

Volunteer's Fastnet Campaign 2015

The Fastnet Campaign, like all great ideas, started from a single point with little lateral thought being given to the actual effort involved in getting to the start line, let alone completing the race.

In our case the idea to do the Fastnet was born during the RNVR YC renaming ceremony for Volunteer, when it became apparent that we had on our hands a yacht capable of offshore racing. As it turned out, the yacht itself was just part of the conundrum: we also needed support from a huge variety of sources to make this a viable endeavour, from a financial, logistical and safety perspective and this was the next port of call. From the outset, we had a huge amount of support from the RNVR YC itself, allowing us to lock down Volunteer's availability early on and providing the foundation for the project. The other major part was to ensure we could rely upon the official seal of approval: while we had this early on from the Commander Maritime Reserves, we were also helped enormously by the Royal Navy itself, who classified the expedition as competitive sport, giving us access to funding and experience of their staff.

Once we had identified the requirements, the next step was to write it all down and find out how much it was going to cost: the total added up to more than £30,000 so a lot of time was spent poring over all the budget headings to ensure that we were making best use of resources.

One of the main expense headings was sails: Volunteer was purchased by the club with a full set of racing sails along with the cruising sails. However, these are predominantly inshore race sails: light, highly tuned, they are not made to be used in over about 30 knots of wind as inshore racing is generally cancelled on this class of yacht above around 25 knots (I hear it's because it's impossible to make tea on the race committee boats at anchor over those wind speeds). To this end, the Royal Navy helped us to purchase an offshore racing mainsail and 2 jibs, the mainsail being a particular bargain as we were able to get it from another 40.7 that had managed to order two. The other biggest expense was replacing the forestay and furling gear for a low profile foil that could be rigged and derigged without taking the forestay off the boat. So as much work was going to be done to ensure that the necessary funding was going to be forthcoming.

To fund this we approached several sources who were particularly helpful: The Royal Navy provided the sails, the Ulysses Trust paid for the forestay conversion, and the City of London Lieutenancy and Corporation grants covered a large amount of the other expenses such as charter fees, race entry fees, mooring, fuel (too much of it!!) and so on.

Once we had a boat and some funding and some sails, the next job was crew selection. We could have got a fully experienced offshore crew from the ranks of the RNR, but as we wanted to introduce reservists to sailing in support of the Maritime Reserves "sea sense" initiative, building a mix of

experience and ranks was essential and "Volunteers" were requested from several divisions and a portfolio of applicants started to build.

By the autumn of 2014 a plan was starting to firm up. Key to any Fastnet campaign is actually getting the yacht into the race. With a maximum of 375 entries, the race is heavily oversubscribed and we had to rely on luck, the priority given to RORC members and a speedy internet connection to ensure Volunteer would be entered. In the event, the maximum number of entries was reached within 20 minutes of the list opening in early January.

The RORC season starts with the Cervantes race in early May, so during the winter period further planning and crew selection took place ready for the first training weekend in Easter of this year. Finding



Skipper in Planning Mode

crew early on had another benefit in that we were able to supply working parties to Port Solent in March to prepare Volunteer's hull for antifouling to race specification. Team

building started early! The Easter weekend was programmed to consist of familiarisation with the yacht, basis safety and sail handling and of course the requirements



Fully Branded Sails

for racing as opposed to cruising (don't bring anything you cannot get into a very small bag). Unfortunately Volunteer had an problem with repairs to the inner hull so it meant that a First 40 (very similar) was chartered from Sunsail and the first serial went ahead with a day in the classroom and then 3 days at sea in and around the South Coast doing basic sail hoists, spinnaker work, man overboard and other safety drills.

A requirement of the Fastnet is that 50% of the crew must have sailed on the yacht with the same skipper for a minimum of 300nm of offshore races approved by RORC. This means it's necessary to schedule more than the minimum number of qualifiers, so that if I decided to not start any race due to

weather, crew or equipment failure, we wouldn't be at risk of not qualifying for the Fastnet race. 4 races were identified as being the best to qualify the maximum number of crew: the Cervantes to Le Havre, the Myth Of Malham to the Eddystone Lighthouse and back, the De Guingand bowl to Cherbourg and the Cowes-Dinard-St Malo.

