**SOUTH WEST 3 PEAKS YACHT RACE – TEAM “HOOFING RUN ASHORE”**

**by Major Gill Duncan Royal Marines**

The South West 3 Peaks Yacht Race is an adventure sports event, in its fourth year, which combines yacht racing, cycling, running and rowing. Competitors must cover 125 miles by sea, 140 miles by bike and 29 miles on foot. This does not sound too onerous by itself but the event runs continuously, by day and night with cyclist / runners being dropped off in harbours to make their way as fast as possible to Lands End, Brown Willy (the highest point on Bodmin) and Yes Tor (the highest point on Dartmoor). Pairs of runners alternate on each leg and sailors rest while the runners run but essentially the team works almost non-stop on whichever discipline to achieve the shortest time. The sailing legs are adjusted with a time correction factor to enable new and old boats to fairly race one another. Tidal gates en route and weather complicate the tactical decision-making, adding to the complexity. It's as much a mental challenge as physical.

Team “Hoofing Run Ashore” was made up from 2 sailors (Major Gill Duncan and Captain Guy Fillmore) and 4 runners (Major Fin Walls, Colour Sergeant Gaz Munro, Colour Sergeant “Charlie” Brown and Corporal Chris Howarth) and a support team of Sergeants Major Pete Beswick and Chris Wetton, who enable the changeovers at harbours and transition points. Planning began in April and the team assembled. Routes were recced and a brief sailing familiarisation was experienced by the runners.

Our boat, Niki, a 46-year old classic yacht was unquestionably the smallest boat. Other competitors would have far swifter charges than us, but we would work hard. We were enthusiastic and confident that we could win each and every leg, whether on land or sea.

Leaving Dartmouth on Wednesday to reach the St Mawes start-line the team stepped straight into a lumpy, upwind night sail. The skipper delivered safety briefings and off we went. To lighten the boat and build confidence with his team he went on the vomit his dinner over the side – the worried crew looked on – what had they signed up to…? Fin Walls decided to sleep in life-jacket and full oilskins that night with a vicelike grip on the lanyard of the life-raft! Dolphins sighted through the night and as dawn broke a new, brighter day dawned. The team pulled into St Mawes with sufficient time to prepare the boat for racing; this included keel-hauling both Colour Sergeants in an effort to scrub the bottom of the boat and testing our elderly mountain leader’s ability to work at height by dragging him up the mast to replace navigation bulbs.

St Mawes seemed to know the Marines were in town as several of the locals remarked to Colours Brown “I’d have thought you’d already be in the pub by now…” – perhaps personal friends of his... The delicious crew supper at the St Mawes Sailing Club however was an excellent opportunity to size up the opposition before heading to bed for an early night.

Moderate northerly winds heralded the start and at midday as the gun went our pairing of Fin Walls and Chris Howarth sped off. Even with a steady pace it was clear that we had the right calibre of athlete. Both completed the 5 mile loop of St Mawes and St Just together in record breaking time - a full two minutes faster than a previous Royal Marine team from 1AGRM. Progress slowed as they jumped into a small child's inflatable with comedy oars and made best speed out to the waiting boat!

With all aboard Niki we flew south to the Lizard under spinnaker, surfing at over 9 knots, leading the fleet for the first and only time on the water. Rounding the Lizard and heading into Mounts Bay saw the team sat on the rail, getting showered by Atlantic rollers but catching up the downwind flyers that had, by now, passed us. Staying close inshore we worked the tides and pulled into Newlyn after 32 miles, snapping at the heels of the bigger boats.

Fin and Gaz leapt off the boat and ran for their bikes. Ahead lay an 18 mile cycle and a half marathon. The first 2 miles were to prove a baptism of fire, climbing a 1:6 hill in first gear out of town. Hilly to say the least, 4 deep re-entrants before the transition in Porthcurno. Running the coastal path to Lands End as the sun set across the ocean was somewhat magical. The boys arrived just before last light, with Fin setting a lightning pace, arriving just before last light to take a selfie at the end of mainland Britain (as proof) before running back into the darkness to the bikes and gritting their teeth as they held best speed into the night. En route they overtook two teams. Their speedy return had astounded the crew but the quick reaction force responded well cutting lines and Newlyn was left in our wake. A moonlit evening charge for Fowey began - our longest sail of 50 miles.

