Papers

The Fastnet Race 1979

BARRY O'DONNELL

We now have in Ireland what we least need: a new group of bores. They will be known as Fastnet bores. I have a vision of my son, then aged 15, propping up the club bar in 50 years' time with a foot firmly on the rail and a gin and tonic in his hand and telling them "You don't know what it was like—it was hell out there."

The Fastnet race in 1979 showed that sailing is not an *absolutely* safe sport. The 1979 race was the 18th biennial race since 1925 and up to then there had only been one race death. Some 302 boats started; their length varied between 30 and 80 feet (9 and 24 m), but the great majority were between 30 and 44 feet (9 and 13 m) long. We were in our 37-foot (11 m) production cruiser/racer *Sundowner*. We were not one of the 85 who finished but one of the 194 who retired. Twenty-three boats were abandoned, and of these five were lost. Fifteen people died. Nobody died in a boat that was sunk. A total of 173 people were taken aboard other boats or rescued by helicopter.

"Come sailing"

To begin at the beginning, we had sailed the boat from Dublin on a cruise to Devon and Cornwall with an "expanded" family crew and then went on to Cowes, where we raced almost every day for a week. This was a good start to a long race because day racing shakes the boat down. This is important—anything loose will fall off during a week's racing at Cowes. Cowes is "Come sailing," it's not "Come dancing," and we didn't see any blazered chaps in peaked caps standing in white ducks on the lawn of the Royal Yacht Squadron because we were out racing, and that is what people do at Cowes; they come to race their boats; it is a boat-racing festival, and it is the best of its type in the world. In the evenings after a 25-35 mile (40-56 km) race lasting six hours you feel like nothing more than a "few" pints of beer and going straight to bed, and that is what most people did.

On the Thursday of Cowes Week we had 42 knots of wind on the clock; clearly the weather pattern was unsettled, and some of the boats in our class were damaged. We did not race on Friday because we were checking everything, and we completely reset the mast. My biggest anxiety was that if it got really difficult in the race the mast would come down, hole the boat, and sink us. We had the bolt croppers out for cutting away the mast and rigging if it did come down, and we had discussed the order in which we would carry this out. In fact, during Cowes Week, the only damage we suffered was when our stern light was carried away by a boat coming behind us. The skipper of that boat, who was actually at the wheel at the time and said, "Sorry,

old boy" and so on, was one of those lost in the race. He was sailing a sister ship to ours and he also had one son and one cousin on board, so it really brought the tragedy home to me subsequently. I had a crew of eight; all (including my two sons) were under 26 except Paul (surgical senior registrar) and all were experienced: two had sailed for Ireland, and Sean had actually been in the only race up to then ever won by an Irishman at an Olympic regatta. Brian had his first mate's ticket as well as a World Cup series behind him at 23.

FIG 1—Supplied by Ambrose Greenway.

Lack of gale warnings

I had met the man who was most likely to give me an accurate weather forecast. He wishes to remain anonymous now, but said that the wind was going to be force 4-5 right through—and this suited us very well. But as we passed Land's End at 1100 on Monday, 13 August, the barometer began to fall and eventually fell an unbelievable 40 millibars in 24 hours. Our own readings were from 1025 to 985, and somebody suggested that we put a match under the needle because it was falling so fast. I could not believe the speed at which it was falling because after all a fall of one millibar/an hour is dangerous, and this was almost double that. There was no other warning of the gale.

The meteorological offices and the BBC had arranged things in such a way that if you listened to the shipping forecast you got no warning of the gale, but if you listened to the BBC non-stop you did. But you have more to do on racing boats than listen to the BBC non-stop, and it was incredible that while a gale warning was being announced on some wavelengths it wasn't put out on the shipping forecast. In other words the vital 1750 shipping forecast on Monday did not carry a real gale warning: it stated that the "wind would be force 4 locally 6, increasing to

Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children, Dublin 12, Eire

BARRY O'DONNELL, FRCS, FRCSI (currently President of the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons and a past President of the BMA, IMA, and Canadian Medical Association)

Based on a talk given to the Sligo Yacht Club on 10 April 1980.

6 locally gale 8 becoming northwesterly later"—which meant to most of us that these conditions weren't going to happen at all. Even so, from the barometer readings we worked out that we were going to have the storm of all time and within hours we were shortening sail. That evening at about 2300 the wind was close on 50 knots and we were down to "bare poles" (all sails off) and streaming warps—that is, trailing all the heavy ropes over the stern to slow the boat down because we had decided to turn and run. And this is before we heard any forecast. The storm had arrived.

