

## April-June 1975

### Sailing interlude around the Canary Islands with David Jackson ZB2DH/MM

Some of the leaves I had were quite long, and I used them to meet some of the people I had come to know via Amateur Radio. David was one such person, and he wanted help in getting the yacht in which he lived, into good condition to sail to Gibraltar. He was berthed at a small yacht harbour called Los Cristianos at the Southern tip of Tenerife, close to Ray ZB2DG/MM, whose family (a group of very talented musicians) lived on a 22 meter yacht called Roaming Melody. They had sailed to Gibraltar from Tenerife where David had acted as their manager. They had much success singing and entertaining in the hotels around the island, but wanted to try another venue. I had spoken to them many times on the radio and had got to know them all quite well. Ray played the drums, June his wife, the electric organ, and the two daughters sang. His son, the youngest of the group sometimes used to sing with the girls, or relieve his dad on the drums. David now wanted to join them in Gibraltar. I had never been on a large yacht, but was willing to learn, so we agreed I would fly down and help out.

His yacht was a 17 meter Klinker built wooden racing sloop. Inside was beautifully panelled, long and slim, she was capable of very good sailing performance. We painted and varnished for about a week, then set sail for Gibraltar. This turned out to be a bit of a hairy adventure. We had portable radio which we could use as a DF receiver, but it was a bit deaf, and didn't work too well. There was the Amateur Radio and a magnetic compass, otherwise we were to navigate using wind, stars and the sun. It did not worry us too much as the weather seemed settled, and we thought we would not be out of range of the DF beacons. Unfortunately, after a good start heading North and then West, the weather changed much for the worse, and the sky became totally overcast. The wind started to blow a heavy gale, and we lost contact with the various DF beacons we had been using for navigation.

The yacht, though in reasonably good shape, was old, and began to take heavy punishment. We were making a windward passage, which meant we were sailing into the wind and sea. This made us pitch heavily, and also made it hard work keeping a course. Because of the violent motion, I was seasick, and could not bear to go down into the cabin. Even David could only hold out a few minutes down there when he tried to work out where we were. When steering, I had a bucket next to me, which I had to use about every fifteen minutes or so. As the voyage progressed, this became better, but I was never completely free of seasickness. We cat-napped in our oilskins in the wind and wave-swept cockpit. Although we never really felt very cold, we must have been. The water was almost like a warm bath when it broke over us.

At times, the yacht was moving really fast, heeled over with the leeward side awash and water occasionally flowing into the (self-bailing) cockpit. Waves seemed to tower over us, and there was the all pervading thrumming of the wind in sails and rigging, coupled with the hiss and roar of waves and breaking seas. It was exhilarating, but at the same time worrying. We tried to make a course toward Madeira, so as not to head directly into the wind, but the weather was too bad for us, and by dead reckoning, we turned to head for Lanzarote. By this time we were both tired and fed up with the constant pounding and battling with the sails. Although we had safety lines attached, it was still dangerous on deck in such weather. At night we only had the small deck working lights, and the waves loomed out of the gloom, frequently higher than we were. The sound of wind and water was everywhere.

We were extremely happy when very faintly we heard the first sound of the Lanzarote DF beacon on the radio, and could get a rough direction in which to steer. At this point we also found out that the boat had started to leak

with all the pitching and pounding. We had to pump every hour or so to keep the bilges from filling up, and it seemed to be getting worse. David had a crawl around in the bilges, but it was very cramped and very difficult to see where the water came in. The leak seemed to be from around the rudder post which had to take a lot of stress. This also meant it was totally impossible to fix at sea. I must admit, that at this point, I was beginning to wonder what I was doing there and why! During the day we only saw mountains of water and driven spray. Visibility was only a few miles at best, and in the trough of a large wave, all we saw was water and no horizon at all!

It was dark and raining heavily when we finally got to the strait between Lanzarote and Fuerta Ventura. We could see one light clearly flashing away. According to the chart, there should have been two, one on Fuerta Ventura, one on Lanzarote. The light we could see was just a flashing beacon with no group flashing code (used to identify the light). The other (if there was one) was not visible. We did not know if we should pass to port or starboard. We tossed a coin and decided to pass it on our starboard side, and nearly had a major disaster. We approached closer and closer. Suddenly I saw something strange. I called out to David that I could see a very faint greenish white line in the darkness ahead of us. The light was flashing apparently from a cliff above us. He immediately put the helm hard over, and we luckily turned quickly away. We were probably only a few hundred metres from the rocks of the Fuerta Ventura shore. The line I saw was the phosphorescence of the sea as it broke over them. To have gone ashore there would very probably have been fatal. Hearts pounding, we put back out to sea again.

As the rain abated, we eventually saw a steamer passing through the strait, and on heading in the correct direction we saw the missing light, very faintly on the Lanzarote side. It was very much dimmer than that on Fuerta Ventura, and could only be seen a few miles away. In heavy rain, it could not be seen at all. We passed safely through the strait, and headed for Arrecife, the main port. It was late morning when we finally arrived. The first sight was somewhat daunting. Huge Atlantic rollers were hitting the harbour wall and spraying high into the air. A large trawler of around 800 tons started to leave harbour, but on hitting the ocean swell, just turned around and went back inside again. We, poor sailormen were out in it all! We had, however, made it. If not to Gibraltar, then at least to a harbour... ANY harbour!

After about a week of heavy weather, the feeling as we passed inside the harbour entrance and into the calm waters beyond cannot be described. Peace and quiet and most of all, lack of movement. We tied up alongside a trawler as we couldn't find a mooring, and just fell into our bunks and slept. I remember the frying and clicking sound of the shellfish on the pier and harbour walls. They could be heard quite plainly as I dropped off to sleep, my ear close to the hull, under the water line. When we woke up, the fishermen were very generous, and we had enough fish to feed an army when we asked if we could have a couple to eat. A whole bucket full. They themselves had been out in the storm earlier, and knew what we had been through.

When in harbour, and no stress on the hull, the leak almost stopped, but David left the yacht there, and we both travelled back to Las Palmas with the ferry. This was a trip of only twelve hours but which had taken us a week to do! There he made arrangements to get the yacht drydocked and repaired in Arrecife. We flew to Gibraltar, and I met up with Ray and family on Roaming Melody. After an interesting week or so there, I finally flew back to England as it was the end of my leave.

Would I do it again? ... Yes, I think I would. Seasick, shaken, pounded, cold and wet that I was, it was still an exhilarating experience.