

# Caught by Hurricane Charlie!

Roger Vanstone and Ted Jenks on passage to Portugal

C. D. PAGE

The passage to Portugal had been planned for some time with departure on the 20th August and arrival at Oporto probably early September. We had arranged a rendezvous with a replacement crew at Santander on September 10th. We were a crew of 4 working 3 hourly night watches and 4 hours during the day. Our general passage plan was to be down the channel, clear of the Ushant shipping lanes, across Biscay to Oporto and coast hop back to Santander. Good thinking, you might say. No hassle with the Raze, no worry with the tides, plenty of sea room and well clear of shipping.

A meandering low over Ireland delayed our departure for 36 hours until we finally decided to move the boat down to Helford to get a quick start as soon as the weather did clear. "Why are we going to Helford? — Why aren't we going to Portugal?" We were bumping along 2 miles south of Falmouth at the time. "Yes, good point" came the reply from the other two on deck.

Falmouth Coastguard had provided us with forecasts and we gave details of our course and ETA for Oporto. So it was off to

sunny Portugal with blue seas, sunshine and a broad reaching 4; or so we hoped.

Friday evening saw us passing the Lizard beating into a southwesterly: not the most comfortable way to start a long passage. As the night passed the wind started to veer and made life a bit easier. By Saturday afternoon we were on a reach with a westerly 3 and the sea smoothing out except for the long Atlantic rollers.

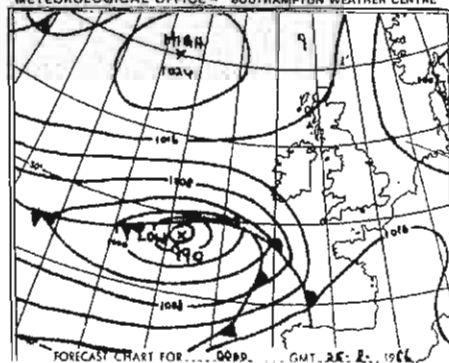
The first gale arrived unannounced Saturday night when we were about 80 miles west of Ushant. We brought down the main and sailed on with 1/2 Genoa and Mizzen. *Cedilla* a Super Sovereign 35 long keeled ketch was well balanced with this rig. By 10.00pm we had 35 knots of wind with seas 15 to 20 feet on the beam. We rose and dipped amongst the white foaming seas making up to 6 1/2 knots. It was, we agreed, one of the most exhilarating sails we had ever had. In 12 hours we had covered nearly seventy miles. We didn't know it at the time but that was to prove crucial later on.

Sunday lunchtime we had everything we had hoped for, sunshine, good winds,

flat seas. We were well pleased, especially as we had had the 'blow' we expected during the trip south. There was great excitement when 20 or more dolphins came alongside to dive and jump, darting

**Weather Chart showing Hurricane Charlie, which, although demoted to a deep depression, still produced storm force winds as it moved up-Channel. Hurricanes spawned off Africa occasionally arrive on the Atlantic coasts of Europe as intense depressions. Worst months September, August and October, in that order.**

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under the boat and leaping out of the water. After a few minutes they disappeared as quickly as they came.

At 1755 we listened to the forecast 'Deep depression moving very quickly ...' 'Biscay South East 8 veering South increasing 9 ...' 'Sole South East 8 to 10 ...' There was a deep depression on board *Cedilla* after that forecast.

By this time we were about 100 miles southwest of Ushant and about 150 miles from any safe haven. Running for shelter was out and we felt that the improvement to our situation was to head south as quickly as possible to get us past the centre of the depression and to take us into the deeper Atlantic water which we felt would make seas easier.

At 5.00am on Monday 25 August the wind started to increase in force. The barometer had dropped to 1015 from 1026

in 10 hours. By 7.00am we had 40 knots of wind blowing from the south across the decks. We were sailing with *Genoa* rolled to storm jib size and full mizzen. Our heading southeasterly.

As the morning went on the seas increased with white streaks of foam tumbling off the backs of the waves. *Cedilla* was still coping well but we were taking more and more water over the decks.

The height of the waves had reached 30 feet or more by lunch time. With the wind increasing, it was obvious that we could not expect the boat to carry on taking the pounding.

Although the recommended course of action in such extreme conditions is to lie a-hull under bare poles we would almost certainly have been rolled. At 1.10pm with the barometer reading 1008 and the seas bigger than anything any of us had ever seen before the the jib was backed, the wheel lashed and we hove-to.

### More comfortable

Almost immediately the motion was a lot better, with very little water coming over the decks. We rose with the waves, white water all around, then swooped down the backs, *Cedilla* lining herself up ready to climb the next mountain. We went below, battened down the hatches, got out of wet oilies and watched the barometer continue to fall.

Midnight saw the barometer bottom out at 1002. Wind force was 9 to 10 and veering



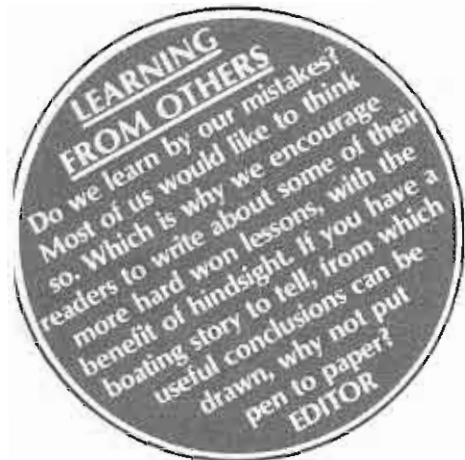
**'The Skipper' on the morning of Monday 25th August 1986, looking tired and worried.**

South southwest. According to our Decca Yacht Navigator we were travelling across the ground at 56.7 knots!

At this point our noble cook appeared from the fore cabin. "Is it usually like this?" she enquired. "Is it serious?" On being assured it was, Ruth, who was on her very first sailing trip, made porridge. It wasn't greeted with the enthusiasm that the effort deserved. If we were holed we had a good emergency covering: it certainly had substance. The spoon stood to attention in the pot for nearly two days.

Next morning the wind had abated and we went on deck. We peered out like a bunch of kids at the school railings. It was a truly awe-inspiring sight. The seas dropped from under us one minute and

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## Learning from Experience

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towered above the next. A further 8 hours elapsed before the sea calmed sufficiently for us to dare to start sailing.

With 5 days without real rest, two gales and no proper food we were all very tired. Whilst a day's rest would probably put much to right, another gale could leave us seriously at risk. As we had been set 80 miles in a northeasterly direction we

decided, reluctantly, to head for France.

Concerned that our relations would be worried about our safety we radioed a passing warship and the Irish Navy were good enough to relay a message to Falmouth Coastguard. A phone call home elicited the fact that we had been in the tail end of 'Hurricane Charlie'.

Arrival in France was without incident

except the difficulty of trying to explain to customs why we were in France when we were going to Portugal.

The next 2 weeks appeared to be from one bar to another while drifting down the coast with balmy sunshine, lovely beaches and all the touristy sights.

We never did get to Portugal. Maybe next year. Weather permitting! ●