

Highs and Lows of an Atlantic Crossing

Memories of the 1976 OSTAR

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Awarded the Dulcibella Prize



John in 1976, and today (below)

What a surprise! For two days I had come up on deck to scan the horizon, only to find it continuously shrouded in a damp, grey fog, but now I could scarcely believe the change. The fog had rolled away revealing a pale blue sky, scattered with fluffy pink clouds. At that moment, it seemed like the most beautiful sight in the world. I wanted my crew to come up and join me, but there was not a sound from the cabin below.

I was struck for the first time on the voyage by an intense feeling of loneliness. There was no-one on board to share my joy. I was three weeks out of Plymouth, bound for Newport as a competitor in the 1976 Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race. Radio communications were primitive in those days and the spirit of Blondie Hasler dictated a minimum amount of technology. I had no way of sharing the experience with another human being.

My log entry for 2 July (much faded after years tucked away in a drawer) reads: 'I am in a marvellous mood. Newport awaits and soon I shall be with my darling Anne. It is amazing what a change in weather can do to one's spirits.' I didn't know at the time that it would take a frustrating, three further days to cross the finishing line and be reunited with my wife. She had married me eight months earlier and bravely accepted a third partner in the marriage, a 54 foot trimaran, *Quest*.

My exhilaration was heightened by the sharp contrast with my mood just forty-eight hours earlier. At that time, the wind had fallen light and the fog came rolling in, clammy, oppressive and blotting out the sea. My whole world was confined to a miserable few boat's lengths. Worse was to come. I heard the muffled sound of fog horns to the northwest. It sounded like a fleet of trawlers and I was stuck in their path, with barely any steerage way and no engine to get me out of trouble.



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My log for 30 June records: 'It is a nasty feeling when one is becalmed and in the path of an oncoming boat. Shamefully, I had to go and look in Reeds to see the correct sound signal for a sailing vessel in my situation - one long, followed by two shorts. In fact, the same as a fishing boat and anything with restricted manoeuvrability.' Not long after, my long and two shorts produced an identical response from out of the fog and I could hear the rumbling of an engine becoming progressively louder. As I peered into the fog, sounding the horn, the trawler passed unseen, probably no more than a hundred yards in front. I breathed a sigh of relief as the sound of her engines slowly receded into the distance.

A few weeks earlier, the start of the race had been exhilarating. The cream of the French single-handers were taking part, included Eric Tabarly on *Pen Duick VI* and Alan Colas on the 240 foot long *Club Med*. A total of 125 skippers in an amazing assortment of craft had made it through the scrutineering and were living their dreams. It came as a relief when, after all the last-minute preparations and the final words of advice, the escort craft waved their farewells and I was at peace with myself and my boat.

The excitement of seeing the leaders of the *Gipsy Moth* class mixing it up with the larger *Pen Duick* class soon gave way to the exhaustion of staying awake to



Quest at the start of the OSTAR in 1976

navigate through the shipping lanes. Then the weather turned sour and we were hit on the nose by the first of five severe depressions, tracking east in quick succession. While Europe sweltered under a heat wave, the North Atlantic was in an unforgiving mood in June 1976.

There was no time to feel lonesome, or even fear. The priority was to survive the gales and press on in the relative lulls.

I had to tie a massive splint across the broken forward beam; shore up a split centreboard case; mend broken halliards and fix a troublesome self-steering gear.

John de Trafford

Reading my log for the first time in many years brings back so many memories. It was an intense experience, marked by real highs and lows.

There were moments of exhilaration and high energy, punctuated by periods of despair that the weather could be so cruel. Why was it all happening to me? When another halliard parted or the head of a sail ripped off, I had to summon up the energy to climb the mast. Whereas climbing sixty-five feet to the top left me trembling with exertion, launching the dinghy to repair the self-steering coupling was very much worse. It took all my courage to clamber off *Quest* into a little rubber dinghy, surging up and down in the Atlantic waves, unsure whether I would be able to haul myself back if I were to fall or capsize.

I was inclined to blame myself for every breakage. Why wasn't I better prepared? What right had I, as a youthful amateur, to pit myself against the pros? I had anticipated problems and prepared for most eventualities, but shortage of funds and time for sea trials had taken their toll. I was working full time in my office until a week before the start.

Fortunately, my box of spares had proven their worth. Cable clamps allowed me to refashion halliards and clew rings, both of which proved to be inadequate for continuously beating to windward through the heavy seas. It was only when I arrived in Newport that I realised that amateur and pro alike had been hit hard by the North Atlantic in one of its more vicious periods. The faster boats on the direct route had taken a pasting and many never made it. There were dramatic rescues, stops for repairs, over 50 retirements and sadly, two fatalities.

My log records: 'Both boat and skipper are semi-invalids at present. We are tired, damp and need straightening out. With some sleep, the skipper is probably less of a problem than the boat.' And the following day: 'This is now the eighth consecutive day I have recorded winds in excess of F7. The constant spray is the nightmare of this windward sailing. For ten days now it has been impossible to venture outside without oilskins. Not once have I sat in the cockpit for the pleasure of it. Not once have I eaten a meal there. Oh, for a change. Come on sunshine and blue skies.'

However, for every setback there seemed to be a corresponding moment of pleasure. The log for 28 June reads: 'It was amazing to see the dolphins last night, leaving a lovely phosphorescent glow as they swam past, and especially on the occasions when they leapt out of the water. However, even more fascinating was to hear their strange whistling noises. They really did appear to be talking to each other. I couldn't hear anything outside, but down below they could be heard clearly through the hull and especially if I put an ear close to the main beam.'

The finish in Newport was a joyous occasion. A jazz band came out to welcome me and my dear wife was dropped on board for a warm embrace. However, the feeling was primarily one of relief, mixed with sadness for those who had fared worse than me - lives lost, boats sunk and dreams shattered. My best moment at sea on that voyage, and probably ever since, had been three days earlier as the beauty of the rose-tinted North Atlantic rippled away to the horizon, with not a shred of fog in sight.