

The Cruising Club of America

Safety-at-Sea



Why We Write these Articles: An Essay by Garry Fischer

As a serendipitous consequence of marrying Angela, Dick Goennel became an important role model in my sailing life and a good friend as well. In fact, he essentially became a member of our family and led me to do some cruising that would otherwise have been out of the question. For Dick, safety was the top priority and an intellectual challenge. It became a discipline that enhanced the pleasure and adventure of sailing. Trying to stay one step ahead of Dick's safety mode led to many miles of sailing fun.

Dick was in his fifties and a sailing icon in my wife's family when I first met him. Introduced to my father-in-law many years before by Corny Shields after a Bermuda Race, he became part of the race crew on Bolero (now restored and still in the CCA fleet thanks to Ed Kane) and ran the foredeck. He worked for Yachting Magazine, was a graduate of the Art Students League in New York and had a keen interest in the classics.

Hanging around City Island boatyards and Larchmont Yacht Club as a kid, Dick became a regular crew member on Corny Shields' championship IOD, quickly graduating to bigger boats. During WW II, as an enlisted man in the US Coast Guard he was a bos'n on the *Danmark*. By the time I met him his sea stories included transatlantic races, Fastnet Races, Bermuda Races, and a successful America's Cup campaign on *Constellation*. His favorite boat was an S&S designed 54 footer named *Puffin* owned by Eddie Greff. One of Dick's best friends was Rod Stephens. Dick worked on the America's Cup Committee in the '60s, was a Bermuda Race inspector and headed the Model Committee of the New York Yacht Club.

Dick did not lack credentials, nor did he lack charm, high standards or the solution to almost anything that could go wrong on a boat. That he joined us in Bermuda Races (Cruising Division), transatlantic trips and cruises in the Hebrides, Baltic, North Sea and Ireland was a testament to his psychological versatility, not to

mention his friendship with our three children and Angela, godmother to his only child, Heidi, an accomplished artist.

Shortly after neurosurgery residency and a stint in the Navy, Angela and I had an O'Day Mariner: a Rhodes 19 modified for overnight cruising, which we sailed between her home port Marion, Massachusetts, and Newport. An afternoon at the Newport Boat Show in the early 70s brought a Tartan 30 into our lives and expanded our horizons beyond the Elizabeth Islands to Maine waters. Dick came on those trips and honed my piloting, navigation and anchoring skills. A Sabre 34 emboldened us to venture offshore from Provincetown to Baddeck in the Bras d'Or. Every evening Dick carefully reiterated what seemed the basic tenant of his sailing philosophy: When something unforetold happens on deck don't run up in your skivvies and add to the problem. Put on your foul weather gear, your boots, pfd, harness and belt with knife, pliers and marlin spike. Then go up and solve the problem. In other words, think what you're doing and properly prepare yourself. The corollary was: on deck, assess the problem, talk over the solution, make sure everyone knows what they are to do, then execute the solution. This saved a lot of grief, more than once. The one blip in that trip occurred when I mistook a bright star low on the horizon for the light of an approaching ship. Dick was amazingly complacent when I woke him up to set me straight.

We cruised the next boat, a semi-custom S&S designed OC (Ocean Cruising) 39 built by Hank Hinckley, to Bermuda, our first real venture offshore. Dick showed me how to set the boat up with single line reefing led to the cockpit. It was a cinch to sail (and reef). One beautiful and serene late afternoon I thought a beer and wine with dinner would hit the spot. A banquet was prepared in the galley and devoured with great joy. Suddenly it was very dark and I realized we had not gone through the usual precaution of shortening sail and preparing for night sailing. Those few innocent drops of alcohol dropped our guard and potentially could have put us at serious risk. Ever since, we have never consumed a single drop of alcohol underway.

