

**From Gibraltar to UK in ten
(not so easy) days
in June 1968**

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I suppose you could say that it all started When I got married to my lovely wife Christine back in 1968 because I only had just one night with my new wife before I had to go back to Fort George and prepare to fly out to Gibraltar for three months. Whilst there but still about three or four weeks to go before my return to UK my commanding officer asked for me and my mate in the pay office, John McLaren to go and see him. We were asked if either of us would be prepared to help a friend of his to sail his boat back to Chichester on the south coast. He had met the boat owner after being invited for a trip to Tangier for a weekend sailing. It was an unfortunate time for him to go as over the weekend the Spanish Government had closed the border and were threatening to invade. The poor relations with Spain were the reason that I was in Gibraltar in the first place as I was serving with the Royal Highland Fusiliers who were the spearhead battalion at the time and ready to move at 48 hours notice. There was no way to communicate with the boat as there was no radio on board. He was lucky that nothing untoward happened before he arrived back on shore. He said that we were the only two that he could trust to do the job properly. John was not prepared to do it but I thought that it would get me home a couple of weeks early and it would be quite an adventure too, zooming across the water in what I was told was a converted Danish gunboat. I made the fatal error of agreeing before I actually had sight of the boat.

So I packed my gear in my kitbag bought enough cigarettes for the 10 day trip plus my duty free allowance along with a couple of bottles of whisky, although there would be no drinking on the boat. I got a lift down to the docks the next morning and asked where the "Bukefalos"



was berthed. Even with good directions I couldn't find it, not a good start. I was approached by a young chap who asked me if I was looking for the said boat which he then pointed out to me. It was moored alongside another boat at the quayside and to my surprise and

disappointment was a 50 foot wooden sailing boat, quite wide and heavy as it was double hulled with 2 masts a low saloon hatch and a proper wooden wheel, but not the gleaming speed machine that I was expecting.

The young man was one of the crew, a stranded merchant seaman who had missed the sailing of his cargo ship on account of the fact that he was in jail for being drunk and disorderly. He had been staying at the seamen's mission waiting for a chance to get back to the UK. He showed me aboard where I met the skipper (A retired Lieutenant Commander RN who owned the boat), A guy named Peter who had flown out from the UK to pilot us home and another chap who was a shipwright and had been working on Norman Wisdom's yacht until they had a falling out, so he too was stranded and in need of a passage back to UK.

So that was it, the skipper and four crew with little or no experience of sailing such a craft. Five people but only four berths and as I was the last to board I was allocated space in the main saloon on one of the bench seats for my bunk. The layout was: at the bottom of the companionway the heads (toilet with a seawater pump flush and a basin) then a cabin either side with two bunks then the saloon and forward of that the tiny galley and a store room. Not that the lack of space mattered much as in the event not a lot of time was spent below decks.

The first task was to ensure the compass was correctly set so a chap came aboard at midday and we motored out of the harbour into Algeciras bay for an hour or so whilst he did what he had to. It was a beautiful day and almost flat calm but even then I became mildly seasick so upon return to the dock I legged it up to the town to buy some seasickness pills.

We sailed on the tide at midnight out into the bay and headed for Tangier in Morocco. All was going well for an hour until the boat was lit up spectacularly by a searchlight. We couldn't see where it was coming from at first but soon found out that it was mounted on the bridge of a Spanish Gunboat and we were ordered to heave to by loud hailer. This was not good news for me as the border with Spain was still closed and here I was a soldier being apprehended by the Spanish authorities. The skipper aware of the dilemma sent me to the bow as lookout with strict instructions to keep my mouth shut.

For Peter it was an even more unfortunate event. He was our pilot for the simple reason that he knew the waters well, being an ex smuggler on the North Africa to Spain run. He had been imprisoned by the Spanish and had his boat confiscated. He had escaped back to UK with another man and they were both still wanted by the Spanish authorities AND he was the only one on board who could speak Spanish so couldn't hide away from the responsibility of translator.

We were boarded by several armed officers who searched the boat and in the process purloined my whisky but kindly left me some cigarettes. After it was obvious that we were

not the smugglers they suspected us of being, but just an innocent craft that had strayed into their territorial waters we were allowed to go on our way, much to the relief of everyone especially Peter who if he had been recognised would have been straight back into that Spanish jail.

