



Touching the Water

In the summer of 1979, 15 sailors were lost at sea during a brutal edition of the Fastnet Race. On the 40th anniversary of that infamous storm, a survivor recounts the meaningful changes that happened in its aftermath.

Several years ago, I learned something profound by observing my then-toddler grandson, Liam, wearing a life jacket, step aboard his uncle's catboat for the first time. His eyes twinkling in expectation, he set out on a tour of the cockpit, spinning a block here, pulling a sheet there, and cheerfully swinging the tiller from side to side.

Then he got adventurous. Leaning over the rail, he asked, "Uncle Will, may I touch the water?"

"Yes, Liam," Will replied, with avuncular authority. "But be careful."

And so Liam carefully touched the water. He was becoming a sailor. A truism of the life we sailors have chosen is that, at heart, we are equally adventurous and wary—tugging on bowlines, testing lifelines, asking questions. Our biggest risk, I think, comes when we make declarations. You're probably familiar with this change in perspective and personal rules if you've moved from racing to cruising, or from coastal sailing to ocean adventures, or if you've taken up singlehanded or moved to a much larger or smaller boat. But



This dramatic painting captures the moment when the yacht *Lorelei* comes alongside to rescue the crew of *Griffin IV* after it sank in the 1979 Fastnet Race.

the biggest shock, I am sure, comes in a storm. That is where we're all Liams in a new boat in strange waters. Survive that storm, learn from that storm, and you are a better, safer, happier sailor.

Forty years ago, in August 1979, I—and many hundreds of other sailors who made a hobby of touching the water—had a particularly meaningful and often-shocking experience when a fleet of modern yachts racing off England and Ireland was surprised by a storm of hurricane proportions. Five boats sank, many more were seriously damaged, and 15 racing sailors died in the Irish Sea.

Many critics despaired for the future of ocean racing, and yet, instead of slipping away under the shadow of Fastnet '79, our pastime gathered forces and re-created itself in a whole new image. A sport famous mostly for dramatic daring was transformed into a community that respected doubt, conducted testing, and thoughtfully accepted a fact that many sailors had stubbornly denied, which is that sailing can often be risky. I call this new perception the Safety at Sea Movement. I have participated in it as a sailor, writer and instructor, and I was present at its creation.

If you are one of the thousands of sailors who attend a safety-at-sea seminar (and there are a lot of them—41 in the U.S. alone in 2018), you are part of this revolution that began 40 years ago in the wake of the savage Fastnet storm (see "Be Safe," page 57). The Royal Ocean Racing Club's Fastnet Race is sailed in odd-numbered years on a 605-nautical-mile course from the English Channel port of Cowes, to and around Fastnet Rock, off the coast of Ireland, and back to the Channel port of Plymouth. The 1979 fleet had 303 entries from 22 countries, including 12 American boats that had been sailed or

shipped across the Atlantic.

I was aboard a strong, reliable boat from Long Island Sound named *Toscana*, a Sparkman & Stephens-designed Swan 47 sloop that its owner, Eric Swenson, and a fine crew had raced across the Atlantic. I had often sailed with them back in America, and now I joined them in England. In our last day race before the Fastnet start, with Eric taking a break ashore, I was at the wheel in a sprint around the Solent, the waterway off Cowes, in brutal weather that prepared us well for the big storm to come. Not only were the demands on the boat, the gear, the crew's teamwork and clear communications relentless, but we also rescued a man from the water after he was thrown from his small powerboat.

During the Fastnet Race's second night, we were battered by a surprise westerly gale that blew for many hours at the level of Force 10 on the Beaufort Scale of Wind Forces. This scale provides wind speed (here 40 to 60 knots), wave height (29 to 37 feet) and a one-word summary of conditions ("Storm"). The blow caused massive damage to the Fastnet fleet, capsizing and breaking many boats. There was plenty of water to both touch and be cautious about. Most striking and nasty were the waves, unpredictable in shape and size, and heaving great sheets of dense foam as the wind's force kept climbing and its direction kept shifting. Steering in and around these monsters was physically and mentally exhausting as the wind kept shifting and the waves kept building.

Heeling far over with a heavy weather helm, headed more or less in the direction of Fastnet Rock under a mainsail with two reefs tied in and a moderate-size jib, *Toscana* was so overpowered that it became necessary to shorten the sail further. Our thoughts naturally ran to setting storm sails, except that we did not have any. After the race management for some reason announced that they were not required, we (like many crews) opted to save weight by leaving them behind in Cowes. What we did do turned out to be surprisingly effective, and worth consideration by any crew in rough weather. With everybody hooked to the boat with safety harnesses, we first tied in the third reef in the mainsail. This lengthy, tense exercise required someone to climb up onto the boom and secure the reef line in the sail's third leech cringle. (Because this was my idea, I volunteered under the condition that two shipmates kept a firm grip on my legs after I hooked my safety harness to the boom.)

