

## Chasing *Sea Witch*

The clipper ship had its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century when it was profitable to move high-value cargo at a high rate of speed. The name really meant "speed" ship, as in moving "at a good clip." It is well known to sailors that the clippers were the fastest sailing ships of all time. So, why, asks Cynthia Parthemas, writing for Sites Alive, would our Rich duMoulin "want to leave comfortable Larchmont, for a 70-day trip from Hong Kong to New York, to break the speed record of *Sea Witch*, in a 53-foot two-man boat?" The first answer is that he is a product of Dartmouth, and this is what Dartmouth people do. But, the second answer lies with his passion for sailing, for adventure at sea, and for the opportunity to bring school kids across the country "along for the ride." But, it goes deeper than that - to the explorers who have always fascinated Rich duMoulin, including Columbus, Shackleton, and the astronauts. I, too, have had a similar fascination - and share his special admiration for Ernest Shackleton and the circumstances of his extraordinary and ill-fated 1914-17 Imperial Trans Antarctic Expedition - and, against all odds, the elements of improbable success of his voyage. His purported recruitment advertisement said it all: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success." Historically accurate or not, his recruitment was over-subscribed. Despite having the *Endurance* crushed by ice, floating on ice floes, camping on Elephant Island in winter, sailing 800 miles for 16 days across the open sea in an un-seaworthy life boat, and then climbing across the forbidding peaks of South Georgia, Shackleton was able to return and bring all of his men home to safety. This is on a par with the heroics and ingenuity of Apollo 13, times at least ten.

Rich duMoulin's partner in this race was Rich Wilson who capsized in hurricane force winds off Cape Horn in a speed race in 1990, but then broke speed records from San Francisco to Boston in 1993 and New York to Melbourne in 2001. Rich duMoulin's love of yacht racing and his career in the shipping industry are legend. At the time of his 2003 sailing trip, he had competed in four America's Cup campaigns, two Transatlantic Races, and 17 Newport-to-Bermuda Races. Armed with his Dartmouth AB in 1968 and a 1969 BE from Thayer, Rich served as a Lieutenant in the Navy at Annapolis, training Midshipmen in seamanship, navigation, and leadership. After the Navy, Rich raced with the sloop *Charisma* to a first in class and second in fleet in the 1972 Newport-to-Bermuda Race, and then skippered *Charisma* in the Transatlantic Race to Spain and then to win the Sardinian Cup. He received his MBA from Harvard in 1974 and entered the shipping industry with Ogden Marine, then bought Marine Transport Lines (MTL – the oldest shipping company in America, founded by the Mallory family – also the founders of the famous Mystic Seaport Museum), and finally established Intrepid Shipping. MTL, by the way, was one of the leading builders and operators of the clipper ships that served the California Gold Rush starting in 1849! For years, Rich has pioneered Junior Safety at Sea Seminars to help youngsters with big boat handling and man overboard procedures. There is a lot more, but you will have to ask him at Reunion!

On March 16, 2003, Wilson and duMoulin set sail in an attempt to achieve two goals. The first was to break the speed record of the clipper ship *Sea Witch*. The second was to tie the adventure into

sitesALIVE!, an innovative educational program bringing school kids from across the country "along for the ride." The boat to beat in this adventure was the *Sea Witch* that sailed from Hong Kong to New York in 74 days and 14 hours on March 25, 1849. That was 40 days faster than the average for that time. That record has never been broken - in any type of boat. With the relatively tiny 53-foot, 14,000 pound trimaran *Great American II*, Rich duMoulin and Rich Wilson challenged the 173-foot, 907-ton *Sea Witch*. The size of the crew on the *Sea Witch* is not known, but is thought to be large, given the size of the boat. The two-man *GA II* crew set sail with 750 pounds of food and only 200 pounds of personal belongings and clothes. They made all their own fresh water with an osmosis system and had no refrigeration. Their menu consisted of freeze-dried food, cereal (in baggies), powdered milk, oranges, Granny Smith apples, eggs (shells coated in Vaseline for preservation), granola bars, and cabbage (to prevent scurvy). They worried that, with only two people, they might be so busy that they would forget to eat. The inventory included 5 sails with no backups (1 gennaker, 1 spinnaker, 1 main, and 2 jibs), survival suits, and a life raft. Two wind generators, seven solar panels, and the engine (running for 30 minutes per day) juiced-up the batteries enough to power the auto-pilot, osmosis machine, lights, navigation equipment, 2 satellite telephones, radios, and fax machines.

