

A EULOGY FOR *ALLIANCE*

SINCE ITS INCEPTION 118 YEARS AGO, THE
NEWPORT BERMUDA RACE HAS NEVER LOST
A BOAT TO THE SEA. UNTIL THIS YEAR.

BY LYDIA MULLAN

*The moon was bright and the seas were high on Alliance's final night.
The author took this photo just hours before the collision.*





Ceilidh's spotlight illuminates the rough sea as Eric attempts to secure a line between the boat and liferaft.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is J/122 Alliance... We've suffered catastrophic damage; the boat is sinking. There are nine souls aboard."

If you spend any substantial amount of time on the water, you'll hear a lot over the VHF. Swearing, squabbling, scolding...eventually, you'll think you've heard it all. But there is nothing quite like hearing that haunting, ancient turn of phrase: nine souls aboard. Especially when you're one of the nine.

* * *

The 53rd Newport Bermuda Race began auspiciously enough, with hundreds of boats—racers and spectators alike—cheerfully crowding Narragansett Bay, shouting back and forth to friends and rivals while circling the start line. Our boat, the J/122 *Alliance*, slipped among the throng, excited to get our racing season's biggest offshore event underway.

A boat with an Irish harp emblem and green and orange racing stripes skirted by us, and my teammate called out to them.

"Hey, what are you drinking, Guinness or Jameson?"

"Heineken!" someone shouted back, eliciting a laugh from both crews.

We didn't know it at the time, but by race's end we were going to be very friendly with that boat.

Our crew of nine consisted of *Alliance's* owners, person in charge Eric Irwin (60) and navigator Mary Martin (61); plus watch captains Sam Webster (30) and Connor O'Neil (31); tech expert Bill Kneller (71); chief morale officer Eddie Doherty (56); assistant navigator Julija O'Neil (33); bow assist Mary Schmitt (22); and me (29) the bow person and on-board reporter.

Six of the nine were engineers, and the majority of us had sailed more than 1,000 offshore miles together. The boat was fastidiously maintained, and we'd met regularly during the off-season to prepare for the race, complete with pop quizzes and hours worth of assigned of lectures on weather, routing, safety, and more. Though the race only requires 30% of the crew to have offshore Safety at Sea certifications, almost all of us had been through the 15-plus hours of online coursework and the in-person, hands-on training. We had every reason to believe it would be a challenging but successful race, and for the first 36 hours, that's exactly what we had.

Though we weren't expected to enter the Gulf Stream until 10 p.m. on the second day, we started seeing signs of it that afternoon. The meandering midocean river of warm water has its own local climate, generating a cloud pattern similar to what you might see over land.

PHOTO BY LYDIA MULLAN

PHOTOS BY LYDIA MULLAN



Bill attempts to get some rest wherever he can find a spot to lie down.

First it was just a hint of fuzziness on the horizon, then the clouds started to take shape into massive heaps with clean, distinct edges. Within a few hours, we started to see sargasso weed that had drifted across the Stream into the cold northern waters.

At the time of our crossing, the Gulf Stream had a large meander that we were aiming for to make a short, fast crossing, but it had also spit out eddies that made a minefield of swirling current surrounding the Stream. Mary M. positioned us to slip into one of them at just the right angle to slingshot us onward.

I was on watch from 6 to 10 p.m. for our approach to the Gulf Stream, and by the time I handed off the helm, we were in it for sure, the warm tropical air filling our sails and 4 knots of current churning below us. After my watch, I couldn't help staying on deck to hang out for a bit, arrested by the view.

That far from land, the night was a deep black, and the sky above us was mottled with dramatic, heaping clouds, backlit by the strawberry moon. Then, the bright, clean light would break from the roiling cloudscape and, like a curtain whisked off a bird cage, we would have light. A moment later, blackness again.

When I returned at 2 a.m., it was to the same but more. The sea state had increased with the current, and though I know every sailor, like every fisherman, is liberal with estimating sizes, when standing at the helm on the high side, the waves often broke the horizon from my line of sight. At just a bit over 5 feet myself, I estimated the waves must have been at minimum 7 or 8 feet.

