

Mission Accomplished

By Diane Kelley

Of the many experiences one might expect in an Ocean Race, the Crew of Corsair could not anticipate the course of events that created an unusually challenging passage in the 2009 Marion to Bermuda Race. Owner David Risch easily selected his crew, three generations rooted in the long-standing relationships of the individuals. David included 77 year old friend and neighbor Ron Chevrier on whose boat, David had crewed in three previous Marion to Bermuda races. Also aboard were his son David, 18, good friends Jeffrey Hallahan and Bob Kostyla, and Bob's son Chris, 23. Collectively they possessed complimentary skills; experience, strength, talent, wisdom, humor, bravery and a competitive spirit of adventure. While individual goals may vary at the onset of the race from standing in the winner's circle, to getting to the party first, the prize that motivated David Risch was sharing the journey itself.

Overcoming fear of the unknown drives many adventurous spirits, and the weather in this Race did not disappoint. Upon arrival in Bermuda, one old salt said he had participated in every race since its inception in 1977, and had never seen anything like this, "The cold front from New England lingered and followed us from the start, then there was an unusual, severe system that moved in from the Mid-West, and there was no Bermuda High! The power of these three events together made it almost the perfect storm." Prior to the Race, organizers provided several comprehensive forums on weather, first aid and safety. But as thorough as the forums were, the fickleness and ferocity of the weather is always a wild card. As an extra measure before the start, Corsair consulted a private meteorologist for a detailed briefing. Given the rapidly changing weather fronts, it became very difficult for even the experts to predict the forecast; nobody got it right.

After a wet start, family and friends of Corsair tracking their progress on iBoattrack were thrilled with Corsair's fast pace and early lead, but late into the fourth day, the boat made a left turn leaving them to wonder why. One could only deduce it was either equipment failure or disabled crew. They finally learned it was both. Prohibited from having contact with the racers, it wasn't until they arrived in Bermuda that they began to learn the unusual circumstances that delayed Corsair's landfall for two more days. Corsair followers later learned the sharp turn observed on iBoattrack was in response to a distress flare David had sighted at 2100 hours on Tuesday. They were the nearest boat and quickly changed course, actively searching for six hours. They combined forces with other competitors who also sighted the flare. The Navigator of Lucky Dog coordinated the effort between the boats, triangulating their positions to effectively search the area. After exhausting a thorough process, Navigator Jeff Hallihan spoke directly with the Coast Guard who had deployed a C-130, at which time the sailing vessels abandoned the search and motored back to reengage the race Wednesday morning at 0900 hours. The total flare diversion cost them over 12 hours.

Three days out, Ron Chevrier officially stood down and Jeff Hallahan took over as Navigator. Ron had become disoriented and felt incapable of fulfilling his duties. It was a puzzlement to all. As Corsair returned to the race Ron Chevrier's condition began to deteriorate. His hallucinations, sleeplessness and restlessness were becoming increasingly disconcerting and it was felt he was becoming a danger to himself and others in the rough weather. By satellite phone, Bob contacted Georgetown University Hospital for medical support. They thought perhaps Ron's condition was the result of a prescription medicine interaction. It became clear that Ron's health was the primary concern and the race became secondary. On that Wednesday evening the Skipper informed the Race Committee that Corsair was withdrawing from the race to hasten Ron's medical care in Bermuda. Given a clean bill of health for all crew members prior to departure, this scenario had never crossed their radar.

Motoring in flukey head winds, Corsair's focus was getting Ron to Hamilton as soon as possible. On Thursday morning they ran out of fuel. A faulty fuel gauge turned out to be the culprit. At the same time another front was moving in bringing 25 knot winds and 10-15 foot seas. While hoisting the storm sail, Corsair slid back down a steep wave unloading the steering cables. When violently reloaded, the steering cables parted. After installing the emergency tiller the crew brought Corsair under control steering now by using the auto-pilot controls. Within hours they raised the #3 to make speed and pound upwind for Bermuda.

Thursday morning Race Officials had informed the crew's family waiting in Bermuda of Corsair's

mechanical problems but that she was proceeding in without further problems. The crew, however, requested help getting Ron off the boat. With that bit of news they knew Ron's condition had worsened. After much discussion via Sat-phone with Ray Cullum, BYC/Marion liaison and close friend of David and Ron, Ray gave measured information to the concerned extended Corsair family. It became apparent that options were few. Corsair was more than 40 miles offshore and would require more fuel than the rescue boat was equipped to carry and to transfer Ron in high seas would be a perilous exchange.

Late Thursday afternoon David finally sailed through St. George's cut with the emergency tiller. Upon entering the harbor they squeezed out the last half gallon of diesel from a jerry can and powered up to the immigration pier in St. George's. A harried customs official presided with care while throngs of concerned friends and family raced down to the pier to greet the weary crew just steps ahead of the ambulance.

The Captain and crew of Corsair could not have been better prepared to deal with the elements of the Race. However, as well schooled as they were in the technical aspects of the race, they could not anticipate the flare sighting and search. Events conspired to delay arrival in Bermuda by one day, a critical window given Ron's condition. Stabilized in the Bermuda Hospital, Ron was Med-Evaced to Mass General for treatment and released. He has recuperated and enjoys sailing in his home waters of Buzzard's Bay.

Ocean racing inevitably flushes out every character flaw and strength inherent in the crew. They entered the race with one paramount mission; to share the humbling and exhilarating experience of an offshore race, bonding fathers, sons and good friends. They never expected what ultimately transpired in a surprising role reversal; the elder crewman witnessed the youngest members "man-up" in the most difficult role - handling the majority of care for Ron with the utmost patience and compassion. By losing a crewman and gaining a patient who required personal care 24/7, Corsair's crew resourcefully created a pragmatic dynamic; they fused together naturally assuming their new roles without a word. Thinking Mother Nature would be their biggest concern, it was Human Nature that presented the most profound challenges... and strengths.

In no small part due to the skill of the sailors, it was ultimately their allegiance to each other that brought the SV Corsair and her crew safely into St. George's Harbor. Although Corsair did not finish the race, they did achieve a bonding experience they could never imagine. The fathers and sons have made a pact to come back in 2011 to cross the finish line and finally say, "Mission accomplished".