The anticipated dangers included weather, currents, traffic, and pirates, as they charted the *Sea Witch* route from China to New York. Following the Trade Winds, they departed Hong Kong, sailed across the South China Sea, through the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra, and into the Indian Ocean. From there, they aimed for South Africa, round the Cape of Good Hope, and across the Atlantic to New York. The toughest part of the trip was navigating the first 1800 miles through the South China Sea with its thousands of islands and heavy shipping traffic. Pirates ply those waters, and there's an even greater danger of colliding with traffic, especially in the narrow shipping lanes near Majorca and Singapore. Another challenge is the approach to the South African coast and the Agulhas Current (similar to our Gulf Stream but even stronger). This area is known for the world's steepest waves, as well as bad weather and heavy traffic.

In the case of danger, there were plenty of potential Navy rescuers in the South China Seas and near South Africa. In the Indian and Atlantic Oceans they could rely on their 2 "EPIRB" electronic positioning beacons and the "Amver system" that relays distress calls to nearby merchant vessels who are obligated to respond. The likelihood of the trimaran sinking was slim, as she has ten watertight compartments and no lead in her keel, making it easy for her to float even if she capsizes. There are also side hatches to the cabin for easy egress should she flip.

If all went as planned, the *Great American II* would sail by the Statute of Liberty sometime during the week before May 29 to a tug and fire boat reception. Without revealing the outcome, it is revealing that Rich duMoulin noted that *Sea Witch* faced greater obstacles without modern technology or weather forecasts. "The power of the *Sea Witch* in heavy seas and strong winds is awesome, and it was carrying cargo! For me, it was essential to have the *Sea Witch* as a competitor. Without the competitive element, I am not sure I could have handled this long voyage."

An update on April 10 (about a month into the race), found that the *Great American II* had fallen off the pace set by *Sea Witch*. The sailors reported that the ghost of the square-rigged clipper ship *Sea Witch*

had passed them overnight on their 15,000-mile voyage to New York City. A week earlier, the 53-foot trimaran was clear of Sunda Strait at the south end of the China Sea and had broken into steady tradewinds after trailing *Sea Witch* by up to three days. Driven by the trades, the duo spurted a day and a half's sailing ahead of the record set by skipper Captain "Bully" Waterman, who raced his cargo of tea to New York's waiting markets in record time a century and a half ago. "As of noon yesterday *Sea Witch's* comparable position was just 10 miles behind us," Rich du Moulin reported by satellite email. "We estimate she passed us in the night and our chart now shows her out in the lead by 70 miles! We could imagine her silhouette moving past us on the horizon." "*Gall* is gamely hanging on," Wilson said. "But we are saving ourselves for the lighter breezes in which we excel. This is a race of strategy more than machismo, to go hard when you can make the easy miles, and to back off, when the sea state gets up and rattles her three hulls. Captain Waterman, hard driver that he was, also knew when to back off."

While working watch and watch, around the clock, to get to New York as quickly as possible, Wilson and duMoulin had been busy corresponding with some 500,000 schoolchildren via the sitesALIVE! program. In particular, duMoulin provided details of the marine wildlife, of special interest to the children. "It can be lonely out here in the middle of the Indian Ocean thousands of miles from the nearest land," he wrote. "Human companionship comes to the *Great American II* crew through e-mail and phone calls. But there is also some entertaining wildlife out here, primarily porpoises, sea birds, and flying fish. In the Indian Ocean, it has been all birds and flying fish, the former trying to eat the latter," he added. "It is amazing to see a flying fish break out of the water, fly hundreds of yards at high speed, swoop around waves, hit the water with its tail to regain momentum, and then splash back in, only to reappear a split second later flying in another direction. Equally impressive is the aerial skill of the birds trying to capture the flying fish. At night when our boat is difficult to see, flying fish will land on deck and die if they cannot flop over the edge or obtain our assistance. When the fish are flying in big numbers, we often wear a facemask to protect our eyes. The other night I was on watch when a huge flying fish, about 15 inches long, landed next to me. I picked him up and tossed him back in the ocean. He must have told his friends about the nice guys on the sailboat, because we started to receive more visitors. My facemask was handy with all the air traffic congestion."

On April 23, Richard duMoulin reported that *Great American II* was just 74 nautical miles south of Cape Town, enjoying moderate winds and seas as they headed northwest for New York before a following breeze. "It feels like we have been trying to round Cape Agulhas, the southernmost point of the African continent, for the entire voyage. The past week has been an endless battle against winds that were too light or too strong, and always from the wrong direction: west. With the Agulhas Current pushing us strongly we were always able to make positive distance every day, but the westerly winds against the current sometimes made for very unpleasant waves."

