

CAPSIZING!

Anthea Cornell Stock

(Following the sad death in September of past OCC Club Secretary Anthea Cornell Stock – see page 215 – her account of probably her most dramatic sailing experience came to light. Although originally sent to a friend, permission has been given to reproduce it here.)

In June 2001 the OCC held a rally in the Azores, ending in Horta. I had to get the summer mailing out before leaving home, so didn't have time to sail down and consequently joined the 'air contingent'. The rally was a great success – well-attended and much-enjoyed, with boats converging from several directions. The Azores, and the Azoreans, remain delightfully unspoilt.

Not having to be home to a deadline, I was pleased to be invited to sail back on a member's 46ft boat. Or, to be more accurate, I was beguiled by the idea of a sail back, though not so keen on doing it in a catamaran, which this was. I've never liked multihulls and never cruised in one. However, both boat and owner Mike – and the other five crew members – were colourful and enticing, so with just a twinge of concern I ditched my return air ticket and went aboard *Dazzler*. I was pleased to see that she had an escape hatch in each hull, and even more pleased that one was in my cabin in the port hull.

On Tuesday morning, 36 hours into the passage, the weather was light and we'd eaten a large and excellent brunch on the huge open bridge deck (I called it the ballroom). There were two people on watch, full main, spinnaker and small staysail were set and I was in my cabin writing. We seemed to be scorching along. I went into the chart room where the boat speed screen read 17 knots. Plenty fast enough, I thought, though maybe not for a catamaran – what do I know? I commented on it out loud and the owner, resting on the chart room bunk, eyes closed, snuggled into his pillow: "That'll move us along nicely".

Our hull lifted. Should it do that? It settled, then lifted again, throwing the owner out of his windward bunk and across the chartroom. I wedged myself, then became like a hamster in its wheel as the hull reared up and the whole yacht, like a giant panjandrum*, its not-quite-rigid frame creaking with the abnormal stresses, went oh so slowly, it seemed, into a half-pitchpole, half-roll, objects falling and clattering all around.

The helmsman had been steering on the windward wheel, on our hull, and as we got to the point of no return I was looking out of our hatch. I heard a voice say "Oh Mike – I'm so sorry", and saw a figure, mercifully not attached to a lifeline, go into free fall and post itself feet first (luck rather than judgement, I think) through the hatch – at that point under water – of the other hull. The roll completed itself. The silence was eerie. A small, rhythmic lifting of the boat on the light swell. Then Mike's voice, with perfect timing: "Oh, bugger!"

Mike and I were the only two in our hull. The other three who'd been off watch were in the starboard hull, along with the ex-helm. Peter, the other watchkeeper had, it turned out, been thrown clear of the boat, but easily swam back. Having checked that

* The Great Panjandrum was a massive, rocket-propelled, explosive-laden cart designed by the British military during World War Two. It was never used in battle.

all was well in the other hull he then joined us via our emergency hatch. Whatever else had been submerged or lost, the EPIRB was right in front of me. We set it off – or rather, we hoped we’d set it off. Its light was certainly flashing but you never know!

Unlike ours, the forecabin of the other hull had a watertight bulkhead when its door was shut (which it was) so that hull was floating higher in the water than ours. The four in there were moving around quite easily and able to recover one or two of their possessions. We were about waist deep in water, so set about finding a place each to lie as comfortably as possible out of the water and wait. Mike was on what would normally have been the underside of a shelf while Peter and I lay each side of the engine on what had been the underside of the cabin sole. It was oily, quite cramped (particularly for Peter, who was over 6 feet tall), and acid was dripping from the battery.

We talked about anything and everything – our homes, working careers, early life, family and friends, sailing experiences. A previous capsizing (yes, it had happened to Mike and Peter before) and rescue. On that occasion they’d had to take to the liferaft as the yacht was sinking. We hoped that *Dazzler*, which was of polystyrene sandwich construction, would be unsinkable. Breakable though, if we were rammed by something large. We weren’t keeping a lookout and wouldn’t have been able to take avoiding action even if we’d seen something approaching on a collision course, while the VHF, fixed to the chart room bulkhead, was submerged well below the waterline. It was afternoon, there was quite a bit of ambient light and, I hoped, of air – I still haven’t worked out how long we’d have taken to use up the oxygen in our air pocket. The swell lifted us every few seconds, compressing the air in our ears and making the mast, mounted on giant ball bearings for feathering but now under tension, clank monotonously.

The water was at arm’s length below us. Various familiar objects floated into view – a sandal, my blister pack of blood pressure medication, my handbag (too far below to rescue) and the liferaft in its heavy PVC zip bag. We decided we’d better try to attach it to some part of the boat even though it was unlikely to go anywhere. I spent some time – I don’t know how long – biting through a tangle of light line (we had no knife between us) to separate off a usable length. I decided later that the liferaft was not just useless but positively dangerous. It was too big to push out through the escape hatch and too buoyant to drag down under water and out through the main hatch, and if it had inflated in the confined space we were in it would probably have trapped us.

Happily the EPIRB had done its job and a reconnaissance aircraft made a first pass at dusk, flying low. It made three or four passes in all, by which time several of us were on the upturned bridge deck, waving. We heard afterwards that they’d been calling us on VHF, but of course we weren’t receiving. Later we learned that two or three OCC yachts in the area had heard the plane calling us and ‘nearly been blasted out of the water by the strength of the signal’.

Our rescue ship was a 10,000 ton Blue Star Line freighter which happened to be in the area waiting for instructions. It was now dark. We stood on the rough bridge deck (normally the underside) and watched as she manoeuvred into position to windward of us, her raked bow towering over us and searchlights shining on us. She put rope ladders and nets over the side and fired rope-ends to us to tie round ourselves. We all made it aboard one way or another, but with few possessions apart from what we stood up in. I was wearing shorts and had bare feet. Also, though I had a life jacket on I had no lifeline, so had had to kneel on the rough bridge deck to hang on to the permanently-

rigged line while the yacht surged in the swell and we awaited transfer to the ship. When I finally got aboard my knees and insteps were heavily grazed and bleeding from the rough bridge deck – but these were minor injuries, all things considered.

The crew fed us and found us a cabin each (en suite!) and we were allowed to use the officers' laundry/drying room, so by the time we reached Terceira – back in the Azores! – we were at least reasonably clean and well-rested. We were taken ashore in a local pilot boat complete with local TV interviewer and cameraman, who made much of my grazes! Two of us were taken straight to out-patients at the local hospital, and a hotel was organised for us all. The Portuguese were very kind and efficient, though we weren't exactly the best-dressed and groomed hotel guests!

It took us a couple of days to organise emergency money and book flights home but *Dazzler*, the capsized yacht, is still drifting somewhere in the Atlantic, in one or several pieces.



The chart will tell what the North Atlantic looks like. But what the chart will not tell you is the strength and fury of that ocean, its moods, its violence, its gentle balm, its treachery: what man can do with it, and what it can do with men.

Nicholas Monsarrat, *The Cruel Sea*