We went in the 1989 Marion to Bermuda Race the year a fellow neurosurgeon on a 44 footer named *Bellatrix* lost a colleague at the helm, a pediatrician, from a head injury during a nocturnal accidental jibe. The mainsheet whipped around causing

not only the fatal injury but also severe damage to the binnacle. The boat had an in-cockpit traveller. Ever since, a prominent feature of our boats has been a permanently mounted preventer controlled at all times by the helmsman. Dick and I designed it with the help of Phil Garland at Hall Spars.

Dick then agreed to come with us in the OC 39 from Newport to Ardfern, Scotland, to see a cousin whose defining life experience had been four years in a Japanese POW camp in Burma. His father and grandfather had built a number of America's cup challengers on the Clyde (*Thistle*, *Genesta*, and *Valkyrie*). The crew also consisted of Newport sail maker Aaron Jasper, CCA member Bill Buell, who shared a boat with Norrie Hoyt and once ran Radio Free Europe, and my 14 year old nephew Jay, on vacation from St Paul's School and no slouch when it came to boat speed or a philosophy. My compulsive watch of weather faxes overlooked the merging of two low pressure areas that delivered us twenty four hours of 50 knot winds (we had no anemometer) from the east, giving me an abiding distrust of weather predictions and my ability to understand them. Reminiscent of the innocent drops of alcohol, I learned there is no substitute for preparing for the worst. To add insult to misery, we got pooped, flooding the stern mounted Charlie Noble and knocking out the Espar heater. We have since always had easy-to-apply canvas covers for stern mounted vents. A little while later the inner forestay deck fitting let go and without storm staysail the boat slowed down to a manageable 6.5 knots under bare poles. Lessons seemed to be happening more quickly than we could assimilate them. For a while there was constant risk of turning sideways and getting rolled while surfing into the trough of the next wave and being rolled. In retrospect we should have deployed the drogue. I decided not to tell the crew that the Canadian Coast Guard reported a rogue iceberg somewhere in our vicinity; I hadn't been able to get the exact coordinates. Dick remained outwardly calm and analytic through it all; that was the most important lesson.

Our next trip across the Atlantic, back to see cousin David, was in a Morris 46. Like the OC39 it was laid out with Dick's help for simple, safe, short-handed offshore sailing. The crew, in addition to Dick consisted of two surgeons from Boston and Jay's 34 year old cousin, John, who brought his Swedish fiancée Brit. Despite being virtually at my by-then-advanced age, Brit was beautiful, fun and a superb cook. A Scandinavian, she was not unused to boats and had once joined us

for a Bermuda Race. Our safety program included the permanently installed preventer, pad eyes to clip into that started at the companionway, jack lines, fanny bars at the mast, solid hand rails on the dodger and along the cabin top, all the electronic throw overboard gear that West Marine sold at the time, a centerline companionway, tied-in pen boards, and all movable objects below were well battened down. About two weeks before entering the north channel between Ireland and Scotland on a sunny afternoon in 12-15 knots of breeze the genneker sheet popped the yellow horseshoe life-ring out of its bracket, a more than \$100 item if you include painting 'Diva' on it. We took down the genneker, sailed a reciprocal course and spent 2 hours searching for it, to no avail. Brit, never short on wisdom or common sense, said 'I'm going down to find my harness and PFD and I'm never going to take it off because it is clear you would never find me if I fell overboard.' From then on we had a 24/7 PFD/harness/clip-on rule. And in the course of three more transatlantic trips and numerous trips to Maine and Bermuda, no one, including Dick, ever whined or complained.

Dick Goennel, it seemed, in the course of making almost all these trips, had become an inner conscience, a superego for me. A greatest reward would be his approval of some new safety twist for the boat. No one ever doubted his judgment and his emphasis on safety always trumped the macho factor, if it ever arose. The most important lesson was "think about what you are doing".

Opportunities to have sailing companions like Dick, an accomplished racer and seaman, may be rare, but the CCA, of which Dick was a proud member, can provide role models.

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