

## Two vessels off the Amazon and one in the Caribbean

**Bob Belderson**

This is a tale of three vessels – one very tiny and one quite big which sailed off the Amazon, and one strange contraption that plied the blue Caribbean. I am on board a fourth – *MV Farnella*, a former Hull deep-sea stern trawler, now surveying the deep sea floor with myself as Principal Scientist.



It is January 1982 and we have a mixed bunch on board. The crew are from Hull and from a ragbag of other British seaports – except for a Filipino cook. The scientists are from IOS Wormley (who are operating the long range side-scan sonar system called GLORIA and the air-gun seismic profiling equipment), three Americans from the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory, New York (one of whom is an Indian) and a number of Brazilian men and women scientists from Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

Using GLORIA we have discovered an amazing pattern of deep-sea channels, which meander their way down the Amazon Fan like so many submerged Mississippis. Since we left Belem at the mouth of the Amazon we have sighted no other ships.



### **A transatlantic challenge**

Then one morning, soon after sunrise, something interesting appears over the horizon. True, there is a conventional ketch-rigged vessel with sails set. But, wait a minute, trailed astern, attached on an umbilical cord, is something rather out of the ordinary. A tiny boat, with a tiny mast. Just behind the mast is a shiny, dark shape. What on earth is it? Is it a seal, or something? Then the radio on the bridge crackles. Skipper Roy Hardcastle, our Yorkshireman of few words, makes contact.

It seems it is on a strange mission. The shape astern, now visible through binoculars as of human form, crouched in a foetal position and encased in a black diver's suit, is a Frenchman. He is on a serious, important mission.; a great first; one for the Guinness Book of Records. For he is set on becoming the first windsurfer to cross the Atlantic.

The ketch requests us to inform the world that we have seen and believed – i.e. that the Frenchman was observed by us not to be cheating. But what is cheating? He is tied to the ketch. Each evening he is drawn alongside and lashed prone on his windsurfer so he can sleep. He is given sustenance. This is surely no grand solo effort. All the same though, he has travelled two thousand miles from Dakar, and has only a few hundred miles more to reach Cayenne, French Guiana. So give him some credit where credit's due – even if he is a Frenchman.

Will he make it? Later we hear that he did indeed make it. What probably started as a fun project seen through a haze of alcohol when gazing out to the blue Mediterranean from a veranda on the Riviera has ended, as the semi-suicidal instinct to show off leads to its conclusion. Later research shows that the windsurfer was Christian Marty who did indeed enter the record books. There is a

sad twist to the end of the tale. Marty became an Air France pilot - perhaps the most newsworthy of all in that he was the pilot of the Concorde that crashed near Paris in 2000.

### **A Cry for Help**

Our second vessel off the Amazon is of a somewhat different ilk. It's a pitch dark night. We are alone on the warm ocean. From the bridge, we spot distant lights. Then we receive a distress call, of sorts.

"Say buddy, we could sure do with some help over here"

What's up? Is this a Mayday? The American's voice is concerned, with a slight tinge of panic.

"What's your problem mate?" is Roy Hardcastle's terse reply.

"We're a cargo-passenger vessel out from Baltimore to San Francisco. Around the Horn. We've got ninety women on board. Passengers."

"So what's the problem?" repeats old Roy.

"Buddy, do we have a problem! There's ninety of 'em - these women - widows, divorcees, unmarried."

"Sounds OK to me" says Roy.

"That's the whole goddam problem buddy. Too much of a good thing. There's only thirty of us crew aboard here. We can't cope. We're desperate. Send in reinforcements....send in reinforcements....."

The lights fade on the horizon. The voice fades away.....

And what was the fate of this love-struck vessel? Did they make it all the way round to the Golden Gate? Or do they drift helplessly somewhere in the region of The Horn, the crew played out, the women demented?

### **Ship of Fools**

I am on deck, watching a beautiful white tropicbird fly the length of *Discovery*, trailing its unlikely long streamer-feathers from its tail, when there is a cry from the bridge above.



"Strange craft ahoy!"

And there, afloat in the wide, wide ocean somewhere east of the Windward Islands, is indeed a strange craft. Verily a ramshackle, Heath Robinson type of craft. Like a miniature shanty town cast adrift on the waves. Basically a raft, but bearing a shack, washing strung from a line, flags fluttering in the trade wind, other odd-looking accoutrements and a raggle-taggle band of voyagers who lounge about on deck and wave beer bottles at us.

It seems that they set forth from the Canary Islands and are bound wherever the ocean currents may take them - hopefully the West Indies. Less hopefully, I suppose, Greenland.

Later, in port at Bridgetown, Barbados we hear a local news report that they are cast ashore on the Bajan east coast.

O Happy Band of seafarers - so different in attitude from our poor, comatose windsurfer.