



Irish Sea, North Channel, 1986

By John Chamberlin

On Tuesday, 19th August, 1986, Robin Rhodes and I canoed across from Larne in Northern Ireland, to Portpatrick in Galloway, Scotland, in just over 61/2 hours.

Although we had planned the crossing from east to west and hoped to complete it while on holiday in Galloway with our families, the weather over the first week had been unsuitable. With the wind against us again on Tuesday, 19th August, but a sea that looked acceptable from our viewpoint on Castle Bay caravan park, Robin casually suggested a crossing the other way. His off-the-cuff remark led to frenzied activity, and by 10.45 both families had piled into their cars.

Robin's wouldn't start!

'Do you think this is a bad omen?' I jibed, as two wives, four kids and me pushed his tired, reluctant Fiat across the grass, until it fired and heralded the dash to Stranraer. In our haste we did everything wrong at the Sealink terminal; wrong place, wrong lane, wrong direction, wrong! I left Sandra, my wife, negotiating with the counter clerk and came out of the loo as they'd agreed that kayaks were a, 'sort of bike'. (Bikes went free!)

'One way?' queried the First Officer Ken Reid as he examined our tickets.

'They're the return," I said, pointing to the boats.

We had run aboard - puffing with exertion as we yomped up the ramp, with everything and its hat in the boats - knowing we'd only seconds to spare before the drawbridge went up and we slipped our moorings. We then stood for half an hour, waving through the single nostril beneath the upturned nose of the Galloway Princess before it finally moved.

'You'd better come with me then,' said Number One, having been convinced of our 'crazy' intentions. So, clutching chart, parallel rules, notes, adhesive tape, A4 plastic sleeves and chart photocopies, we headed up to the Bridge. We had thought we would be fighting for table space in the restaurant, amongst the other passengers, so it was a pleasant surprise to be given free range of the Bridge facilities; chart table, extra and bigger charts of the area concerned, binoculars, and bigger (real!) parallel rules. I rapidly worked out a course departing from the top of Larne Lough at 15.00, and Robin did one for an hour later. We agreed a compromise (knowing it would probably be 15.30 by the time we left the Lough) and spent the rest of the journey scanning the receding Scottish coastline, with the Navigator's optics, for landmarks to be used later.

After about two hours our relationship with the senior crew was so good (the Radio Officer brought us the mid-day Shipping Forecast bang on time!) that we struck up a deal - we'd help them dock the ferry and they'd help us carry the boats off. As it turned

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out, we got out of the way and watched while they docked the ship. And they watched while we carried the boats off!

They continued watching down at the slipway, with amused and sceptical interest, as we got changed and loaded the kayaks, until an authoritative voice yelled a sharp reminder that there, 'just happened to be a ferry to turn round!'. With hasty good wishes the smiling and helpful members of the crew scuttled back aboard. It was 14.15.

Bad omens two and three (they come in threes) were that Robin had forgotten his deck compass and I my Helly Hansen shirt.

By 15.10 we were paddling out of Larne Lough in the rain, but on a fairly flat sea, and once clear of Island Magee we adjusted the compass to 95(M) and focused our attention on the distant horizon.

At 16.10 we stopped for our first rest, grabbing a quick sandwich and drink - our first since breakfast. Taking time again to confirm our heading, we stopped next after the second hour's paddling, at 17.17. Donning anoraks because of the cooling wind, that break was the longest we had, at eight minutes.

The forecast had been, 'NW 3-4, backing W and decreasing 3 later. Scattered showers, good.' Sea conditions were predicted as 'moderate', interpreted by HMCG at Ramsey (IoM) as, '....swells of 3 to 6 feet'. Literally, the range should have been from, 'Large wavelets. Crests beginning to break. Foam of glassy appearance. Perhaps scattered white horses', to, 'Small waves, becoming larger; fairly frequent white horses'.

In fact that's how it was for the first hour or so, but after that and without much noticeable increase in the wind, the sea state changed markedly. The wind certainly did not 'back', when it would have been behind us, or 'decrease (to) 3'. With regular swells at 4 to 6 feet and many 'white horses', every few minutes sets of waves about 8 feet high began to cause us problems with stability and direction-holding (Robin suffering more with the former and me with the latter), or to quote Rob., 'You were being slewed around all over the place'. At one stage three of the aforementioned 'white horses' had trampled consecutively and energetically over Robin's deck, giving rise briefly to concentration on stability rather than progress, until he remembered how far we had to go.

