

A Madman In A League Of His Own

It was Bill's watch, and seas were bad, at least 30 feet and very heavy. Suddenly a real bad one roared down on us from the port side and crashed in. Roaring right over us, it rolled us over. I had a fleeting memory of being thrown clean out of the stern, seeing Bill going under me, then the boat coming down on me. Down I went into the green depths with tremendous weight driving me downwards. More panic — down, down! Needing to breathe, I choked and began to drown.

These are the words of Frank Dye, remembering a trip that retraced part of a Viking sea route and that he nonchalantly called a “summer cruise.” It was Tuesday, July 28, 1964, somewhere between the Faroe Islands and the coast of Norway. *Wanderer*, an open 16-foot Wayfarer dinghy — built of plywood for racing and inshore daysailing, but modestly modified for long-distance touring — was battling a gale that bore down at Force 9 (41 to 47 knots on the Beaufort scale). She was hove-to, with the mast down and a canvas cover tied across the cockpit to protect her crew. When the world inverted, that shelter instantly became a potential death trap.

The situation was dire after the third capsized that night. In between, *Wanderer's* redoubtable skipper and his intrepid crew, Bill Brockbank, treaded 50-degree water that could kill an adult through exposure in short order. Time and again they scrambled to right the boat and get back on board before the next breaker rolled over and swamped them.

The lowered mast, tied to a crutch, lay in splinters. Essential tools had washed overboard, along with most of their food. Using a fish bucket and a plastic potty, they bailed like crazy to stay afloat, tethered to a makeshift drogue they fashioned from different bits, including their mainsail. To point the bow into the monster seas, one man had to stay on deck and yank on the warps. It was a fight against nature's fury and a struggle for survival.

They capsized one more time but made it through this night of horrors. By dawn the storm had “abated” to Force 8, which felt like a breeze compared to what they'd seen. Seas still were awe-inspiring,

but the men were alive. Cold, exhausted and battling seasickness — but desperate for calories — they had to repair themselves first with a tin of self-heating soup and some ham they found rattling around under the floorboards. Then they jury-rigged their ride by shortening the two pieces of mast and lashing them together so they could carry on under jib.

Dye celebrated in style: He brushed his teeth. Brockbank, who suffered most from mal de mer and lost 18 pounds during the voyage, grinned and filmed. The true test of will came when a ship passed nearby and failed to notice the flares they'd fired.

“For Brockbank it was a pisser. Not a crash moment, but an oh, f*** moment,” as *The Guardian* wrote to commemorate the 50th anniversary of this trip.

Later, a trawler came even closer to inspect this odd little broken boat in the middle of the ocean. Brockbank was on his off-watch, lying under a piece of canvas in the cockpit, shivering. “I could see the helmsman looking at us intently, but I pretended not to see him, and after some hesitation the ship steamed off,” Dye wrote in his book *Ocean Crossing Wayfarer*. “I was not sure about Bill's reaction, but I did not want to be rescued now.”

Out of a Pickle by Your Wits

Dye quoted a fellow sailor to explain his thinking: “The sea has no favorites, and if you get into trouble, you must be prepared to get yourself out of it by your own efforts.” His mantra: Don't make others risk their lives to save yours. Hence, *Wanderer's* radio had no transmission capability.

A stocky guy with thick Buddy Holly glasses, Dye was a Ford dealer in Watton, England. He was 30 when he started sailing in 1958, but he'd built a daredevil reputation for adventure, which included coastal trips in England, Wales and Scotland, and voyages in Germany, Sweden and Denmark. Trips across the North Sea to Iceland and Norway burnished his status as a dinghy hero. They earned him cult status with some; others thought he was a crackpot who took undue risks. “Madman of the Atlantic” was the moniker his wife, Margaret, remembered.



Frank Dye was an expert navigator, a must-have skill when sailing a 16-foot dinghy far offshore.

She crewed on many *Wanderer* excursions, ignoring the warnings: *Do not sail with that man. He'll kill you.*

