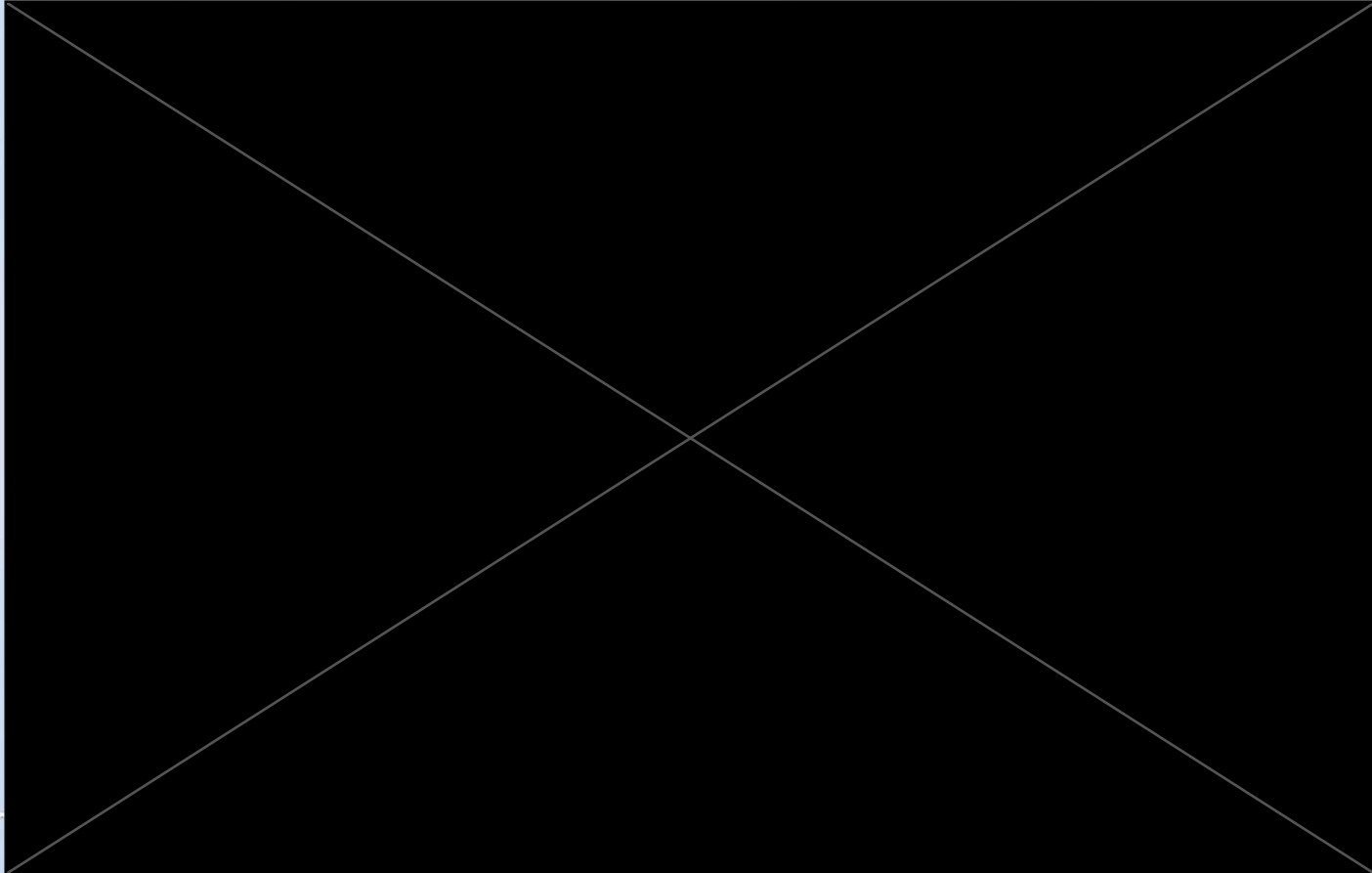


# BAPTISM BY FIRE

SHE WENT OFFSHORE LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE AND FOUND IT IN SPADES DURING THIS YEAR'S ANNAPOLIS-NEWPORT RACE




 works at the bow of the J/122 Alliance before the start of the Annapolis-Newport Race in June.



PHOTO BY WILBUR KEYWORTH



Megan and Lindsay prepare for a long night. At right, Mary helms through complicated conditions.



It's 4 a.m., and we're taking on water. I'm kneeling beside the nav desk, gasping into a bucket. Thirty-knot gusts have us on our ear. Seawater slops against my knees, soaking me from bare feet to thighs. My throat burns, my bailing bucket a cloudy mix of bilge water and vomit. "Hey, [redacted]?" Eric leans over me with a wan smile. "Still think it'd be cool to do The Ocean Race?" I raise a hand, unsure whether I am about to flash him a thumbs up or the bird.