FIG 2—Supplied by RNAS Culdrose.

The storm

The fastest speed our boat recorded was 16 knots—I'd never seen it beyond 9.9 before—and the highest wind speed we recorded was 72 knots, which is hurricane or over force 12: my 19-year-old son was on the helm at that time and remembers it quite clearly. We had a saloon meeting and I had no mutiny because I was so much older than them all and we had no problems, no hysteria—there were at least two boats in which crew members had to be struck, but mine wasn't one of them. I said that we weren't going to abandon the boat for the life-raft and said, "This boat can't sink," to which my 15-year-old said, "He sounds like the skipper of the *Titanic*."

We had someone at the helm all the time, because we thought that if we lashed the wheel and went below as some crews did we should not survive. We all wore full sailing gear, safety harnesses, and life-jackets all the time. It was incredible to read some of the reports where they didn't do this, because you may have to abandon ship quickly and could easily die of hypothermia.

Those on deck wore a heavy line around them as well as a safety harness. This was three-quarters of an inch diameter rope and was not going to give way whatever else happened. Two of our crew were washed overboard and both pulled themselves back on these lines. I like the combined harness and life jacket that has a crotch strap. One man lost his life through having his harness pulled off over his head—in fact he was the one who had hit our boat at Cowes. Many people have difficulty getting into harnesses in a hurry, and many are badly designed.

We took on water only once, when the hatch was opened and a crew member was so mesmerised by the size of the oncoming wave that he didn't close it. Some people never had the hatch closed right through the race: some had a terrible sense of claustrophobia saying, "if we go down we'll drown like a rat in a trap." But, of course, you can't go down while the saloon is

intact because you're in a big air bubble, and your whole security depends on this. So I felt very safe having it closed.

The radio-telephone worked until noon the following day (Tuesday), and we heard two Mayday calls. One was a British Mayday, with fantastic phlegm: the man said "This is the yacht *Magic*, and this is a Mayday. We are in serious trouble. We have lost our rudder and we are out of control," and giving his position as if he were reading the news. (All were rescued from *Magic*: it sank under tow.) Next came a "mainland Europe" boat that was "in trouble," and there were three fellows screaming into the mike; the difference between the two nations was unbelievable, and was one of the few funny things in the race.

Gale theory consists of two main propositions: one, all gales blow out and the worse the gale the longer it takes to blow out—and they blow out faster in the summer than they do in the winter. The other proposition is that the wind always changes direction in a gale, and it was this that made conditions so difficult, because there were two sets of waves, one coming from the south-west and one from the north-west. While we were avoiding one we were hit by the other, and this is what really hurt. The traditional advice is to "heave to" (stop the boat), but you can't heave to in a short-keeled modern boat. If I had been closer to the shore I would probably have tried to use a sea anchor, but it is a less satisfactory way of dealing with the problem than turning and running before the gale so long as you are not near the shore. Cork was too near—attractive in many ways, but too near, and dangerous because we might have been blown on to a lee shore. Even at 70 miles (103 km) away (20 (32) more than Cork) Dunmore East (Waterford) was probably a risk, and we eventually aimed at the Tusker Rock (off Wexford).

The most frightening aspect was that so many things happened at night. The noise of the waves was incredible, as was their size, every oncoming wave blacked out everything else, you could not see beyond it. The speed of the boat was terrifying

FIG 3—Supplied by RNAS Culdrose.

(I was afraid the rudder would come off), as was the whistle of the keel every time the boat surfed off a wave. There was no sleep, no hot food; we lived on chocolate. The next day at noon nobody was fit for deck, everybody was exhausted, so we lashed the wheel and waited for the gale to blow through. At 1530 we started the engine at the first shot and off we went to Rosslare, Co Wexford. We were the last Irish boat to come in. The only damage done was to the boom, but everything else worked. Sean, the Olympic winner, said that it was the first time that he had ever been on a boat where everything worked.