Once the mainsail was deeply reefed, it came time to set a smaller headsail.



His crew already safely hoisted aloft by a helicopter crew, the skipper of the British yacht *Camargue*, streaming warps, prepares to join them.

Eric wisely decided that we rig a small jib called the forestaysail on an inner forestay just forward of the mast. Now seen mostly on classics, this rig with two stays forward—the long headstay to the bow, and the shorter inner forestay secured farther back—was widely used on Sparkman & Stephens boats of that generation. After we all talked through the steps, our brave deckhands made their way forward on the windward rail, nearly crawling with their hands grasping the lifelines and their safety-harness tethers clipped to the long length of wire (called the jackline) running on the side deck from the cockpit to the bow. They lowered the big jib on the headstay, stuffed it below, and got to work setting the smaller forestaysail on the forestay.

Such conditions are not friendly to one of the essentials of sailing such boats in

any weather, much less a Force 10 gale: easy, clear communication. Without it, crew organization can easily fall apart with misunderstandings that lead to mistakes and injuries.

Such was not about to happen on *Toscana*, thanks to Suze Noyes, our chief sail-trimmer. Securely clipped on, she knelt in a field of spray near a winch, the new sail's jib sheet in one hand, a winch handle in the other, and her eyes alertly focused forward as the foredeck gang slowly hoisted the new jib up the forestay. When it was fully hoisted and the halyard was cleated, Suze hauled on the sheet as far as she could, and shouted a question to the foredeck crew: "How's the trim on the staysail?" They looked aloft and thrust their thumbs in the air.

Communications back in working order thanks to Suze, *Toscana* accelerated



In a famous image from the tragedy, airman Peter Harrison looks up from the deck of *Grimalkin* moments before crewman Nick Ward is successfully rescued.

to 6, 7 and, at times, even 8 knots under its tiny rig, on course to Fastnet Rock and very easy to steer, with only occasional blasts of severe weather helm. Boat drivers are like auto tires: If they wear out quickly, you'll crash.

Out of the dark ahead appeared the loom of the light on Fastnet Rock. A few hours later, the light was close enough to reflect down the companionway to the galley, where I was going off watch, warming a cup of tea prepared by Francie, the energetic cook, and looking forward to some sleep.

Voices echoed below from the cockpit. "We're clear now, Eric!" shouted our navigator, Johnny Coote. "You can bear off to course." Looking out a port, I spied Fastnet Rock at a distance. Between us, incredibly, sailed a small cruising sloop plugging along through the white waves

under only a tiny storm jib.

"What could that little boat be doing out here on such a night?" Eric exclaimed. I would later learn that this was an English couple who had touched those waters many times, and were taking their annual summer cruise.

Shortly after sunrise, as we surfed back toward England, Johnny checked the radio and somberly announced, "Men are dying out here."

Soon enough we came upon boats that had been abandoned, in some cases dismasted during a capsize, and rolling helplessly in the sea. After we finished at Plymouth, before us in the harbor we saw a pier crowded with solemn, silent women and men—wives and husbands, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, friends—staring mournfully out to the English Channel. Plymouth has been a

naval port for centuries, so this pier must have served many hundreds of times as a widow's walk. But I wonder if ever in its history it had supported so many people whose hearts were aching. We secured *Toscana* to a float, cleaned it up, and came ashore, walking through that sad crowd.

Soon after, I was approached by an English yachtsman and publisher named Peter Johnson. We had exchanged correspondence about some aspect of sailing history, but on this day, he made a statement that was in part a question. He told me, "You, John, are going to write a book about this, and I will publish it." He did, and so did my skipper, Eric Swenson, out of his New York publishing house, W.W. Norton & Company. After signing in at the press center, I began what turned into two months of conducting interviews of other Fastnet veterans, all of them as exhausted and sad as I was. Only 85 of the 303 boats that started the race finished it. Nineteen boats were abandoned by their crews. Five boats sank. Fifteen sailors died (and another four in a boat that was following the race). More sailors at great risk were saved by heroic actions of Royal Navy helicopters, the lifeboats of the Royal National Lifeboat Institute, and other yachts and several commercial vessels.

