



Fastnet Force Ten Race 1979

Story and photos
by
Chip Barber

In July and August of every odd numbered year, the combined yacht clubs of Cowes on the Isle of Wight host one of the world's largest regattas. It is comprised of a series of short races and is capped by the 605-mile long Fastnet Race at the end of the week. In this blue water race, crews sail from Cowes west past Land's End in Cornwall, around the Fastnet Rock off the southwest coast of Ireland, then back to the Channel, finishing in Plymouth. The following is an account of the Fastnet Force Ten Race in 1979.

It is hard to believe that it has been over 26 years since I raced in what has become known as the infamous “Fastnet Force Ten Race.” Fastnet in 1979 was a killer. Fifteen men died, not one of them suspecting that when they left the starting line at the Royal Yacht Squadron in Cowes on August 11th, they would all become victims of the worst yachting disaster of the last century.

I was a new Lieutenant Commander stationed at the Naval Academy in Annapolis and assigned as the head coach of the Varsity Offshore Sailing Team. I had put a great young crew of Academy midshipmen together on *Alliance*, a 56-foot-long custom Sparkman and Stephens sloop that the Academy had taken in donation the previous year. We practiced hard throughout the winter of 1978-79, and in May we set out for what was to become legend in the rich history of Naval Academy sailing.

We raced from Annapolis to Newport, Rhode Island, before cruising to Marblehead, Massachusetts, to prepare for the 3,000-mile sailboat race from Marblehead to Cork, Ireland. We had a great little boat and a well-prepared crew. We considered the competition for this race to be the much larger 70- and 80-footers, all manned by the very best professional and amateur crews in the sport at that time. Superb sailors like Jim Kilroy in *Kialoa III*, Sir Peter Blake in *Condor of Bermuda*, and Steve Colgate in *Scaramouche* were our competition.

This race turned out to be very difficult for all. We saw gale force winds for most of the race, and occasionally the anemometer indicated storm force. And the Atlantic seas were huge, usually over 15 feet. Most of the time we were reefed, but we managed to fly a spinnaker during the worst of it. For 16 days we reached across the North Atlantic, going over 100 miles further north than any other yacht in this race to find even higher winds and boat speed. Even in July, we had ice on deck



Royal Cork Yacht Club, established in 1720, hosted *Alliance* and her crew after the transatlantic race.



Alliance finished First-in-Fleet on handicap

and in the rigging at night. Our strategy worked, and when we arrived, tired and wet, in Cork, we were number one on handicap, winning out over 35 other sailboats.

Before leaving Cork, we were presented the First-in-Fleet Trophy by the President of Ireland. We were sea tested, experienced in heavy weather sailing, and ready for our next adventure.

In late July, *Alliance* and her crew participated in the short races of Cowes Race Week in the Solent, but we didn't excel as we had in the transatlantic race the previous month, only earning second and third place finishes. We were all looking forward to the challenge of the upcoming Fastnet Race. *Alliance* was ready to give

up day racing in the Solent and kick up her heels back at sea.

When they departed Cowes on a bright Saturday, most of the 303-boat fleet were not ready for the fury that was to strike two days later. The Fastnet Race had not seen heavy weather for many years, and many of the crews entered the race just for a good time among friends. These crews did not have the experience we did, nor were they as prepared as we were aboard *Alliance*. Complacency would be their undoing.

For the first two days, the winds were light to moderate. Our challenge was to minimize the adverse effects of the strong tidal currents of the English Channel. By Monday morning, we had



Alliance practicing in Annapolis before departing on her 8,000 mile odyssey in 1979.

entered the Irish Sea, but the wind was calm; no one realized this was the calm before the storm. On Monday afternoon, I picked up a high seas weather forecast from the British Met Office (the UK did not have a continually transmitted weather forecast on VHF, as we do in the US). This forecast predicted winds strengthening to 32-38 knots overnight. But the next forecast early on Monday evening called for even higher winds. Most of the racing fleet did not hear these forecast warnings and were unprepared for the fury that hit them that night.

At dark, *Alliance* was overpowered even when flying a small jib and a deeply reefed main sail. We were sailing at the boat's maximum speed of 9 knots with the wind speed of almost 50 knots. We continued to reduce sail, but around midnight our jib exploded from the force of the wind and high seas and had to be cut away. The latest forecast now called for winds of over 70 knots!

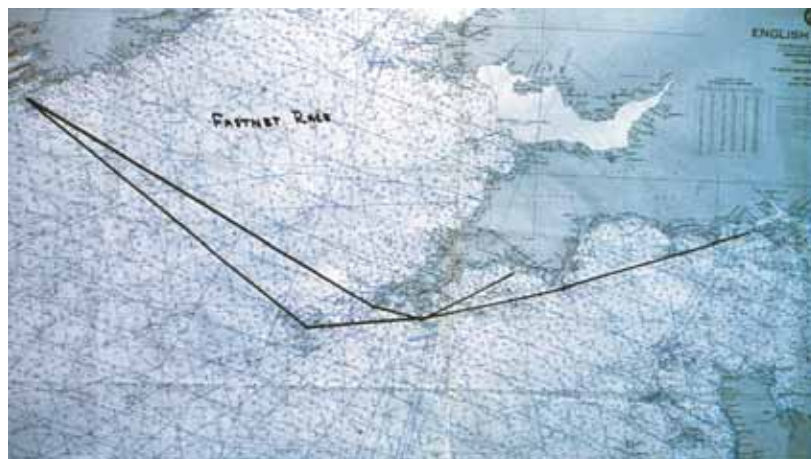
On *Alliance*, all of the crew were tethered to the boat for safety. We were sailing toward the Fastnet Rock turning point under "bare poles" at a forward

speed of 5 to 6 knots. Even our smallest storm sails were too much for the wind and seas. We had almost no maneuverability and could only reach on toward Fastnet Rock. We were knocked down twice by huge waves, which put the tip of our mast into the water. The seas took their toll, damaging rigging and even stainless steel gear including the steering wheel. Several crewmen were injured, but none with anything more serious than cracked ribs. We were lucky. Later that night we fought for over an hour in 60-knot winds and 45-foot seas to put up our storm trysail, the tiny scrap of heavy sail that gave us the ability

to turn *Alliance* and start our run back across the Irish Sea just as dawn broke.

