

Steve Sidaway March 2020

Throwing Caution to the Wind! -the remarkable story of a transatlantic row

Just over 12 months ago, intrepid WBC member Steve Sidaway crossed the finishing line in Antigua on The Talisker Whiskey Atlantic Challenge –dubbed ‘the world’s toughest row’. With his fellow crew he finished eighth in the 3000 mile race from La Gomera in the Canary Islands to Antigua - setting a new world record for a mixed crew who had come together a mere 6 weeks before the race.

The ultra-endurance sport of ocean rowing began in 1896 when a pair of Norwegian fishermen made a gruelling row in an open boat from New York to Europe –a 2500 mile journey that took 92 days and 22 hours. Only 700 people have ever rowed an ocean: this is a sport that attracts fewer participants than any other extreme challenge such as climbing Everest.

With such an exacting trial, emotions inevitably run high and simply watching the start of last year’s race in early December (still underway) proved exhausting to Steve as he relived the moment: ‘You’re on your knees at the end of those 35 boats going off in five minute intervals.. You can see all the fear, and anxiety and the tension and the excitement... You



become emotionally entwined’.

So what inspired Steve to tackle this amazing challenge?

Ever the adventurer, in peak physical condition and keen to kick start his bucket list after early retirement from the police force, it was a no-brainer for Steve to leap from Team GB indoor rowing competitions to rowing the Atlantic in the 2018/19 race. It was a personal challenge but also an altruistic one with Steve raising over £4426 to date, towards his charity, Molly Olly’s wishes, a local charity dedicated to supporting

families of children with terminal and life threatening illnesses.

Two members of his club who rowed the Atlantic first piqued his interest - in sight of Antigua, they messaged him and said ‘one day you’ll row the ocean!’ In 2017 Steve joined a crew rowing round Great Britain for the Cowes to Lochinver (far west of Scotland) leg. Then in early 2018 he watched the end of the Talisker race and he admits: ‘cried like a baby for every boat that came in’. He resolved at that point to take on the challenge and went off to get the qualifications needed to qualify for the race itself. ‘They’re very, very strict on the criteria. Courses, time in the boat. Then the scrutiny of the boat and equipment. Health checks, dental checks ...’ et al. Preparation is serious belt and braces: ‘You have backups for backups for backups. Two is one, one is none in their view.’ And for the crews of course there is a very serious commitment –financially and otherwise. The cost of putting a boat on the ocean is around £120,000. ‘Unbelievably expensive. Most people have written off two years of their life to find it plus all the training stuff and sacrifice they make for their families.’



Preparation was fundamental...

A scant 6 weeks before the start of the race, Steve secured his place with a mixed crew. A crew from the North East had two people drop out very late in the day, and the call came in. He knew one member to some extent having spent time flying up to Scotland and training with him but the other two he knew only from a 10 day course they had all attended. So this presented even more of a challenge: 'I knew I was going to have to give some ground about my own aspirations on the row. I knew we were going to have to work together and deal with stuff we didn't know about each other's strengths and weaknesses.' But as he says 'actually, rowing an ocean is a gamble'. Across the four, attitudes to competitiveness varied pretty dramatically - from Allan who just wanted to get across to Steve - probably the most aggressive. 'I want to win - not at all costs but I'll kill myself doing it'.

Before the trip began, part of the crew's focus was to figure out each other's boundaries. 'So how do things manifest in you? If you're sad, angry, tired, what happens? Which buttons don't we press? Or which ones do we press and how do we motivate you - and all that kind of stuff.' As Steve said, the short pre-race time they had together probably forced the pace on this in a good way. Other crews who had grown up together would not necessarily have felt the need to do this.

Each crew member had a carefully defined role

Steve was in charge of efficiency - all about making sure the boat made the crossing as quickly as possible. 'Anything you do repeatedly is either to the benefit or detriment of the boat. So if you're slow with changeovers, which happen every two hours, if you take just a minute longer than you need, that's a day on the trip!' Allan was technical - a retired fireman and heating/

plumbing engineer by trade, so he had responsibility for making sure that nothing broke down. Claire focussed on navigation - tracking weather reports, capturing the data and calculating efficiency. Phil was skipper, leading the project from the start and responsible for communications with the duty officer. 'He had the independence and the responsibility to make sure that everything we were doing was right and safe'.