In addition to preparing the crew, Volunteer herself needed to be prepped for offshore racing. Whilst she is normally MCA coded for 8, the crew was going to be increased to 10 and as the Fastnet is a Category 2 ISAF race (more than 70nm from a safe haven) this meant some additional equipment. Fortunately with some support all the additional kit was procured with no extra cost to Volunteer itself. One

important piece of kit that we still needed was a laptop with Expedition, the preeminent offshore race software loaded onto it. Whilst strictly not necessary many yachts racing offshore carry it and it is something that we felt would improve our performance, so when we discussed this with some of the people involved in the project one club member with extensive IT connections sourced this for us. A small bit of electronic trickery later and we had Volunteer all set up to broadcast the instrument feeds via Wi-Fi.

Of course no yacht runs on people power without food. So the victualing became a great discussion point. On a race boat it's anything you can eat out of a packet, so boil in the bag meals

and chocolate bars are the order of the day. One of the better things to evolve in the world of offshore racing is boil in the bag meals. These have come along way both in diversity of types and the quality of the food, to the point where they can happily make up the mainstay of the crew's diet as the evening meal. Add in porridge as a morning meal, wraps or sandwiches for lunch and the only thing you need is to make sure any pork pies get eaten by their sell by date (not a given on a five day race!).

One major difference between cruising and racing is weight, so the crew had to learn often the hard way, about weight management. This isn't just sitting everybody out hiking, but movement around the yacht in light airs, and simply what weight is on the boat in the first



Fully Branded Crew

place. The crew became very practised at turning the yacht from cruiser in race mode in a short space of time, getting a lot of gear off the yacht that was essential for cruising but surplus to requirement in race mode. Volunteer is fitted with demountable cockpit lockers so

these could be taken off as could the majority of fenders and mooring lines. Internally the same approach held: if it does not make the yacht go faster get rid of it. That meant one saucepan, no cutlery except spoons and a huge reduction in manuals and other gear (the obvious exceptions being any safety related equipment,, along with fixtures and fittings that were included when the boat was weighed for its rating). During the races we use bottled water for drinking, using seawater for cooking the boil in the bag meals (and washing up, as this was limited to the spoons) and baby wipes for washing. This means the water tanks are empty, with a double benefit of reducing weight and stopping any water in there from sloshing around, unbalancing the boat as she moves through the waves: free surface effect if you will.

So having got the basics sorted out it was time to race.

The Cervantes Race

The first of these was the Cervantes race from Cowes to Le Havre via a few marks (including a “spreader mark” off St Albans head) for a total of 135nm and was the yacht’s baptism. A downwind start on Saturday the 4th of May meant we were straight into race mode and trying to work out how it all worked. Lessons on the dock are no substitute for doing it for real. In cruising mode Volunteer can be sailed with 6 control lines. In race mode that goes up to nearly 20. So you can imagine the bafflement of some of our dinghy sailors as they were faced with the complexities of the array of pit clutches. Into the foray we went: my first concern being safety,

the excitement of our first start was always tempered with the concern about fingers coming back still attached to palms. Fortunately the experienced crew aboard understood the requirements to sail safely, so



Happy Hiker 1

we got through the race, and in fact the campaign, with no injuries.

By late afternoon we were faced with our first tactical decision. The wind was from the South



Happy Hiker 2

East so the choice was to go south or to go east, with the shifts favouring the south.

Question was how far to go south before tacking, wondering whether the wind was going to back or veer. It was interesting

to see the fleet start to tack as we crossed the channel on a course towards Cherbourg. We held our nerve until about 5 miles from the French coast and on the turn of the tide to west going. The winds were well into a F6 on the Beaufort scale as we kept hard on the wind across the channel and it was a good familiarisation to the campaign as a whole. Needless to say some people felt a little queasy with some technicolor moments but as we closed the coast the wind did moderate and backed somewhat so we were able to close Le Havre on one tack. We made the finish in just under 24 hours on corrected time to end up half way up the fleet. After good lunch in the Le Havre yacht club, followed by a very pleasant sail overnight back to Port Solent, we were left feeling this was a good start to the

campaign and some good lessons learned (including - keep your sea boots on whilst using the heads at 30 degrees).

Myth of Malham Race

Our second qualifier was the Myth of Malham over the Whitsun weekend and it was a

very different race to the first one. The course took us from Cowes west down the Solent to the Eddystone Lighthouse outside Plymouth and then a shortened course finish to the west of Hurst point (originally programmed to come back via the eastern end of the Solent), total distance about 250 miles. The forecast was for very light winds strengthening in the latter part of the race which promised a tactical challenge of both crew and race software. The



Concentration

advantage of this race as a qualifier is that you are sailing across a lot of the Fastnet course including three of the major headlands.