The morning saw us entering Tangier harbour where we moored to allow The skipper and the shipwright to go to the souk to buy fresh vegetables and other supplies. The seaman and I were tasked with guarding the boat and tidying it from the nights searches whilst Peter donned his diving gear to inspect the hull. In all a pleasant and peaceful day.

The following morning we set off bound for Chichester in good spirits and a high mood. The passage through the straits was uneventful and we were soon making good progress northwards towards the coast of Southern Portugal. The weather was fine, the wind brisk and progress good. This was a good time to learn the ropes of sailing and get to know the boat as well as watching the pod of dolphins accompanying us and playing on the bow wave. I could almost touch them as they came so close to the boat, an experience I will never forget. The best speed we could muster with sails set and the engine going was four to six knots, maybe up to eight with a good following wind and it was the following day that we passed the south western tip of Portugal and headed northeast into the Atlantic.

With the benefit of hindsight but at the time totally un concerning, the safety features on the boat were almost nonexistent. There were a number of shrouds (fixed ropes securing the mast to the bulwarks) for each of the two masts which were useful as handholds and a small dinghy secured to the over cabin hatch plus a lifebuoy attached to each side of the rigging. That is it, no personal safety items such as lifejackets or harnesses. But at that time of my life I was indestructible and had no fears.

The skippers plan was to sail north-west into the Atlantic with the prevailing northerly wind to catch the expected westerly trade winds which would take us north towards the UK. Thus to end up safely in Chichester harbour in ten days time. I didn't realise at the time how optimistic this was.

The weather which up to then had been benevolent and in our favour took a turn for the worse and within hours had developed into a freshening northerly which in a sudden squall took away the spinnaker before we could haul it in. We spent several hours battening down and securing loose items. I moved my kit into one of the cabins as I was to "hot-bunk" with one of the other watch, much safer than sliding around on a saloon bench, and more comfortable too. I should explain here that the four "sailors" were split into two watches to do a six hour on six hour off rota with the skipper on permanent call. So we slept when we could during our off watch time when the other guy was on deck. The bunks had sides to stop us from rolling out.

Up until then cooking in the small galley was off limits for me as that was the place where my sea-sickness took hold, in fact Peter being the best cook did most of it. His Spanish omelettes were especially good. As the storm intensified the galley was abandoned as it was too dangerous to do any cooking. Our diet for the next several days consisted mainly of cornflakes with re-constituted milk.

Our next problem became evident on hearing a tremendous ripping sound. The mainsail which was pretty ancient developed a split a few feet above the spar, luckily the split was horizontal and we were able to reef the sail in to about three quarters area with the split rolled around the boom. After a worrying time the skipper confirmed that the sail was holding. The seas by this time had become huge, I won't even guess at the height of the waves but the boat was rolling quite badly as we were making much less headway due to the diminished sail area. All of my waking hours were now spent on deck so my sea-sickness was kept at bay.

The steering was by an wooden wheel, very Linked to the rudder by were somewhat worn so pressure forces on the were now experiencing so we had to stand on the helm remained true. course now became something of a slow dance.



old fashioned much like this one. chain. The pawls in the event of high rudder such as we the chain would slip the chain to ensure Changing or holding

After the first day or so of the terrible conditions I was woken from my well deserved slumbers by the skipper and told to get on deck as we had an emergency. It was the middle of the night and was hellish on deck. It was an "all hands on deck situation" as I was sent up to the bow with my watch-mate to man the manual pump, which was worked by an iron bar with hand holds at each end. The boat was holed and was taking on more water than the bilge pump could cope with so we were in effect sinking. It transpired that we had been hit by a large object in the storm on the side that was taking most of the weather and heavy seas. We worked the pump for what seemed several hours and then were relieved by the other watch. We pumped until the bilge pump could take the strain but had to go back to the manual pump several times over the next 36 hours.

The wind abated somewhat on the third day and the skipper got us together for a little conference if you could call it that. It went something like this.