**Alliance**

Boat partners Mary Martin and Eric Irwin co-own the J/122 *Alliance*, and I signed on to their crew for the summer, looking forward to racing offshore for the first time. My main goal was the Marblehead-Halifax Race in July, but to get some extra miles in ahead of time, I also joined for the 475-mile Annapolis-Newport Race in June.

The *Alliance* program is an eclectic mixed-gender crew of all ages, though we could be roughly divided into kids and adults—under 35 and above 40. There were even two cabinets in the galley labeled “kids’ snacks” (gummy bears and Oreos) and “adult snacks” (almonds and dried fruit).

For the Annapolis-Newport, all of us kids had some bow responsibilities, and the staggered four-on, four-off watch schedule was organized to have two kids and two adults on at a time. Our watch captains were sisters Lindsay and Megan Gimple—experienced offshore rac-

ing sailors—and I was paired with Lindsay, while Sam, another Boston-based 20-something, was with Megan. To round out the crew of nine, we had Marcus, our navigator; Eddie, a part-time liveboard and all-around solid sailor; and Dan, our local Chesapeake perspective.

Annapolis-Newport is often two races in one—the 130-mile leg down the Chesapeake Bay, then the race up the East Coast to Newport. Our first afternoon out was idyllic, with the warm, early summer sun beating down and a spectacle of spinnakered boats zigzagging around us. Mary had pulled off an expert start, and from the rail, we filled the afternoon chatting about the fleet around us.

But neither the conditions nor the camaraderie of spotting friends and rivals in the distance was to last. As daylight wound down, the breeze and the sea state picked up. I usually don't have a tender stomach, but even I was feeling a little wary of the wave angle and bit of yaw

PHOTO ON PREVIOUS PAGES BY WILBUR KEYNORTH; ALL OTHERS BY [redacted]





L to R: Eddie and Megan trim the spinaker on calmer days. Once dry, the sail stack made a good place for a nap. Sam uses a beanbag to trim in comfort. Below, pulling into Newport just ahead of a storm made for a memorable finish to a memorable race.

we'd taken on. I refastened my life jacket, grabbed my tether, and headed back on deck.

One thing *Alliance* takes very seriously is safety and preparedness. The default is life jackets on and tethers in any weather or at night. We all knew how to start the engine and use the boat phone, set an MOB marker on the AIS, and deploy safety gear.

Eric directed me to the leeward side of the cockpit where I was out of the wind and also out of the way of the working crew. Inquiries were made about what drugs I'd taken (Dramamine) and how long ago (half an hour). And before I realized it, I was asleep with the fresh air cooling my cheeks.

By the time my watch rolled around at 10 p.m., the wind had whipped itself up to a roaring 30 knots, gusting mid-30s. Down in the lower Bay, the sea state was impressive with waves hard on the port quarter every five seconds, and an occasional rogue one surging from the stern. While surfing, Eddie hit our race max speed of 14.8 knots.

"How are you feeling?" Lindsay asked as we clambered back on deck and clipped into the jacklines.

"Physically I'm good. I slept. Mentally I'm a little overwhelmed. I've never sailed in conditions like this," I admitted.

Sam and Megan had put a second reef in during the previous watch, and we had the J4 up, so we weren't expecting to make any changes to the sailplan. But even without that complication, there was a lot going on.

"Is it too much or would you want to try helming?" Lindsay asked.

I considered it seriously. I did not want to. It was cold and dark, and I was intimidated. I couldn't remember helming in anything over 20 knots, much less 30. The sea was omnipotent. The waves were taller than I was.

But.

I knew that if I let myself be scared out of this, I'd be setting a mental limit. Next time I saw 30 knots, it'd be that much harder to face. Besides, someone was going to have to be at the helm for the

next four hours. If I was out of the rotation, everyone else would have to pick up my slack.

"I think I have to," I finally said.

Muscling the helm over to surf a wave, Lindsay kindly said, "You don't have to."

"No, I mean if I don't, I won't get over what I'm feeling right now. I think I should."

"OK," was all she said for a moment. Then, "I'm going to just talk about what I'm doing, what I'm thinking about while I'm at the helm. Stream of consciousness. And then you can come over here and hold the wheel, and I'll stand behind you like a creepy guy teaching you pool."

"Or when you teach a little kid to ski between your skis."



"Oh, yeah that's much cuter. Let's go with that." We laughed, and I felt a little bit of my tension bleed away. "And then if you feel comfortable, I'll step away and you can do it yourself."