Life on board

Life on board was very intense with a relentless routine of 2 hours on, 2 hours off rowing. After two hours rowing, fatigue sets in. Two hour intervals also gave the chance to fit a sleep cycle into a rest period alongside managing the other jobs on the boat. But each two hour session would be staggered with a change of partner every hour. 'It gave us some stimulus and it also meant you'd have a conversation and we'd explore something in our childhood or whatever ...And then one of you'd go - oh you've just reminded me, I've got to tell you this story.' The staggered shift system worked very well: one of the pair would be reasonably alert when the other emerged from the cabin where two minutes previously they had been fast asleep. The boat was rowed almost continuously for the full 42 days - with just two short

exceptions. But as Steve says: 'I loved every single stroke I pulled on the boat'.

Safety is of course at a premium given the extreme isolation of the boat. 'You're strapped in by your feet in the rowing position. And tethered by a waist harness all the time - without exception apart from when in the cabin. But I never took my harness off the whole trip. Man overboard is a huge problem and instant disqualification from the race.' The crew wore shoes to row in rather than barefoot. The boat itself was well equipped with navigation systems - a chart plotter, paper charts and GPS capabilities plus an AIS anti-collision system to warn other vessels. This was very hungry on power so at one stage says Steve, 'we had to turn everything off, navigation lines, everything. Slightly scary'. But in general Steve felt the crew were lucky with power: 'We did okay - we had good weather, lots of sunshine so the solar panels were very effective'

Cramped conditions were another challenge: the boat measures 8 metres nose to tail and 1.6 metres wide. Two so called cabins were shared by each pair: a forward cabin known as 'the palace' because one person could lie down in the centre -but only one. In the stern cabin 'your feet go underneath the rowing positions in two tubes, so two people are





jammed side by side. You have to make a decision whether you want to lie on your side, front or back because once you're in there, you can't turn over. Like a coffin you slide into!' Generally the rowing rota meant there was no need for two to be in their respective cabin at the same time - unless a storm forced the issue. Sleeping in these conditions was challenging. 'You sleep in snatches of forty minutes. You just pass out. It's not uncommon to wake up with a mouthful of food that you were eating. The next thing you know there's a bang on the door....' Sleep walking was common: 'Watching people struggle and hallucinate and sleep walk, sleep talk....'

A buddy system helped keep all safe

'You're constantly checking your mate because when they come out after a rest period, they're gone to the world so you need to make sure they've got what they need to be safe for the next two hours....sun cream, food and drink'. Dehydration, hypothermia can set in unbeknownst to an individual crew member. 'So you need your buddy to spot it. You might think you're too hot, but your buddy will say you're not, you're actually not. Or dehydration, you don't actually spot it yourself.'

Nutrition was a huge battle

Steve estimates the amount of calories needed to be about 12000 a day. 'The authorities regulate how much you take in terms of high calorie food but snacks you take what you like. If you carry the weight across the ocean, go for it. Chocolate, crisps, nuts - the stuff you know you'll eat. The main food is 'pretty grim'. You just have to force feed - it pretty much tastes all the same. And in the end it was an effort to heat food so we just rehydrated it cold. Cold coffee, the lot....' So the boat had 60 days of dry food and 20 days of wet rations that did not need rehydrating. But the crew are not allowed to break into these without permission. They are there purely for emergencies to ensure around three weeks of survival. 'If you were in massive storms which means they can't get a rescue attempt in, your water's gone, you've got food for three weeks'.

Maintaining personal hygiene was another challenge

'Washing is a luxury - keeping clean is important. But having a shower just to feel good isn't.' So how did the crew keep clean? 'When you came off the oars, I'd try to strip down to a pair of shorts, then use wipes -one and a half, maybe two. There's obviously an order of things. Start where you

want to be freshest and finish where you don't want to go anywhere else!'