In their handoff, the previous watch had mentioned the conditions made for tiring driving, so I suggested to Connor that we do short shifts. He agreed, and with Bill beside me trimming the main and Connor and Julija on the rail ahead of him, I took the helm.

Thirty minutes later, Connor asked if I needed a break, but I was enjoying the waves. We weren't slamming, and the sea seemed to be steadily urging us onwards. The boat was well balanced, and I didn't feel overpowered. This was precisely the kind of gorgeous night sailing you go offshore looking for.

"Give me 10 more minutes," I said.



Austin Graef steered Ceilidh through the rescue of Alliance's crew.

Ten minutes later, he asked again.

"Ten more," I repeated.

And then—sometime in that fateful 10 more—the impact.

I felt it as much as I heard the screeching, metallic *bang-bang!* I tried to get the boat stabilized, but the wheel moved strangely in my hands, like there was not quite enough tension on it. Snapped rudder cable? Parted mainsheet track? Imminent dismasting?

In a heartbeat, everyone was moving. Connor was shouting, "All hands! ALL HANDS!" and Bill was at my feet, pulling up the panel for the rudder compartment.

"We've lost steering! Get the jib down!"

Below, Eric was awake in an instant, crawling to the back of Sam's berth to examine the damage where water was already surging into the boat. As a career naval officer in the submarine force including command of a submarine, he's more than trained to assess and respond to water ingress emergencies. Mary M., a Massachusetts Maritime Academy alum with her own career as a naval contractor, called back to him from the nav desk.

"Am I calling for a pan-pan or a mayday?"

There was a beat of silence before Eric said, "This is a mayday."

Up on deck, Bill had made the same assessment.

Having dealt with a more minor flooding issue the previous season, we knew the quirks of our pumping system well, and Sam was able to get 4,000 gallons per hour of pumping capacity up and running in just a few minutes, buying precious time for help to reach us as Mary M. communicated with the Coast Guard and boats nearby. The good thing about being in a race is there are always boats nearby.

The whole exercise was executed with a sober diligence that perhaps belied the severity of our situation. People often say to me, "You



Ceilidh and Alliance greeted each other at the start of the race in Newport with no idea of what was to come.

must have been so scared,” but the truth is, I wasn’t. I don’t think any of us were. We snapped straight into mitigation mode. We had been trained for this, we’d taken our courses, we’d done our homework. The only focus was on managing the situation so that a crisis didn’t devolve into a tragedy—there was no time for fear.

As we began rotating below to secure the essentials from our personal belongings, Eric asked me to get some photos of the rudder compartment topsides. Sam was already back there, and we crouched at the transom to peer in. Fiberglass shards were everywhere and water was slopping around, but it was clear to see what was wrong. The upper rudder bearing was ripped from the boat and the lower bearing housing was cracked open, leaving a jagged, submerged hole with the heavy rudder post still oscillating back and forth through it. The J/122 doesn’t have a watertight bulkhead that could’ve stopped the water, and even if we could’ve packed the hole around the rudder post to slow down the water, there was no safe way to steer the boat without doing more damage. The collision mat we’d practiced setting up was useless. The pumps could not keep up. We were hundreds of miles from land.

From the sound and power of the impact, it was obvious we’d hit something massive and man-made. But how could we have only hit the rudder and not the front of the boat or the keel? In the sea state, we were sailing at an angle to the waves, surfing down them fast but not head-on. The object was waiting for us in the trough of the wave, submerged and invisible in the night. The keel had glanced off it before the rudder took the full brunt.

I didn’t have long to marvel at the mortal wound, and after I’d taken a quick video of the damage, it was my turn to go below.

For all of the hours and days that I had spent on *Alliance*, she looked alien to me that night, lit like an operating room with glaring white lights I’d never seen on before. What had always been a hushed red cocoon after dark was jarringly stark and bright.