Working a boat in light airs requires a great deal of skill. Alternating crews and helmsmen to maximise our levels of concentration we made excellent time into Fowey, carrying the spinnaker throughout. The runners showed themselves to be no slouch at trimming the sails and keeping the boat moving despite the very trying conditions. Nevertheless we maintained good pace and stayed in touch with the pack, coming in second equal on handicap.

Into Fowey we pulled up alongside the quay at Polruan with Charlie Brown and Chris Howarth hauling their way straight up the steep hill to meet Pete Beswick, ready with their bikes, and began the long-schlep to Jamaica Inn where they left the bikes and headed straight for Brown Willy. Passing another team’s runners they were wished good-luck with the hideous terrain ahead. Babies-heads (tussock grass) are no stranger or obstacle to Bootnecks and sensing the advantage of our Dartmoor conditioning the lads delivered a blistering time for the ascent of Brown Willy and back before re-joining their bikes and ploughing downhill to re-join the boat.

The leg to Plymouth was only 22 miles. The wind was again sufficiently aft for us to carry the spinnaker and as the other teams were sighted ahead we continued to grind on, refusing to get left behind. Cutting as close inshore of Rame Head as possible to maximise the tidal advantage and shorten the distance inside the western end of the breakwater we flew the spinnaker almost into Queen Anne’s Battery.

By now our rolling drop-off was polished. Fin and Gaz jumped for the pontoon and began their final long leg to Yes Tor and back 75 miles on the bike and 4 miles on foot. Immediately the sailors were heading back to sea, hunting down the pack. This time straight out to Eddystone Lighthouse and back, a distance or 26 miles. The sailors had won this last leg through guile and persistence.

On land a small navigational error as darkness fell again (the map *may* have been left in the support vehicle…) unfortunately cost a couple of minutes but quickly the pair was back on track. The return to Plymouth used up their remaining reserves and nerve as they hurtled down the final 10 miles of the disused railway north of Yelverton to Plymouth in the, by now, pitch black, averaging 33 kph. Another record fell by a full 10 minutes, this time one previously held by Royal Marine team, Per Mare.

At sea the overworked commando-dagger emblazoned spinnaker was pulled out and Niki charged out across the Sound. Visibly catching up with the fleet ahead. We rounded Eddystone and gybed the spinnaker as the wind began to die... In Plymouth Sound it disappeared.

Frustrating was not the word. We knew that our lead on handicap was being whittled away by our sudden slowing at the eleventh hour and something we could do nothing to prevent. Oars we had carried from the start were pulled out, a Heath Robinson lashing that we hoped never to use in anger was employed but with just enough to ghost on we finally pulled into Queen Anne’s Battery and the finish line as the runners returned from their last leg at 0030 on Sunday morning.

36 hours and 30 minutes after starting we had covered the 294 miles by land and sea. We collapsed into the cockpit for a welcome couple of cans of beer for the hot debrief and story telling! This had been a challenge that embraced those things that make us Bootnecks; competition, endurance, learning new skills, teamwork and comradeship.

A few hours later we were lined up for the prize-giving. The times were all in and calculated with the handicapping accounted for. In reverse order we waited until the penultimate team was described:

First in two of the four land legs, 2 new records, first in one of the sailing legs and second in two others, which when added together had us a very close second overall; 37 minutes behind Musk Ox, this year and last year’s worthy winners. The times were very close across the entire fleet and the competition had been keenly contested, but with a sense of inclusion and good spirit. Opposing teams had helped each other out with encouragement, advice and spares when needed. It was an event which brought the best out in everyone. Tim, Amelia and Bryony Whitaker at Nearwater Events have got a winning formula – stunning West Country scenery, close competition among like-minded warm-hearted folk.

Back at work we reflected on our achievements and how we could shave back those vital minutes to win in 2017. There is no doubt that we are all committed to another attempt. As our name suggests this really was a "Hoofing Run Ashore!"

Special thanks must go to Pete Beswick and his support team, driving where needed through day and night and to Lisa, Gill's wife, who ensured we were squared away with high energy meals and now-legendary flap-jacks throughout the race.

To those that are interested this is an annual event and really is the most engaging sporting challenge any of us had undertaken. Get a team together and have a go on 16-18 June 2017. You won't be disappointed.