Since I had the compass, I was in front and taking fairly frequent checks on route status. My Icefloe is marginally faster than Robin's Sea Hawk, and with the effort I was putting into holding then boat on course I gradually eased away from my trusty partner. I shouted back, 'How're you doin' buddy?'

'It's not exactly what I had in mind!' was the laconic reply.

The third break was at 18.15, for five minutes, during which Robin took the camera from me for the next hour. (For obvious reasons, in that period he only took two rather hasty photographs.)

Another of my yelled communications, 'How are you managing in the waves?', received the cautious response, 'I've taken my surf boat out in less!'

We passed into the fifth hour and had a snatched two-minute break at 19.30. Yet again the conditions and resultant lack of stability permitted very little intake of food and drink. It was, literally, only two minutes before we pushed apart again, as the seas continued their attack. I subconsciously agreed with Robin, it wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind

either.

The thoughts that occur when you set off on a trip like this are interesting, perhaps varied or even a little confused, but certainly personal. You know the distance, risks, commitment, your own capabilities; you want the crossing, and accept the challenge; but you don't know what will happen. In our case, this matrimonially parentless sea had been 'happening' for about four hours now.

Although the Scottish coastline was now getting noticeably closer, the temperature was falling, the light beginning to fade and, with a possible increase in wind strength, the sea was not relenting.

This had a fairly obvious side-effect of detracting from the pleasure of the trip, with few occasions to sit back, relax and enjoy the changing scenes presented by such a crossing. The positives were moments surfing, but the natural direction for this was not ours, so it didn't last long, and the beautiful sight of the larger swells leaving us behind, to our right, white haircuts flowing back over hunched broad shoulders, as they surged and growled on their way. (I hasten to add that 'beautiful' was not the adjective that sprang to mind, as one glanced left and rearwards, to see similar waves approaching.) Once or twice I felt the strong urge to '...photograph one of you buggers', but sitting vulnerably in the momentarily threatening green solitude of the troughs, the urge was relegated to a lesser priority. I am disappointed now, even self-critical, but my dining room chair is not going up and down, nor is it ten miles from land.

With the light disappearing quite steadily, when I hailed my companion for the scheduled break at 20.30, he declined, which really meant I had to also. By now I was beginning to notice the lack of real food intake, and the heat loss because of the missing Helly Hansen. Given the directional problems, it was a hard paddle.

We were targeted then, still on 95(M), for the 'House of Knock', a white building about a mile north of the Killantringan light, and as 21.00 approached I adjusted this to the white-painted brickwork of the lighthouse itself. A huge stack of dish aerials on the horizon, about two miles inland and a mile north of Portpatrick, was by this time becoming a useful transit marker.

Along with the darkness came the switch-on of the lighthouse, enabling us to confirm the expected sequence of 'FL (2) 15s', and that we weren't in fact closing on South Stack! Reassuring though that was, it was a bit too late to worry if we had got it wrong.

Soon after nine (and a little too early!) I shouted to Robin another change of heading, to aim at Ports Kale and Mora (Lairds and Sandeel Bays), the twin coves a mile north of the village. I thought we were actually closer in, a mistake, most probably exacerbated by the darkness.

Now aiming for the harbour and village lights directly, at about 21.20 it became apparent that we were overshooting our mark. Still about half a mile offshore, I was peering through the blackness trying to pick out the harbour entrance and in particular the green 'leading lights' which, when aligned, indicate the centre of the opening. Without my driving glasses, this task was made more difficult by the coloured lights all along the sea front - red, yellow, green, blue, red, yellow, green, etc.

Which bloody green one was mine? After five minutes or so's concentration I realised we had overshot, and could dimly make out the surf crashing on the cliffs south of the

village. The shore immediately north of the harbour is no less hazardous, with cliffs, stacks and old harbour or pier workings. We had to make the gap.

The thought of stopping for a break at 21.30 was dismissed as soon as it occurred.