Privacy was inevitably limited. The lavatory was a single shared bucket on deck. 'It's actually not as big an issue as people tend to think it is.' Steve gives talks on this subject: 'It's a question of choice. Once you're on the boat the number of choices left to you is tiny. You can't choose your company, you can't choose where you are. You can't turn around in an ocean rowing boat. They just don't work against the wind.' So if you decide you cannot stand the food, or continue, that is tough. Ultimately 'nobody's going to come and get you unless your life's under threat. So it's a very different type of challenge.'

Taxing weather conditions

The crew had wished for big waves and big winds to help propel them forwards. But the race was dominated by the middle three to four weeks where there was almost no wind at all. The last ten days saw the trade winds turn back on again with thirty foot waves dwarfing the boat. An especially hairy moment came early on in the trip when the boat pitch poled - tipped end over end. 'It was a fairly confused sea so we had two wave systems that came together with the boat sort of in the joins. It stood the boat up on its end. I think we were probably within a couple of degrees of actually going over'.

Meanwhile the temperature would soar to the high eighties (Fahrenheit). In the heat of the day trying to sleep in the stern cabin facing West- East and glass panelled was nigh on impossible. The cabin would have to be kept shut so it would not compromise the righting properties of the boat, which meant the temperature rose to a scorching 100F. 'You'd have to kind of curl up on deck in the tiniest spot, covered over, to try and snatch some fitful sleep.'

Whales and dolphins for company

'The entire time we were out of sight of land we saw five boats and three aeroplanes in six weeks. Basically there's nothing out there.' There were days of mirror calm with almost no wind at all. 'So you get big waves that are possibly even a mile between crests - you can see 5-6 miles in all directions. The whole ocean's just kind of undulating. You could see whales and dolphins coming from miles away. It's just beautiful. We had dolphins with us for 3 miles at one point. 'And because there are thirteen hours of darkness, often visits would be at night. 'You'd just hear a whale sound and feel the spray on you ...Absolutely magical'.

Camaraderie kept spirits high

Inevitably given the different attitudes of each crew members, there were conflicts. So they adopted a routine which they christened 'the stone in the shoe'. This recognised the potential conflict in raising what might appear to be an insignificant issue. So in essence they could precede a conversation with 'this is a stone in the shoe' chat which signalled that it was not being taken out of context. An example was Allan who would come out and apply sun cream at the oars whilst all the other crew would sort this before they came on deck. 'When in your head you're thinking, if you do that

one more time, I'm going to punch you in the throat....'

But the crew had 'lots and lots of fun on the boat because you find humour in the tiniest things. When your phone's not ringing and emails aren't arriving, and you haven't got all the stresses and strains of daily life, then actually you've got so much more space in your mind. And so you start to become mischievous. You start to think of doing nice things for your crew whether it's making some simple canapes. You'd suddenly appear out of the cabin in fancy dress with a tray. It's unbelievably good fun to do that sort of stuff!'

Competitiveness ramped up as the row progressed.

As time went on, the crew gathered more data on other crews to see how well they were doing. 'We had a packet of fruit pastilles we used to use as reward. So if there were other crews that we gained on in a four hour period, out came the deck knife and we'd chop through a pastille!' Claire in fact now talks to companies about reward systems: 'never underestimate. People aren't always after a big financial reward. Sometimes they just want recognition.'

Were there any threats to the success of the trip?

There were big challenges beyond the daily routine. Phil had a 'really

fussy' eating disorder which he had lived with since childhood. At the start of the trip he said he could not deal with the food and refused to eat for several days. This was of course a major challenge given the calories needed to sustain the rigorous 12 hour daily rowing routine. 'We spotted it when he just wasn't eating. When you're spending that amount of calories you just gorge on everything you can and you're constantly feeding - you're still in calorie deficit.'

So inevitably Phil was in a bad state: 'his eyes were rolling' and it took 10 days or more to get back on track. 'He just had to suck it up and realise eating was no longer going to be an active pleasure. Just an act of survival really.' So the solution was for Phil to eat smaller portions but more often. He would also spice things up and was given more than his fair share of snacks. But he never missed a shift, though he was not able to put as much into it. So was this a threat to the race? Steve contends not: 'I don't think he was ever going to get to a position where he would die as a consequence of no eating. This was an issue in his head rather than his body. So from my point of view it was never a trip threatening thing'. And good has come out of it: 'His wife loves us to bits cos she thinks he's changed'.