After a reasonable start down the Solent we got into the Channel and were pushed down towards the Casquets TSS when, as predicted the wind started dying late on the first evening. As the tide turned we had no choice but to drop the kedge anchor in the early hours. On Volunteer this weighs about 16

kgs with 5 metres of chain. It is deployed when racing using 200 metres of very thin polypropylene line. The problem came when had to retrieve it. We were in 60 metres of water and needless to say the first bit was easy but lifting 25 kgs of chain and anchor on 4mm line is not quick (about 35 minutes). So we were much slower than anticipated in getting going again when the tide turned and the wind built. The rest of the first 24 hours saw

us slowly beating towards Start Point in drizzle. The weather improved as we got close towards the Eddystone but by the time we were round it we had taken over 30 hours. So back towards the Solent under better wind conditions but a feeling that this race was not going as well as the first. After going past Start Point the wind started filling and we came across the bay on a beam reach before finally turning around St Albans Head towards the finish on a spinnaker run. It took us 50 hrs to complete the 240nm and we finished in the lower

part of the fleet and a realisation that we needed to do much to get the performance of boat and crew up to the standards required in the Fastnet.

De Guingand Bowl Race

The third qualifier was the De Guingand bowl race. A Friday evening start at 1900 from a start line to the east of Cowes and finishing in Cherbourg. The winds were forecast as mainly westerly going to F5 later in the race. The actual course took us east to the Rampion Met Mast

off Brighton, then back west, past St Catherine's Point to the Needles fairway buoy, with the last leg across to Cherbourg.

We managed to get a good downwind start towards the Forts. Keeping the Spinnaker going well for the next 4 hours but as we hardened up on the Owers buoy we had our first serious broach as the yacht rounded up into the wind. The crew handled the incident well, dropping the spinnaker and hoisting the No3 Jib in a fairly short time as we carried on to round the Met Mast. The rest of the night saw us on a close reach across the south side of the IOW to the Needles. We turned around the Needles Fairway buoy at about 0800 and the next day brought us reaching across the Channel towards Cherbourg in a F5 to finish the 140nm in around 20 hrs. It was obvious from this race that we still had several areas to improve on, not least our understanding of how to control the main in higher wind speeds



Doctor on Deck

St Malo Race

The fourth and final qualifier was to St Malo, a classic 150nm sleigh ride of a downwind race

that we finished in 22h, the race was run in northerly winds and by then it was obvious that our downwind performance had much improved. It was also the race we had the Colonel Jeff Moulton- Finance and Personnel onboard so a good performance was essential. A finish in the upper third of the fleet fully justified a superb seafood dinner (the joys of St Malo!). The other benefit of this race was that we now had all of the crew qualified for the Fastnet.

By now many lessons had been learnt, we were much better at sail handling, more of the crew were much better at helming and our management of the yacht internally was much improved. We had turned a varied collection of sailors and sailing ability into a crew capable of competing in one of the worlds iconic yacht races.



Departure For the Fastnet

The Fastnet Race

The Fastnet started on the 16th of August, the first Sunday after Cowes week and we spent the previous 2 days prepping the yacht for this race. With light winds forecast in the first half, we needed to plan for a 5-day race, managing the victualing to ensure we were not over stored but equally not starving by the time we arrived in Plymouth. When we sailed from Port

Solent on the morning of the race the feeling was we were as prepared as we could be. If only the wind would co-operate. Around the start area we meet



Blue Rider

up with Blue Rider (Peter Stonestreet) coming to wish us well. Also on board were Mark Fearon, Will Pook - who was reserve crew for the race and Alan Waters probably checking to make sure we had actually left! and his wife Gwen. Our start time was 1300 and we watched with interest as the first start at 1200 saw some of the bigger multihulls try and cope with the remains of the east going tide trying to close the line. By the time of our start with scarcely a breath of wind from the west, Volunteer and the rest of the fleet drifted over the start line. A good call on how far up-tide of the line we needed to be saw us get over in second place and in relatively clear air at the southern end, the crew lying down on the leeward rail to help the sails fill. The wind picked up as we headed towards the Needles, with the big boats that had started behind us dashing past us at the narrowest part of the channel at Hurst Point, some nearly close enough to touch.

This compression of the fleet meant that a very small area of Solent water was filled with the zigzag tracks of a 300 strong fleet tacking into the wind past Hurst Point. Quite a sight!