Skip. OK chaps still no westerlies encountered just the constant northerlies, we can continue on our present course further into the Atlantic searching for a good wind to take us north OR we can go about and head towards Portugal.

Us. How many days before landfall in UK?

Skip. don't know for sure but maybe ten or twelve.

Us. How many days to Portugal?

Skip. three.

Us. OK how much fuel left for the engine?

Skip. Three days.

Us. How much water and food left?

Skip. three days.

Us. what the F*** are you asking us for then, just turn this boat round and let's get back to land otherwise we starve or sink or both!

We had seen no other vessel for the last three days and were many miles from the usual shipping lanes. We turned the boat round which was no easy thing in the still heavy seas and high winds but once heading north east for the coast of Portugal the stove in bow was on the Lee side and took in less water which meant our pumping duties were eased but in the process we had lost the foresail, split from top to bottom. We were left with half the mainsail and the fully functioning mizzen which is the one at the back. Our spirits were much lifted now especially as the storm began to abate and we were making good progress, heading for Oporto in northern Portugal.

I was on watch early the following morning when something caught my eye astern and abeam of us. I couldn't make it out at first because of the mist and spray. I thought I may be hallucinating because it appeared to be a very large white vessel coming up to us at double our speed. A ghost ship I thought because of the white hull and the four enormous masts with full sail rigged. My watch mate confirmed with me that it was indeed real and the skipper was roused immediately. Such a fantastic sight and another one indelibly printed on my mind. All five of us were now on deck as it came abeam of us, a giant of a ship compared with the small ungainly boat that we were sailing. Someone with megaphone hailed us and asked if we needed assistance. We must have been a sorry sight with our sails in tatters. It turned out to be the Russian Navy training ship, one of, if not the biggest four master in existence. Their English was pretty good and our skipper bravely denied the need of any assistance. So with a wave from us and a salute from them they moved swiftly off into the distance and were soon swallowed by the mist. Was it real, had it been a dream? We looked at each other and agreed that it had been real. I can't remember the name of the ship but the following picture looks very much like it.



The rest of the day and the following morning were featureless until late afternoon when we spotted a trawler in the distance, then another, then a couple more. We knew that we were fairly close to land now. We closed with the nearest trawler and Peter our only Spanish speaker managed to find out in a mixture of Spanish, English and broken Portuguese that Oporto was at least two days sailing for us northwards which we had neither the fuel nor provisions to reach so we turned South and headed for Lisbon.

The wind was now astern and we made good progress although the rolling waves were still very large, as high as a double-decker bus at least which meant that we had to keep the stern lined up at all times or we would broach. Not an easy thing to do with a slipping rudder chain which sometimes took both of us on watch all our strength and effort. There were a group of small islands in our path but Peter had knowledge of these and kept us well away from disaster.

The following morning, day nine I think, saw us round the point into the estuary of the Targus river and we were soon sailing under the impressive Lisbon bridge that looked like a smaller version of the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco.

The city and dock area were on our left and we headed for the yacht marina but we were not allowed entry, (I think we looked too scruffy and probably smelly too as none of us had fully undressed since leaving Gibraltar) so we were directed further along the dock river into a dock with several rusty old merchant ships that we had to moor up alongside to the companion ladder of one. It was lunchtime but we had no lunch to eat.

We managed a mug of tea and the last of the cornflakes in celebration of our safe arrival in port (any port). The skipper now came up with a really bonkers idea. His marine agent had their offices in Faro (the place we had passed several days before) and he asked for volunteers to crew the boat back there where he would arrange the sale of it and hopefully get an advance that would enable us all to get back to the UK. Needless to say there were no takers!

We now needed to get ashore to the public facilities where we could get ourselves cleaned up and presentable before getting a hot meal and a cold beer. The dinghy was unshipped and put in the water for us to row to the dock side but it immediately started to take on water. Now this was one thing that hadn't been checked in Tangier. It clearly wouldn't take us all without sinking so me and the sailor boy volunteered to climb the rusty companion ladder onto the deck of our rusty companion and reach the dock that way. Neither of us could swim so it wasn't such a brave choice.