Throughout the night we heard the "May Day" calls from other boats in the Irish Sea; we even heard some of the rescue communications from the Royal Navy, the RAF, and the RNLI, as well as the Dutch naval ship that helped. In the horrific conditions, there was nothing we could do to assist any of the five boats that sank, or the 19 yachts that were abandoned, or the 15 men who died that night. It was a helpless feeling. Only 85 of the 303 boats that started the race were able to finish it.

The biannual Fastnet race starts in Cowes, Isle of Wight, passes Fastnet Rock off the Irish coast, and finishes in Plymouth.

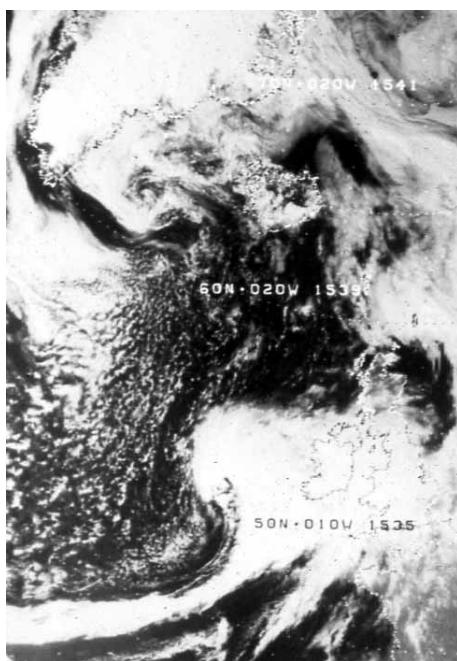


Looking west in the Solent just after the start of the 1979 Fastnet Race.





Satellite shot of the 1979 storm that decimated the Fastnet Race Fleet. Notice the strong banding and accentuated comma shape as the storm approaches the Irish Sea. Ireland is in the lower right corner. Photo courtesy of the Meteorology Dept. U.S. Naval Academy.



Close reaching under reduced sail. Fog can always be a problem while racing in the U.K.

After finishing the race in Plymouth on Wednesday, I took *Alliance* to the docks at Royal Marine Barracks Stonehouse to distance my young crew from the sensationalist British press. As the Senior Officer aboard the visiting US Naval vessel (our 56-footer could have been an aircraft carrier; naval etiquette doesn't differentiate), I was shown to their best VIP suite, which was decorated in priceless antiques and oil paintings and had a sterling tea service.

While luxuriating in a huge cast iron tub in the marble bath, I heard someone enter the suite. I got up and, holding a big towel around myself, walked into the living room to find a Royal Marine packing all of my saltwater soaked clothing back into my equally wet sea bag. I asked what he was doing and the marine snapped

to attention, clicked his heels, and saluted. "I'm sorry, sir. You've been usurped." Being American, and not understanding "usurped," I asked him to repeat himself. He did. Then he pointed to an equally soaked sea bag next to the door. I padded over to the bag, leaned down and read the tag attached to the handle: "The Right Honorable Edward R. Heath." I mumbled to myself, "Now I think I know what 'usurped' means."

The former prime minister was a superb yachtsman and raced whenever his schedule permitted. It turns out that his yacht *Morning Cloud* finished right behind *Alliance*, and he also took refuge from the tabloid press at the Marine Barracks.

The memories of the summer of 1979 will always be with me.



Close and exciting racing on the Solent during Cowes Week 1979

The crew of *Alliance* pose in Cork, Ireland, after finishing the 1979 transatlantic race. Author is seated, right.



Note: The lessons learned from the 1979 Fastnet tragedy have been incorporated

into detailed safety regulations for sailboats racing offshore. These regulations, which I helped to draft, are responsible for having significantly improved offshore sailing safety. Edward Heath raced his series of yachts called Morning Cloud for many years. He died in 2005.

Charles Barber is a veteran sailor of over 40 years. A career naval officer (aviation), Chip retired from service in 1992 after a successful tour as Director of Sailing and Commodore of the Naval Academy Sailing Squadron. In this capacity, Chip's teams won the national intercollegiate sailing championship. Chip was

the coach on board the Naval Academy's 48-foot sloop *Constellation* in 1992 when she won the coveted St. David's Lighthouse Trophy for First-in-Fleet in the Newport to Bermuda Race. Upon leaving the Navy, Chip founded an international yacht management service and provides administrative management and special project management for high-level racers as well as for long-distance sail and powerboat cruisers. His current projects include the restoration of a vintage 1938 Sparkman and Stephens 68-foot racing yawl. Chip plans to navigate this boat in the Centennial Newport to Bermuda Race in June. Chip Barber will be a contributing writer for *The Virginia Sportsman* and will be sharing with our readers his experiences, stories, and expertise on sailing.