By this time Robin, some fifty to a hundred yards seaward of me, had sussed out the same conclusion, so he simply acted accordingly when I yelled to head for the lights of the cliff-top hotel, north of the village.

This up-wind-and-sea ferry-glide lasted about ten minutes, until I was confident that I was focused on the correct pair of green lights. It was then simply a case of holding that transit whilst an adjusted ferry-glide took us into the harbour mouth and the first calm water for over five hours.

Those few minutes, actually approaching and entering the harbour, leaving dark hairy seas for those calmer waters dappled with the reflected incandescent colours of the waterfront, were for me quite worth all the effort and apprehension. But of course, by then, the risks had been left behind.

We took a quick flash photo' of each other and then headed for the beach and our waiting families, near the slipway in the eastern corner of the bay. We beached at 21.45 and I stopped my stop-watch - 6 hours, 36 minutes, 7 seconds.

Robin pulled a bottle of French beer from his boat, cut his hand as he sprang the cap on a rock (although he didn't notice the cut until the following day, and only then realised how it had been caused) and took a well-earned swig. Handing it to me, he watched in astonishment as I downed most of the remainder. Sorry Rob., I thought you had two.

Sandra took two quick photo's of us (on both of which I am guzzling that beer!) and we hastily began to change before loading the cars.

The families hadn't eaten either during their clifftop vigil, so all eight of us were ravenously hungry. The Old Mill, just out of the village, welcomed us at about 22.30, kids and all, and quickly rustled up the requested meals. It was while at the bar ordering the first pints that I looked at my hands - blistered, torn and bleeding - Robin all but heaved at the sight. His were unmarked, thanks mainly to a new pair of paddles.

Looking back on the trip the following day, we agreed the seas we had experienced for most of the crossing were consistent with winds of Force 5 to 6. Yet whilst the wind may have freshened a little, it didn't get up that much. So the only unsuitable conclusion we could agree on was that the seas had come from nowhere. A few days later hurricane 'Charlie' was with us.

The mistakes we made were not too serious individually, especially had the sea remained calm as expected, but cumulatively they should be objectively criticised. The error in heading directly for Portpatrick too soon was partly the result of these, combined with, by that time, the probably understandable desire to head for home once the lights of the village had come clearly into view. My fault; even though it was difficult reading the compass in the dark. The lack of my thermal shirt seemed insignificant in the sunshine earlier on, but as soon as I stopped paddling, I began shaking with the cold. I don't think we would have wanted to go on much longer. After landing we must have emptied at least two gallons of water from Robin's boat. That hadn't helped his stability.

Two days later I had a useful chat with the local Coastguard, Bert Grieve. He was not

without scepticism of our rationale; no support boat, no radio, I don't know. What do you think? We certainly didn't have as much chat with HMCG before-hand as we normally do. In our haste I put all my trust in Sandra to make the necessary calls, without giving her, in fairness, much information. In the event the trust was well-placed, because she made the correct communications both before the trip, and near its conclusion. But it was wrong.

In mitigation, the disappointment of planning similar crossings in '82 and '85 only to be thwarted by the weather, probably led to a less disciplined approach this time. There are lessons to be learned from that.

However, the cost of these errors of judgement became tragically more than academic when we learned that, very sadly, three days after our crossing, a 52-year old man was found drowned fifteen miles off South Stack, Anglesey. He had set off from Caernarfon for Dun Laoghaire, attempting a solo crossing (for charity), and after having, '....ignored warnings from North Wales Coastguards', stated the Welsh Daily Post for Monday, 25 August.

Whilst the circumstances will have been different, and our sympathies nonetheless go to the gentleman's family, the incident will serve as a signal reminder that our chosen activity carries its inherent risks. It was reported that the wind in which this well prepared and motivated seafarer met his death was Force 5, objectively this must have been about what we had. The sick irony for us was that the day following our trip was a scorcher, with a commensurately flat sea. Perhaps we had snapped too hastily at the carrot of the first apparently suitable day.

Nonetheless, I am pleased to have completed another crossing of that notorious sea, and grateful again for our good fortune.

Safe paddling: may the Force be with you, preferably 4 or less!

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