



Skip Novak

Remember when the maxi *Drum* capsized during the Fastnet Race? The crew do and a 30-year reunion brought it all back

Thirty years ago last August the maxi yacht *Drum* capsized in the Fastnet Race with 24 crew aboard. The keel had fallen off near Dodman Point in Cornwall, which was dramatic enough, but the fuel that fed the ensuing firestorm was the fact that crewman Simon Le Bon from the pop group Duran Duran had been trapped below.

After our timely rescue, happily with no loss of life, both he and the managers of the group, Mike and Paul Berrow, were put in the unenviable position of backing an optimistic and very expensive salvage and refit in

only five weeks to make the start of the 1985 Whitbread Round the World Race.

Reputations were at stake and the press was salivating. We had to pick ourselves up, shake off any doubts and react.

The miracle of completely rebuilding the yacht in time for the Whitbread was down to blind perseverance by our three backers and the crew. We held firm and got on with the job.

Required: salvage, righting, pumping out and towing back to the Hamble; then new keel, new sails, new mast, new electronics, complete rewiring of the electrics, paint job in and out and servicing all else that survived.

Making the start and carrying on round the world for a respectable 3rd place in the maxi class was the stuff of Whitbread legend. It is not an exaggeration to look back on it as a defining experience for all of us.

In 2005 we chartered *Drum* from Sir Arnold Clark for that year's Fastnet Race. What better way to celebrate the 20-year reunion than by finishing what we had set out to do in 1985, rounding the Fastnet Rock and sailing into Plymouth? Unfortunately, I found myself in the Canadian Arctic attempting the North West

Passage on *Pelagic Australis*. I had a plan to fly in and straight back if we made it halfway to a safe haven, but it was a bad ice year so I missed the Fastnet reunion. As it happened, rounding the Rock was not to be, as it was a windless race and *Drum* retired.

Ten years on and time to gather the troops once again. This time we were in Monaco during the Monaco Yacht Show, as not a few of our crew had graduated into the superyacht game and by consensus this venue made sense.

Twenty of the capsized crew and the Whitbread crew flew in from all points on the globe and gathered for a two-day affair of lunches, dinners and repartee at Neil Cheston's villa above Monaco. Many of the guys I see on a regular basis. Several I have not seen for decades. Sadly for us, Simon Le Bon is on a roll, was on tour in America and couldn't attend.

Never having been to one, I can imagine what a classic school reunion is like: everyone sizing each other up and assessing how well they did in life or didn't do, with envy and schadenfreude dished out in equal measure as an aperitif. Not so with the *Drum* crew.

There is something singular about having shared a life-threatening experience the day we found ourselves upside-down in the English Channel. The refit against all the odds strengthened that bond and stood us in good stead for the protracted challenge of the Whitbread race itself, which was no mere outing. It was not the accomplishment that mattered most, but rather the total experience.

When we all reconnected in September it was straight back to 1985, save for the bald and grey heads and sun-lined faces. Most of us have continued a life at sea, more or less. Immediately slipping into the same silly conversations that got us round the world got us through the reunion.

After watching Rick Tomlinson's 'slide show' (twice) accompanied by vintage 1980s Duran Duran, we came to the conclusion that, as in our youth, we still might be somewhat immortal with a job left undone. So will we finish the Fastnet – finally – on *Drum* in 2017?

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