I triaged my cameras, drone, and mics and Tetris-ed all the priorities into one backpack. My passport and phone were already with everyone else’s in the ditch bag, but I had to find my credit card and driver’s license.

I dug through my personal bag, past the clothes that I had carefully packed for the voyage, accumulated over years and adorned with the logos of various teams and programs. None of that was coming with me. In the moment, I didn’t think twice about it, just glad that precious liferaft space was being allocated for my cameras. In fact, the only sentimentality spared was for my backup spray pants. As I scanned the salon for anything I’d forgotten, I saw them clipped in their place on the clothesline, and I was struck with the

almost surreal realization that they would still be there when the boat hit the sea-floor. They would never be unclipped.

Back on deck, Eric called for Sam and Connor to deploy the liferaft. The conventional wisdom is that you should never step down into a liferaft, instead staying on your ship until it’s so low in the water you can step across or up. But we were using the liferaft to transfer to another boat that Mary M. had been in contact with, and they were close enough that it was

time to start offloading *Alliance*.

The 7-foot wave state that I’d been enjoying so much an hour earlier was a danger now. *Alliance* was buoyed up and then dumped off the crest of a wave while the liferaft struggled to keep up, the raft’s built-in drogue fighting all the way. Trying to keep it under control, Sam and Connor played tug of war against the ocean itself.

But the boys held fast as Bill, Mary S., and Julija got in, and we handed gear down to them. Eric asked me to run through the boat and take a final round of videos of the damage for the insurance, and then it was my turn to disembark.

We’d practiced getting into a liferaft before, but every single one of us fell when we hit the bottom. It’s not a floor, just a tarp over water. We each pitched forward, carried by our momentum, often crushing the people already in the raft. Because the transfer had to be done in one quick step with little takeoff room and even less landing room, I couldn’t say what a better strategy would’ve been. But if you ever have to take that step yourself, remember that a little tumble may be part and parcel of the transfer, and the last thing you want to do in that moment is hurt yourself or someone else.

Once I was in the liferaft, Eric heaved three bricks of emergency water to me. Over the VHF we’d heard that the boat headed for us



Sam takes a look at the damage to the rudder bearings.

PHOTOS BY LYDIA MULLAN

PHOTOS BY EDDIE DOHERTY



Sixteen people on a boat outfitted for seven is a tight squeeze.

was only provisioned for seven people, so bringing water for our crew of nine was critical. Eddie had also dumped my personal bag out, filled it with protein bars and almonds, and tossed it into the liferaft too. (Later there would be time for much consternation over the fact that neither the gummy bears nor the rum made the cut.)

In 1,000 miles sailed with Sam, I had never heard panic in his voice, so when he said, sounding tight and pained, that they couldn’t hold onto the liferaft any longer, time was up.

I think Eric and Mary M. would have wanted to be the last people on *Alliance* in the final moment with her, but with Sam and Connor already positioned to hold the liferaft and with the strength it was taking them to manage it, safety won out over pride of place, and Mary M. and Eric climbed past the boys into the liferaft. Then they made the precarious leap, and we were off.

The silence in the liferaft was stony and tense. Something dug painfully into my legs. Everyone was soaked, half in the lap of their neighbor, half under a pile of gear. Later, we’d watch footage from another boat’s perspective and see ourselves spinning and hurtling over waves, so impossibly small in that black night. When we got to shore, it was the memory of that half hour in the liferaft that

stayed with me.

If you ever have to get into a liferaft, hope that it’s with strangers, because there is nothing quite like seeing your friends there.

* * *

Andrew Halliburton sat at J/121 *Ceilidh*’s nav desk at 3 a.m., tracking the other boats in their fleet. Suddenly, an alarm flashed on his screen. It looked like a man overboard.

Having navigated for multiple Transpac winning campaigns, Andrew was no stranger to seeing an emergency alert pop up on his AIS. Typically it was followed by a quick call from the boat saying that everything was fine and it was an accidental trigger. He waited for the call, but it never came. A few minutes later, a new icon popped up—an EPIRB. There was no accidental triggering of an EPIRB. This wasn’t one person; this was a whole crew in trouble.