Plenty of "touch the water" questions were being asked even before the last Fastnet survivor staggered to the finish. Because few hopes are more universal than the wish that a tragedy will somehow have a happy ending, I'm never surprised when asked if something good came out of the 1979 Fastnet Race. The fact is that much was learned on the water, and especially in subsequent reports, investigations and the Royal Ocean Racing Club's detailed questionnaire sent to 265 captains. From all this came a vast database about the race.

A concern that shocked all sailors was that though keel boats are presumed to be stable enough to stay upright, fully one-fourth of the Fastnet boats capsized. Why and how that happened to so many keel boats that had been deemed stable was closely studied by naval architects and researchers who, in towing tanks and many other related experiments, developed ways to ease the risk through new measurement rules that penalized undesirable design features.

Those and a great many other Fastnet-related technical issues are covered in the aptly titled book, *Desirable and Undesirable Characteristics of Offshore Yachts*, published by Norton and the Cruising Club of America and edited by me, with articles by Olin Stephens and many other designers and sailors who were stimulated by the



The yacht *Ariadne*, adrift, dismantled and abandoned, was one of 19 boats left to fend for itself on the Irish Sea during the devastating storm.

Fastnet disaster to review standards and practices.

The changes that came to yacht design and construction were important, as were many other technical changes. But I believe there is another development triggered by the Fastnet storm that has had even broader influence. That is education and training in the areas of sailing safety in public safety-at-sea seminars. Running all day and sometimes over weekends, these seminars are led by sailors who have vast experience in all aspects of sailing and safety studies. Topics include heavy weather, emergencies, choosing and sailing the best boat, hardware, crew training, and all the other factors that occur in any ocean voyage.

The first event called a safety-at-sea

seminar probably was the one in which a crew of U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen were trained before they sailed to England to race in the 1979 Fastnet. That seminar was organized by the boat's commanding officer, Edwin A. "Ned" Shuman. Early in 1980, he and others organized a public-safety seminar in one of the academy's largest auditoriums, with the aim of identifying and publicizing the many questions asked by the Fastnet experience. I was there and reported some of my findings that would appear in my soon-to-be-published book about the race, *Fastnet, Force 10*.

I can recall the moment in Annapolis when the importance and complexity of these newly defined problems were publicly recognized. During a talk on

medical issues, a speaker was asked what should be done if a sailor in a boat sailing offshore came down with a severe case of hypothermia. His reply was this: "Get him to a hospital as soon as possible." When the audience erupted in sympathetic laughter, we were acknowledging not only the crucial importance of sailor self-sufficiency, but also the challenge of finding ways to address those needs and demands in a practical way.

That event was the model for a program of safety-at-sea seminars developed at Annapolis by Capt. John Bonds in conjunction with *Cruising World*, which continue to this day under the sponsorship of US Sailing and other organizations. For more information about safety seminars and other training, visit the United States Sailing Association website (ussailing.org).

When Bonds started taking safety seminars on the road, this new kind of sailor training began to appear across America and abroad, and was adopted by sailors of all kinds of boats, from dinghies to family cruisers to circumnavigators. This dedicated, positive and pragmatic response to the Fastnet storm both honored the hundreds of sailors who, on that brutal night, fought for their survival, and simultaneously addressed the needs of all of us who, in one way or another, reach out and touch the water.

"Every Motion with a Purpose" and other Fastnet Lessons



The Royal Naval Lifeboat Association responded heroically in the '79 Fastnet.

When I recently asked Gary Jobson, who sailed the '79 Fastnet in *Tenacious* (the race winner skippered by Ted Turner), to list three important takeaways from the storm, he provided these very good advisories:

On deck, make every motion with purpose. Keep a lookout on both the windward and leeward sides of the boat. The helmsman must have a crewmember watching the compass and instruments as a verbal addition to visually watching what is going on while at the helm.

Below deck, work at keeping gear

orderly down below. When it gets messy, it is difficult to find things in a hurry. Stay hydrated, even if you are seasick.

Clear communications and issuing precise orders are essential. Every member of the crew needs to understand what the priorities are at that moment, and what is likely to happen next.

Note that the emphasis is not on hardware but on people skills. Jobson's suggestions make fine sense to me. Here are three of my lessons learned:

Be a good, strong leader. Vague, weak leadership causes low morale

and leads to mistakes. A crew has no standards of performance and is constantly playing "who's on first?"

Select and prepare the crew with care. Sailors must have basic skills and be resilient, team-oriented, and (as Susan Noyes demonstrated during the race aboard *Toscana*) prepared to lead.

Respect basic seamanship. I define "seamanship" this way: The art of sailing, maneuvering, and preserving ship or a boat in all positions and under all reasonable circumstances...and some unreasonable circumstances too.