After our ablutions and whilst sitting in the dockside cafe over a big meal we saw that a large liner was in harbour and found that it was scheduled to depart in the evening heading for Tilbury. The skipper's new plan was to pool all our remaining funds, buy one ticket to UK for Peter who would then call everyone's family and moneyed friends to give money so that he could hire a small lorry or large truck, drive it through France, Spain and Portugal to Lisbon, collect the rest of us and our kit and caboodle and motor back home.

The plan didn't suit my requirements at all. Firstly by the time I got back to UK I would have been at least a couple of weeks absent without leave, not a good position to be in. Also as they are wont to do the French had decided to have a petrol strike so it was highly likely that any rescue truck would be marooned in France as we were in Portugal. I passed on my thoughts to the others and they agreed it was not a good plan for my circumstances so I decided I would go to the British Consulate and seek out the Military Attaché for his help and advice. Before I could do this we bought Peter his ticket and helped him board the liner stuffing his cabin with our labelled bags and putting the shipwright's big tool chest in the corridor after persuading the crew that everything belonged to the one man.

I now took a taxi to the embassy whilst the rest went back to the boat for more kit to lumber Peter with. The Military Attaché was in and agreed to see me. After hearing my story and phoning my Commanding Officer in Gibraltar to confirm it he became very helpful and told me he would book a flight for me to leave for the UK the following morning which was music to my ears. Even more music was to come when he asked if I had any money left after chipping in for Peter's ticket. I didn't even have enough for the taxi back to the docks so he left the room and was soon back with a wad of escudos which he gave me. There was more than enough to treat everyone to a slap up meal whilst we waited for Peter to board the liner that evening and to buy some cigarettes of which my stock was seriously depleted.

After waving goodbye to Peter it was back to the boat to organise my kit for the morning. My army kit bag was on its way to Tilbury with Peter so I cadged a scruffy sea-bag from the skipper which used to be white. It was fairly small but big enough for what kit I had left. That night I slept well for the first time in my own bunk and first thing in the morning went back to the embassy. My benefactor the Military Attaché had come up trumps with tickets for an early afternoon flight, he asked how I was for cash and after I explained that I was feeding three other hungry Brits he passed me another wad of cash. I had to sign an undertaking to pay for the flight in the event that the Government refused to cover the cost which I did with alacrity. With a thank you and a handshake I was swiftly back to the boat to tell my shipmates of my good fortune. I bought lunch and handed over most of the money as there was far too much for my needs. The others then wrote out names and telephone numbers that I was to call when I reached London with an explanation of their plight and a request to gather up plenty of cash to give to Peter when he arrived a couple of days after me. After that and with my scruffy bag over my shoulder we walked to the taxi rank and after handshakes all round we said our goodbyes. I was not in any way sad to be saying goodbye to Bukefalos.

I thought whilst sitting in the departure lounge that all the excitement and troubles were behind me but after boarding the TAP plane and taxiing to the end of the runway, the engines building to full power for take-off then suddenly decreasing power as we taxied to the furthest reaches of the airport. After a while wondering what was going on, everyone had to leave the plane and congregate a distance away. Then all the baggage was unloaded and each passenger had to go and identify and collect what was theirs. I stood watching interestedly until just one bag remained, a scruffy off-white sea bag that was being inspected suspiciously by the officials. Then I realised that it was MY bag, the one I had borrowed from the boat and I belatedly stepped forward to identify it as mine. We were bussed back to the terminal where we were told that a phone call had been received saying that there was a bomb on the plane. It turned out to be a hoax and two hours later we were airborne and heading home.

I made those calls to very surprised families from the London terminus before using the travel warrant I had been given to purchase my ticket to Derby and normal married life. I

never saw or heard from any of the crew again but did manage to retrieve my kit bag from the customs shed at Tilbury which was delivered to me a few weeks later in Scotland. Several weeks of routine life later I was summoned to the Adjutant's office to be presented with the bill for my flight home. Undaunted and remembering who got me into all this I told him to send it to the Commanding Officer who was still in Gibraltar and that I was sure he would pay it. It was a bit cheeky on my behalf but was obviously OK as I never heard any more of it. Although not many months later I was posted from the Regiment to a new unit in London.

Life goes on thankfully.