He rushed to alert Austin Graef, the 29-year-old helmsman, and called for all hands. Jim Coggeshall, the boat’s owner, and the other four members of their crew rushed to help. The stricken vessel was just 2 miles directly upwind of them, and they changed sails in a hurry to adjust course.

It wasn’t long before they could identify running lights that had to be their target. Andrew breathed a sigh of relief. From what they’d heard from *Alliance* over the VHF, it’d sounded like there was a possi-

bility that the boat would be gone by the time they reached its last known location. But running lights would give Austin something to steer by and the crew of *Alliance* a hope of being rescued. In a sea state that was at least twice as high as a liferaft was tall, it would have been nearly impossible to spot the raft on its own.

As they got closer, *Ceilidh*’s crew stripped the boat of any lines that could potentially drag overboard to foul the prop and fired up the engine. Austin’s brother, RJ, prepared a line to throw out to the liferaft while their father, Rick, got out a spotlight to illuminate their target. Jeremy Marsette kept a lookout while Ryan Mann pulled out his phone to record.

“We did that first pass where we could see into the liferaft,” Austin recalls, “and just seeing the look of nine people huddled up inside, it’s giving me goosebumps. I will never forget that.”

In the dark and the sloppy waves, he could barely see what he was aiming for, just trying to get *Ceilidh* as close as possible without running over the raft. RJ’s first two tosses didn’t make it. The third did, landing squarely in the hands of a distant figure reaching precariously out over the water.

With the line secured on both ends, RJ and Rick tried to reel

the liferaft in but to no avail. Even with Andrew’s help, it was too much drag. They ended up wrapping the line around their primary winch and grinding it in, inch by inch. To Andrew, the raft looked impossibly small, and as Rick and RJ started pulling people out of it, it was almost cartoonish to see so many bodies lifted from such a tiny space.

RJ reached down into the liferaft as person after person handed him their tether to hook onto the back of the boat. Then, he and his father would each grab a hand at exactly the right moment and haul them over the chasm of churning black water to safety.

In the cockpit, Ryan took down the names of everyone recovered from the liferaft, nine souls in all.

The Archambault 40 *Banter*, whose crew was good friends

I felt around for tenderness. “I’m OK, I don’t think I hit the wheel.” Sam stared at me dubiously for a moment. “You put a dent in it.”

There is a unit in the Safety at Sea course titled “being a good victim,” and it outlines all the things you should do if you go overboard to improve your miniscule chances of being located and recovered. But they failed to mention what happens in the days after you’re recovered. What happens when you put nine wet, exhausted, traumatized people onto a boat that is underway, hundreds of miles from shore and still trying to function as a racing team?

We were a huge inconvenience to *Ceilidh*. We had more than doubled the number of people on their already at-capacity boat. They were so gracious with us, sharing everything they could, from food and clothes to deodorant and sleeping space. We all tried to stay out of the way as much as possible, but there was just nowhere to be that wasn’t underfoot. The three berths in the salon were in constant use, as was the aft cabin and a little crawl space behind the head that Austin and RJ had dubbed “the condo.” Still, there were usually three additional people lying in a heap of sails on the floor, sleeping if they were lucky.

I spent most of my rest time all the way forward, where my nausea was soothed by the cool trickle of water dripping down from the forward hatch onto my face. Small mercies, and all that.

We kept a rough watch schedule to free up space below, but other than sitting on the rail, there was nothing to do. No time to decompress or process everything that’d happened. Just long hours to sit and think.

The conditions remained relatively the same for the next few days, and *Ceilidh* continued taking a beating from the waves. At one point, a shout for RJ wrenched me from

an uneasy dose. Through the forward hatch I could see one of the stays bouncing listlessly against the jib. I watched as they scrambled to fix it, weirdly unable to muster any sense of urgency. Later, the rudder bearing started sheering off bolts, and again RJ was up in an instant, making repairs. Still, I existed in a numb daze.