But this was not the worst problem the crew had to face. Steve had to contend with a very serious heel infection that started out as a simple blister but then got badly infected: 'black, necrotic tissue'. One of the biggest causes of health evacuation on boats is either chronic sea sickness or skin infection. So the crew consulted the race doctor who insisted the bad tissue had to be cut completely away and then the area scrubbed with a stiff brush until it bled clean. Antibiotics were refused on the basis insufficient tissue would be cut away, and painkillers denied as these needed to be reserved for chronic pain such as dental. Surgical scalpels



did not do the trick so they had to resort to a multi tool with scissors and cut away a large chunk of flesh on Steve's foot -about the size of a tablespoon. 'The overriding fear for me was this would be the end of the trip and I'd end up being evacuated'.

A welcome -if brief -pause at Christmas

The longest pause for the entire crossing was about six hours on Christmas Eve where the boat went into a headwind. The crew deployed a paranchor: 'a great big parachute you put in the water - it stops you being blown backwards'.

A spectacular finish

'We were 26.5 nautical miles from Antigua when we could see it. We were racing another crew at the time and they'd closed in on us lots in the previous days. It had been really hot and we had some really tricky currents work against us. At that point the crew had to make the decision whether or not to go straight in. 'But if you do, you have to stay 80 miles back because you're subject to drift... At that point Claire made a great call. 'We've got a bottle of champagne on the boat – let's do it!'' This was the first time since Christmas Eve that they had stopped rowing. 'We stopped for about 20 minutes. Just drank the champagne from the bottle - and had a quick reflection. It was really good call. We knew we'd be walking into pandemonium.'

They then rowed in to 3 or 4 miles out until a coastguard boat came out to meet them. 'You can just see the spray...this thing's roaring towards us and then it just kept going...It spun around us churning up the sea. 6 or 8 people on the boat whooping and hollering, screaming. So a great assault on the senses. Super exciting. 'The crew were then escorted in to a fantastic view of Shirley Heights: 'one of the most beautiful harbours in the world. The finish line is literally a finger of land opposite the fort.



And the flares went up and as we turned in the sun was literally setting. There was a restaurant on the other side of the harbour. It was 6.30pm in the evening, it was full and they were blasting out the music of 'We Are the Champions'. And the super yachts lined up honking their horns.'

So would Steve do it again?' In a heartbeat!'

Steve is adamant that he would do the race again, family commitments permitting. 'But differently. I'm naturally very competitive. I'd want to do it racing, with a crew that wanted to go all out....But each crew member pulling as hard as the other is hard to achieve. If someone isn't pulling as hard as you, it becomes a conflict. 'So where next? If not the Talisker then another ocean beckons. 'There's a great Pacific race that goes from California to Hawaii. Or I'd like to do the Indian Ocean as an independent row. Realistically from Australia to one of the islands off the East coast of Africa'. But for now Steve is staying closer to home –he has bought a coastal rowing boat and plans to race at the World Championships in Portugal in October.

And then there's the River Avon in the land bound Midlands!

So what does Steve think of his home club, Warwick Boat Club?' I'm a relatively recent member since 2016. I tend to be a very

active member of the club as well as rowing - down here a lot repairing the boat sheds and that sort of stuff. I really love it.' He feels the club punches above its weight: 'It may not be not the greatest water but it's the most picturesque for 200 metres anywhere in England! 'He is inspired by the future vision of the club: 'I really appreciate the efforts of the people who are driving the vision. If you can get your gold standard aspirational build, that will be amazing. Why not?'

Why not indeed: 'The world's your oyster!' springs to mind as Steve looks poised for more adventures. So watch this space, we have certainly not heard the last of his exploits!

Molly Olly's Wishes

Molly Olly are a local charity with a presence in hospitals and hospices throughout Great Britain and Ireland where they work to support children and their families. 'It is a truly brilliant charity with a clear focus on making every pound of donation work to achieve the greatest impact.' If you'd like to contribute visit this page:

www.mollyolly.co.uk/learn-about-donating/