She explained that she was monitoring the heel angle through her feet. Coming from a dinghy background, she felt more in tune with the boat when standing and moving with it. In the dark that proprioception was extra helpful. Instead of chasing our heading, she pressed down with a wave, then let the breeze round the boat up to the heading. Press, round, press, round.

That didn't seem too bad. But then again, I knew how easy it was to oversteer or get caught by a weird wave and lose your rhythm. I knew how easy it was to watch an expert and think it's actually as simple as they make it look.

I handed off the traveler and took the helm, with Lindsay at my side as promised. She kept one hand on the wheel as I began to steer. Press. Round. Press. Round. Press. Round.

My eyes were glued to the mast instruments, which displayed boat speed, heading, and true wind angle in impassive glowing digits. Nothing else existed.

"You have to tell me if anything is happening because I cannot look away from the instruments," I warned, finding even carrying on a conversation more distracting than I was comfortable with.

But then Lindsay slipped away, and I was doing it. I was steering a boat in conditions I'd only ever seen as an ominous red bruise on a weather map. There were no catastrophic round ups, no blown out sails. I was OK. I could do this.

"Hey, look at that," Eddie said after a long, focused stretch of me wrestling through waves.

"What?"

"You just handled a 35-knot gust," Lindsay said.

I hadn't even noticed.

Eventually, though, it was time to rotate, and I passed the helm off to Eddie, proud and relieved to give it up in equal measure.

By now, we were approaching the ship anchorage off Hampton

Roads near the Bay entrance. It looked like a city, lit up with the lights from so many ships, and our radio crackled constantly.

"See all those little sailboats out there in this mess?" we overheard on the VHF.

"Yup."

"Real glad I'm on a ship."

We also started hearing calls checking in on MOB alarms. Every time I heard one, I felt a little sick. In the pitch black with this sea state and the howling winds, how could you hope to find someone?

Mary popped her head up to report that all was well—the occasional blue water that surged over our bow was apparently a fleet-wide issue, and older beacons were mistaking the dousing waves for being submerged.

Before I knew it, we were approaching our watch change at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, where we'd leave the Bay behind and head into the Atlantic. I wanted to stay awake to see it, but the chill and exhaustion won out, and I went below for a few hours of respite.

Before settling down, I sent a single text to my dad:

"Just got off watch, helmed the boat in 30kts, gusting 35. Big waves. Lots of boats turning back, but we're fine and almost out of the worst of it."

But we were not fine or almost out of the worst of it.

### Water, Water Everywhere

I curled up on the port settee—head to the nav desk, cradled in the lee cloth—and drifted into a fitful sleep to the staticky lullaby of MOB check-ins.

A commotion and voices pulled me back to the bleary brink of consciousness: "Water... up front... I don't know where." I fought my eyes open in time to see Lindsay struggling past me towards the bow.

"Lindsay, what do you need?" I mumbled, half awake.

"Uh, you could start bailing if you want," she said. Frankly, that did not sound like an "if you want" sort of situation to me.

"Is there a floor panel out?" Half awake, I couldn't remember



Boat partners Eric Irwin and Mary Martin discuss strategy after the conditions dropped from gale force to glass, above. L to R: Lindsay trims the spinnaker on the way into Newport. Sam and Marcus enjoy some good weather (relatively speaking). Megan's 2-6 a.m. watch ended with a dramatic, mirror-like sunrise.

whether this boat needed a special tool to get it out or not.

"What?"

"So I can get to the bilge?"

She looked at me in confusion, and that's when I peered over the lee cloth and saw water over the sole, sloshing around her ankles.

I was up in an instant.

"Do not get wet if you can help it," she instructed as she moved onwards to meet Mary in the forecabin. Squinting into the dim red light ahead, I could just make out a pulse of water hosing into the boat. Each time we hit a wave, it gushed in around the bowsprit.

I reached down to grab my shoes, only to find that the tide of water had carried them off. I wouldn't see them again for two days.

As I lifted the first 2-gallon bucket up the companionway, Sam knelt to meet me.

"What's the problem?"

"I didn't get a good look, but it seems like a lot water is coming in around the bowsprit." I handed him the bucket, which he took and poured out behind Megan's feet. That's when I noticed she was on the wrong side of the boat, slumped exactly where I'd been the previous night.

"Is she OK?"

"Not feeling great," he said. Marcus and Dan were also down. It wasn't one thing after another, it was everything at the same time.

No matter how many buckets I handed up, it didn't seem like I was making any headway on the water. I eventually switched to the hand pump just to get each bucket fuller.

I couldn't tell if I'd been bailing for minutes or hours. Occasion-



ally Mary or Lindsay would reappear to dig up more materials for stemming the leak.

"We need to tack," Mary finally called.

"Mary says we need to tack," I said with my next trip up to the cockpit.

"Tack? That's completely the wrong way. We're on the favored tack now."