Subsequent inquiry

The Royal Ocean Racing Club held an inquiry. Altogether 669 questionnaires were returned, and the result is a fascinating piece of reading for anybody who is interested in the sea or in safety at sea. It is also well written. The various points that came out of the inquiry were: the race could not have been put off on the basis of the weather forecasts. So far as yacht design was concerned the flat-bottomed boats did very badly. Steering gear was the biggest cause of failure. Cockpits must drain better; an extra storm mainsail must be carried, in addition to a storm foresail. There was a lot of talk about safety harnesses, and the report said that the combined harness and life jacket was advisable. Life rafts came off worst in the whole inquiry. People have said since "Why carry a life raft at all?" Certainly I wouldn't leave my boat even if I were up to my waist in water. The basis of carrying a life raft seems to be for use after fire, explosion, or collision—for these a life raft must be carried. But in heavy seas you must stay with your boat.

There were various options in the questionnaire about why you retired—injury, damage, seasickness, but we opted for "No longer really enjoying the race."

The report did not find that crew experience made any difference to whether or not the boat was brought home in safety, but it certainly made a difference to whether or not you finished. Those who adopted active tactics in the storm seemed to come off better than those who didn't. The report considered that more complex navigation aids would not have made any difference, and I would agree. A good radio direction finder and

a couple of compasses are as much as you are going to need in these conditions.

The report also said that yachts should continue to sail over the Fastnet course. If I were to be asked for my personal view I would say first that you cannot give any recommendation that is suitable for conditions like Fastnet 1979. We all know that statistically the most dangerous 50 yards (45 m) in the world are those in your dinghy from the quay to your boat. Every year people are lost then. I read a lot so that I had a lot of theory behind me before I was faced with these problems, and I found my theoretical knowledge a great help.

The last event was a beautiful memorial service for those who lost their lives in the race, organised by the Royal Ocean Racing Club at the Royal Parish Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, on 8 November 1979. We sang lustily "O God, our help in ages past" and listened to psalm 107—"They that go down to the sea in ships . . . these men see the works of the Lord." Admiral Sir Maurice Laing said in a thoughtful address that many of those at sea that night wished to speak to the Lord but were unaccustomed to so doing and perhaps a little uncertain of how to address him. The widows came out of the church first into the sunlight of Trafalgar Square, then young children, because many of those who died were relatively young, and then the tanned men with King Olaf of Norway and Mr Edward Heath leading. I'll not forget the Fastnet memorial service, but I'll never forget the Fastnet '79. Close the hatch.

(Accepted 17 October 1980)

Hospital Christmas parties

REUBEN GRÜNEBERG

The chairman of the district management team in a teaching district receives a great many invitations to Christmas parties held in hospital departments. I enjoy going to such festivities whenever I can, but the problems may be considerable. One evening at this time last year I attended five parties that were being held at the same time. Colleagues told me that there were yet others going on concurrently. The problems of getting from one to another in an increasingly tipsy state became formidable, and I was sorry not to be able to spend more time at each. Clearly I had accidentally uncovered an area of hospital life that is crying out for administrative attention. It is high time that we rationalised the giving of Christmas parties in our hospitals.

Method

The first task is to establish the facts. How many parties are given, where, by whom, and for whom? I believe that the problem is such that we should appoint an administrator to make the inquiries (scale 29, £12 055-£15 225, plus London

weighting). He should be provided with secretarial support (higher clerical officer, £3995-£4834, plus London weighting) and an office. His task should be to collate the answers to a questionnaire about parties and report on them to a working party that would already have designed the questionnaire. The working party would report directly to the medical executive¹ and should have wide membership and power to co-opt. All departmental heads² (as well as heads of departments) should be members, and every possible trades union and staff group should be represented. This will cause a few problems because some are affiliated to the TUC and others are not; since the former will not recognise the latter it may, come to think of it, be necessary to have two working parties—this may necessitate a second administrative post (principal admin assistant, £7134-£8761, plus London weighting) for liaison.

With hard work and skilful chairmanship (chairman of medical executive) the questionnaire may be agreed after only a dozen or so meetings. Since the stencil machine and the duplicator in administration have been sacrificed on grounds of economy, the questionnaire will have to be printed commercially, but the expense can easily be justified because of the importance of the subject. When available, the questionnaires will be circulated in large numbers to all comers in the district. (This will, of course, require extra payments to be made under the porters' bonus scheme, but the ship must not be lost for want of a lick of tar; £1000 should cover it.)

When the answers to the questionnaire are available, including all the late answers (so significant, because very likely different from the others) the important task of analysis can begin.

University College Hospital, London WC1E 6AU

REUBEN GRÜNEBERG, MD, FRCPATH, chairman of the district management team in the South Camden District of the Camden and Islington Area (Teaching), North-east Thames Region