It is well known that the sea conditions in the strong-flowing easterly current on the Agulhas Bank can be appalling when powerful westerly winds generate giant, steep waves with a confused wave pattern. Huge ships have been known to break in half and, comparable to rogue waves, there are rogue holes that ships can plunge into. Richard duMoulin estimated they were 90 miles ahead of the position reported for the *Sea Witch*, which also rounded the Cape on her 37th day at sea.

Approaching the equator and still 3,900 miles from New York, *Great American II* had built a lead of 400 miles over the pace set by the extreme clipper ship *Sea Witch* in the China tea trade a century-and-a-half ago. Since leaving Hong Kong on March 16, the 53-foot trimaran had waged a see-saw battle with the ghost of the legendary 192-foot clipper, trailing it in the China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The day before, *Great American II* continued to open out on *Sea Witch*, logging 270 miles for the 24-hour period, her best day's run during the passage. During the last seven days she sailed 1,543 miles for an average distance of 220 miles a day. Ken Campbell, the boat's shore-based weather router at Commanders' Weather in Nashua, N.H., predicted that *Great American II* and her crew would slow as they entered the doldrums late on Friday and might take as long as two days to pick their way through the squalls and calms before hitting the steady breezes of the northeast trades sometime on Monday. A week before weather conditions were continually forcing the boat on a northwards course closer to the African coast and away from the direct route to New York. "They did an excellent job during the last week of getting out of an area of light winds and getting west," Campbell said. "Closer to the African coast, the doldrums are gigantic, stretching 500 to 1,000 miles north to south. Once you're in them the only way out is going straight north, and at only 100 miles a day in those conditions it could take a long, long time."

Campbell said he would have preferred the boat to be even further west and closer to the South American coast but predicted *Great American II* could make a good crossing in a thin portion of the doldrums at 28 to 30 degrees longitude west, close to its current position. "That's the sweet spot," he said. Rainsqualls present the danger of too much wind and are usually followed by lighter breezes. For the next few days *Great American II's* crew would have to be especially vigilant to avoid the black clouds associated with squalls as they pick their way northward. "We sailed through enormous, ominous black clouds throughout the day," Wilson said in a satellite email message today. "There was rain in most clouds. We outran two but were finally caught late in the afternoon by a rainsquall. We sailed on into the night, changing sail from spinnaker to reacher and back again before setting a jib and then the reacher again to deal with the changing conditions."

When *Great American II* entered the doldrums, she was an estimated 500 miles ahead of *Sea Witch*. But Rich Wilson and Rich duMoulin were worried that this band of fickle winds and squalls could be a parking lot and could easily devour the space they put between themselves and their legendary nemesis. While they only logged a 4.6-knot average speed in the doldrums, *Sea Witch* was much speedier, averaging a pace of 8.1 knots. But the good news was that their pace was fast enough to retain a one-day lead on *Sea Witch*.

On May 14, *GAI* was sailing in Northeast trade winds and logging some of the best 24-hour runs in her history. "In ideal conditions, with a following breeze and flat water, the boat glides along like a toboggan on new snow," said Wilson today in a radio broadcast. "She was built as a cruiser/racer 15 years ago and is not capable of the sustained high speeds of today's modern racing multihulls. But she easily attains speeds of 15 knots and higher in these ideal conditions." On May 14, *GAI* logged 292 miles in 24 hours--the best run Wilson and this boat had made together to date. At this point, Wilson and duMoulin were some 2,780 miles from New York and would have to cover that distance in 15 days in order to break *Sea Witch's* record. But the strong Northeast trades they were enjoying wouldn't last:

storms, headwinds, and lulls in the breeze could easily lay in their path. "We need to fly to have a shot at the record," said duMoulin in a satellite email report. "For the past two days, these Northeast trade winds have allowed us to put the pedal down. . . but we have to fly while we can."

And, they did. When they sailed into New York Harbor on May 27, Rich duMoulin and Rich Wilson had successfully broken a 154-year-old record, sailing the 15,000 miles from Hong Kong to Ambrose Light in 72 days, 21 hours, 11 minutes and 38 seconds. The old record, set by the tea trade clipper ship *Sea Witch*, was 74 days, 14 hours. They had raced a ship and crew long gone. All the way from the South China Sea to New York Harbor. They felt the ship's presence every day, hours ahead, running alongside unseen, or just behind, pushing them all the time. "It's been the greatest adventure of my life," said duMoulin, "I had 219 four-hour watches, and every time I went to the deck, I looked forward to it." The sailors read the *Sea Witch's* log daily, comparing locations. "In the middle of the night, I could almost see it," duMoulin said. "It was a living competitor. It was really like having the ship come alive and be a threat to us. The times I was tired, if she showed up on the horizon, I wouldn't have been surprised. It was a very interesting competition. They kept coming back at us and passing us."