Their crew worked tirelessly to keep the boat in good shape and get us all back to shore, with the Graefs sleeping no more than 45 minutes at a time as they traded off the helm for days, and the others supporting them and trying to keep up a sense of normalcy for the rest of us.

The last night was the worst. We were slamming, and I lay on the floor in the sail bag heap next to Bill and Eddie.

“Are we worried about the water dripping around the mast?” I asked.

“Lydia, I’m worried about a lot of things,” Eddie said in a small voice.

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been thinking about how they have an eight-person liferaft.” I nodded even though he couldn’t see me in the dark. It’d crossed



Once onboard *Ceilidh*, Alliance’s crew gathers for a team meeting.

with *Alliance*’s, had also diverted to assist, and they were circling *Ceilidh*, preparing to take on some of the refugee crew. But in all the bashing against the transom, one of the liferaft’s tubes had been punctured. There was a second of hesitant deliberation about what to do next before RJ cut in.

“We are not putting anyone back in that liferaft; no one is going off this boat.”

The grim reality of the situation set in. We were in for a long ride to Bermuda.

* * *

The combined *Ceilidh-Alliance* crew convened on the rail just as dawn broke, saying tentative hellos and exchanging names as the sun rose over a very different scene than it had set on.

Somewhere behind us, *Alliance* pinged on the tracker one last time.

“Are you OK?” Sam asked me.

“Oh yeah, how are your ribs?” Bill said.

“What?” I asked dumbly.

“You could’ve broken a rib hitting the wheel that hard.”



The author takes a photo with the combined crew at daybreak on Wednesday just after *Ceilidh* crossed the finish line.

my mind as well.

“If something happened to *Ceilidh*, I’d be in the water.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Yeah. Pretty much all of us.”

When I couldn’t take lying still anymore, I headed up on deck to wait out the night. It took about five minutes to be completely soaked through by the waves. Sam was huddled beside me, trying to avoid the worst of the water coursing down the side decks. Even though he was right next to me, I couldn’t seem to speak. I would’ve done anything for a hug in that moment, but instead I curled in on myself, numb with misery and the adrenaline crash.

But as it always does, the eastern sky began to lighten, and what had been only darkness took shape with the dawn. A triumphant shout went out: “Land ho!!”

After days of open ocean in every direction, Bermuda was in sight.

An exhausted elation rang through the boat as we crossed the finish line and turned for the harbor. Austin passed out in the cockpit immediately while the crew around him shared a celebratory sunrise beer—they were, indeed, Heineken.

We strung up *Ceilidh*’s battle flag and a token *Alliance* flag below it and were met by friends and laurel wreaths at the dock. There were tears of relief and gratitude and sadness. It’s all a blur of hugs and photographs now.

In the hours and days after getting back to shore, I must have said a thousand times that, though I hated to phrase it this way, it could not have happened to a better team. We were prepared, aware, and vigilant. We maintained our composure, and we all made it out alive.

And in Bermuda, at an evening party, the crew of *Alliance* danced. The band strummed up a song I knew, something exuberant and old school. Everyone was dealing with our ordeal differently, but for one golden moment, time slowed down, and I saw the laughing faces of my teammates and friends, safe and happy, and reveling in the tropical night air. Someone grabbed my hands and swung me around, laughing. There were people all around me, jumping and swaying.

It was suddenly too much, too loud. I needed air.

I broke from the crowd to walk down the dock, alone for the first time in days, the noise of the party dimming behind me. When I passed *Ceilidh*, I faltered, an unexpected sob ripping through me. And then I was on my hands and knees, vomiting into the dark water below, still carrying the weight of being one of nine souls, a weight I may carry onto every boat I sail for the rest of my life. 🌊

There’s more to this story on the way. Check out the Nov./Dec. issue for key seamanship and safety takeaways from Alliance’s crew.