After the Needles with the wind now from the southwest we headed to towards St Albans Head. We made our first tactical call as the evening drew in, to head offshore to find wind and get out of the stronger tides to the north. By midnight we were nearly reaching the TSS off Les Casquets in F1-2. This is an

obstruction of the course (incurring a 20% penalty) and we watched with some concern as other yachts got caught in the turn of the tide and were swept on to it. We kept clear of it fortunately and skirted over the top. Unfortunately it transpired that going south was not the right call as the boats that stayed north and kedged off Portland Bill got the wind and 2.5 knts of current first and were away in the early hours of the morning before we got out of the light airs further south.

Monday morning the wind picked up as we headed towards Start Point to catch the tide through the bay, dying out completely by the afternoon to leave us drifting on a millpond. We made a second tactical call to go offshore at this point, and this time it was the right one: the wind veered north and filled in as we were on a starboard tack heading south, slingshotting us round the fleet in the bay and picking up around 60 places on the pack. By now were well into our stride and with a better forecast for the run around the

Irish Sea but with a wind hole around the Scillies on Tuesday morning in the way of better conditions giving us cause for concern. Overnight Monday saw us reaching along past The Lizard, with the morning breaking and the wind dying again frustratingly. However we had a secret weapon in the form of watch leader Richard who was something of a light airs guru and ghosted us through the fleet, many of whom had stalled ahead of us. We kept going heading up the East side of the Scilly's and into the Irish Sea on Tuesday afternoon on a fine reach, port tack and by now F3-4.

The wind picked up overnight from the South West and we peeled down from the No1 to the No2, reefing at around 2300 as the gusts went to 25kts. The morning found the horizon breaking cold and grey with Ireland visible in the distance but with a feeling that we were at the all-important turning point in the race.

After what seemed an interminable beat during the morning as we turned inshore of the Fastnet TSS, we rounded the Fastnet Rock at 1317 on Wednesday, a shade over 3 days after starting and cracked off past the Fastnet TSS to start the journey home.

An uneventful fast reach back across the Irish Sea saw us reach the south of the Scilly's by Thursday morning. Rounding the Lizard, in the late afternoon we hoisted the asymmetric spinnaker to hammer back into Plymouth, with our Navigator Peter Costalas taking the race and season boat speed record at 14.5knots! We finished at shortly before 2300 on Thursday



The Bloody Rock at last

night, coming 60 out of 70 in class and 190 out of 350 starters overall to enjoy a well deserved beer in the beer tent!

The hospitality in the race village in Yacht Haven was superb but unfortunately the 24hr bar was maybe not such a good idea as most of us got into our bunks at about 0500 and by 0800 it was “call the hands” we needed to start turning the yacht around. We had arranged for a

van (driven by Mark Fearon) to bring the cruising gear from Port Solent but had not foreseen that we would end up on a 7 deep raft and full race gear including sails to get off and the cruising gear/sails to put on. With the help of Mark, Bernie Steed and Gareth Derrick we chain-ganged the gear on and off. Nursing hangovers and looking forward to the promised lunch and evening prize giving party we completed this final serial of the



The Finish



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campaign shortly before 1200. In time to hand the yacht over to Gareth and his crew who were taking the boat back to the Solent for the 5 Castles Cruise. Scrubbed and smelling somewhat better than the previous days we got to the party in our Race Jackets feeling we had run a good race.

It was a great end to a fantastic campaign and a privilege for me to lead it. It cannot be stressed enough how happy we all felt to have taken part and how grateful we all are to the RNVR YC for the support it gave in getting the yacht to the start line. There were many people who helped but none of it could have happened without the support of Alan Waters who was unfailingly there every time to get the yacht turned round from cruising to race mode and back again or our navigator, Peter Costalas, who oversaw the yacht from a management standpoint, including getting the charters sorted out and the repairs before we took her out. David Monk's support in supplying our computer and sourcing the race software was also a godsend.

This all meant we managed to turn people from an eclectic mix of backgrounds - Police Inspectors, School Teachers, Doctors, Engineers etc with a range of sailing experience - Round the World Sailors through dinghy sailing to none at all - into good offshore racers. The Club's backing in providing this help to get the Maritime Reserves sailing cannot be overstressed.



Lastly my sincere thanks to my superb crew for the campaign:

Tasha Barton
Liam Connors
Peter Costalas
Catherine Fearon
Richard Hamilton
Helena Hamlyn
Will Pook
Phil Spencer
Chris Toms
Peter Wrigglesworth

I look forward to more sailing adventures with you in the future.

Joseph Macdonald
Skipper
Yacht Volunteer