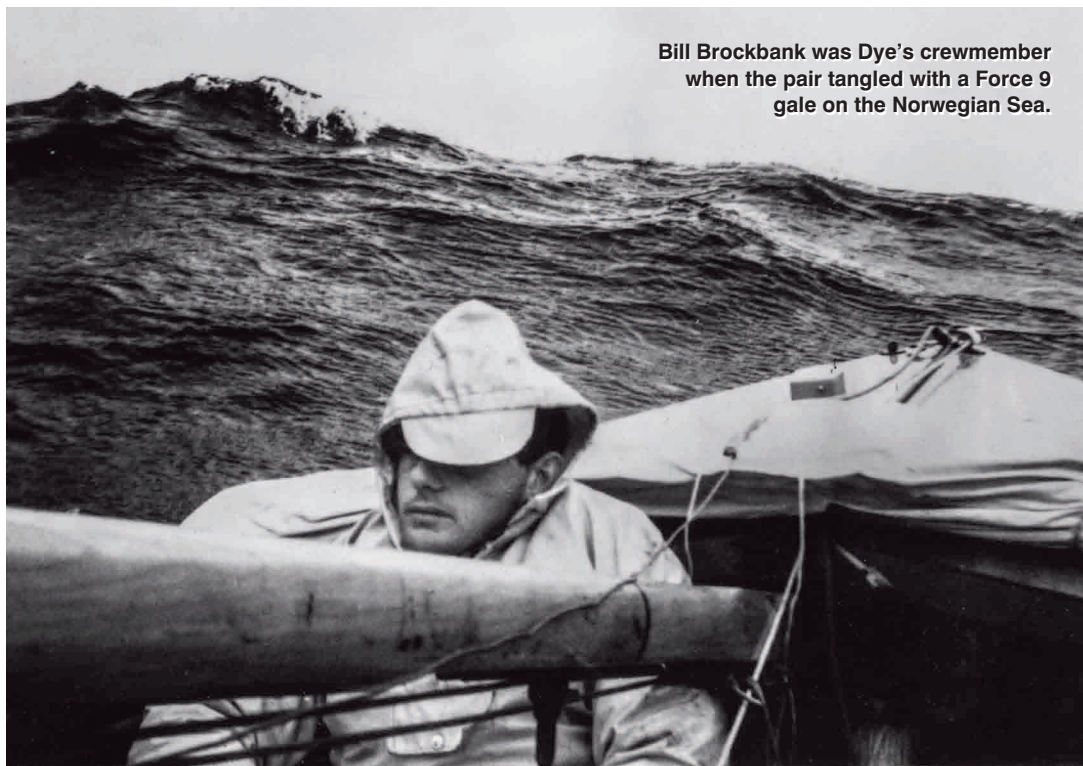
Despite capsizes, broken masts and crewmembers falling overboard, neither Dye nor his mates came to harm. He was daring, for sure, but he did not take stupid gambles. He knew that the devil lurked in the details, so he took meticulous care of his boat and gear. He studied almanacs, weather reports, storm probabilities and sea temperatures to gauge survival times. He worked out food and water rations and the procedure of reefing sails that had no furling gear. He carried expedition gear and haversacks of food, including self-heating tins of soup, cartons of eggs, lifeboat biscuits and dehydrated meals. He also built a gimbaling petrol stove that could heat mess tins underway. There was a jug of whiskey on board as a gift or, if necessary, a barter chip. "His medical kit included enough morphine to knock out a horse, as there was always a chance he'd need to amputate a limb at sea," *The Guardian* explained.

Daring but not Foolhardy

In many sailing pictures, Dye looks chubby. That's because before the age of wicking layers, fleece and breathable outer fabrics, sailors wore multiple layers of clothing to keep warm and dry(ish). By today's standards, oilskin overalls, corduroy trousers, cotton jerseys, wool pullovers and Wellingtons are ridiculous for offshore sailing, but circa 1960 that's all there was. Dye and his crews always brought a truckload of extra clothing in plastic bags to add layers against the bitter cold of the high latitudes or to replace garments that had gotten too damp and cold with condensation and perspiration. Gosh, how ripe they must have been when they removed their clothing.

Dye's skill set was deep and included precise navigation with imprecise tools. He would get a noon fix with the sextant on a tiny boat that danced wildly in the ocean swells, then sit on the stern to work out the position on a soggy chart. He did carry a radio direction-finding kit, which helped (if it worked, that is). He also had a sixth sense for the elements, estimating drift with reasonable accuracy, an important factor when navigating by dead reckoning without landmarks. Perhaps most important was his talent to effect repairs on the fly, even without a deep tool chest. He fixed a broken trailer with a few branches from the side of the road, and he used splints to rebuild *Wanderer's* fractured wooden mast. All he needed was a saw and line for lashings.

After being pushed to the brink by that gale, Dye and Brockbank caught a break in the weather and limped to Norway. When they tied up in the port of Ålesund, they had completed one of the scariest, craziest and most daring sea voyages undertaken in such a small sailboat. The crew of a workboat towed them in and asked if they had crossed the Norwegian Sea in that nutshell. "Ya," Dye replied, to which they said, "You are madmans." Dye didn't dispute that, and he headed to church.



Bill Brockbank was Dye's crewmember when the pair tangled with a Force 9 gale on the Norwegian Sea.

Small Boat, Big Adventure

This trip bears comparison to Ernest Shackleton's 1916 crossing of the Southern Ocean in a lifeboat to get help for his marooned men. But Shackleton had professional crewmen; Dye and his companions — among them a lay preacher, a gym teacher, a schoolmate and an American serviceman — were rank amateurs who took vacation time to go on their seafaring adventures. Sometimes transportation to and from the sailing venues required the crew to hitchhike, or take a bus and train. Friends helped Dye trailer *Wanderer* to the starting points of his voyages and provision the boat.

He once shipped Margaret and *Wanderer* to Norway on a freighter and followed after finishing up business duties, then cruised to the Lofoten Islands with her. Another time, *Wanderer* and crew were lowered from the deck of a cargo ship. Once in the water, they stepped the mast, made sail and headed home, waving to the ship's crew, who stood at the rail shouting *lykke til* — "good luck" in Norwegian.

Wanderer today hangs from the rafters at the National Maritime Museum in Cornwall, England, a quiet witness to the courage of her owner and the daring voyages of a time long gone. Dye, who died in 2010 at age 82, remained faithful to the dinghy all his life, never wanting to sail anything else. He chose that Ian Proctor design with purpose; it looked right to him and proved to be forgiving and predictable, even under extreme circumstances.

"The Norwegian Sea should have been easier," was the laconic conclusion of his narrative about that "summer cruise" of 1964. Dye's grainy, scratchy amateur film by the same name became a cult classic among dinghy sailors. "It was unfortunate that the one year that we chose ... was the worst in over a century and included two Force 9s — and we caught one of them."

The next time you zip up your high-tech foulies, stow your PowerBars and energy drinks, and check your AIS, VHF and GPS, pause for a moment to contemplate this man, his mates, his boat and his travels. ■