"No, like, we need to tack. Because of the water."

Maybe the buckets I'd been handing up hadn't quite conveyed the severity of the water ingress, because in short order Mary was stalking past me to have words about what was "favored," which apparently involved staying afloat. Point made, we prepared to come about, and I braced myself on the first step. I'd been bailing long enough to be well acquainted with exactly how high the waterline was. But as we tacked, a truly shocking amount of water slopped out of the floorboards from starboard to port.

And with that shock came a new problem: Micro leaks around the instruments' wiring had been filling the headliner, and on starboard tack, a steady trickle dripped onto the nav desk. I pushed the



boat phone and laptop as far into the corner as I could, and Mary rushed to lift a makeshift towel-tent over the nav desk.

Each time I poured a bucket off into the cockpit I seemed to be slopping more and more of it onto Megan's boots.

"Sorry, sorry," I murmured, but I wasn't even sure if she was awake to hear.

When Mary and Lindsay had managed to stem the worst of the water, they came back to help me with bailing. I perched in the companionway and lifted the buckets they filled out into the cockpit, but all that time bouncing around belowdecks was starting to take a toll on me.

I handed a bucket down to Lindsay, only to clamp a hand over my mouth and frantically nudge her shoulder. One look at my face had her tossing it back up to me. I was sick right into the half-full bucket.

"Hey friends," I leaned out of the companionway. "Can you make sure this one goes over the side? It's a biohazard."

And we continued like that for the long hours until sunrise. Bail, vomit, bail, vomit.

*Alliance* does carry a several-thousand-gallon-per-hour pump for exactly these occasions. It's a compact thing with a lay-flat hose that can be conveniently rolled up nice and small. The problem was that connecting the pump to the cockpit several feet above required the tube to make two bends. For a hose with form stability that's no problem, but for a hose that's essentially a long plastic bag, the angles necessary to get water out of the boat kinked it and slowed the water significantly unless someone—or better yet two someones—were holding it in place.

A shout went up that the water was up around the batteries, bringing a conversation about abandoning the race that had been simmering for an hour up to a full boil.

"We've got too much water in the boat and these waves are not supposed to let up," Mary said. "And we've got four of nine down for the count—"

"Oh, no, I'm not down," I interrupted from the bucket at her feet, swiping a ribbon of slime from my mouth. "I'm just puking." That didn't seem to reassure anyone.

Our watch schedule was a wreck since anyone who was sup-

posed to come on at 6 a.m. (and was well enough to do so) was exhausted from hours of bailing.

But finally came good news—the onwatch had located and solved the leak. A drain in the anchor locker had backed up, and the waves over the bow had completely filled the space. Without a watertight seal between the anchor locker and the bowsprit, the water was gushing into the V-berth. With the anchor locker bailed and the drain cleared, we were getting ahead of the water at last. Dawn was breaking. We were not abandoning the race.

Lindsay, Sam, and I sat in the cockpit as the grey morning light illuminated the night's carnage. Nearly half of the 62 boats that'd started had abandoned the race during the night, many of them even before leaving the Chesapeake. Land was long gone, and the waves had swollen to 10-foot mountains. I marveled at the seascape, only to be met with stony, exhausted silence.

Eric called for us to heave to so that we could get our bearings and a little rest, but between the waves and the breeze, we were still crashing along at 6 knots. Megan was only awake long enough to dry heave viciously before passing out again. Eddie was asleep on the floor.

But as the day wore on and the wind wound down, we pulled together to get back to a sense of normalcy—back on our watch schedule, back to hot meals (for those who could stomach it), back to the race. We were safe, the boat was secure, and smart decisions had been made.

We occasionally skirted into cellphone range, and I wanted to text my dad another update, but I didn't know how to say "We took on a bunch of water in the middle of the night, but don't worry, everything's actually fine now," without causing a panic. I ended up just turning my phone off.

### Race to the Finish

The next two days are a blur to me now, pinpricked with highlights like dolphins close enough to touch during a 1 a.m. headsail change or a dramatic, perfectly still dawn. Megan and I eventually got back to keeping solid food down, and we had Oreos and perfect spinnaker conditions the next day. *Alliance's* two new sails—a windseeker and a J0—got a good workout, as did the kids, who stayed busy with constant headsail changes during long stretches of light air. I was so worn out that my fingers struggled with the soft shackles.

And finally, after 526 nautical miles and three days at sea, we cruised into Newport just seconds before an electrical storm rained down fury on us. Despite the leaking and bailing, the exhaustion, the heaving to and literal heaving, we finished second in our class and second overall.

At the dock with drinks in hand, Eddie reached over to clink my cup. "That your first offshore race?"

"Yeah," I grinned.

"It's all going to seem easy from here out." ■