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A race gone wrong

The 1979 Fastnet remains the worst disaster in the history of sailing

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ADAM MAYERS

On Aug. 11, 1979, a team of Canadian sailors set out on a 600-mile race from England to an island off the Irish coast called Fastnet Rock. A weather bomb of near-hurricane force descended on the fleet; ultimately 15 people died and 25 boats were abandoned in what remains the worst disaster in the sport of ocean racing. In this excerpt from *Beyond Endurance*, his book about the race, Adam Mayers describes the scene aboard the Toronto boat *Magistri* as conditions deteriorated.



ARCH ALYEA
The Royal Canadian Yacht Club's *Magistri* heads out to the start of an Admiral's Cup race in the Solent, off the Isle of Wight in August, 1979. Nick DeGrazia is at left with Peter Milligan (mustache) behind him. Standing in the foreground is Chris Punter.

The difference between a gale and a survival storm is that in a gale, the skipper and crew retain control of the boat and can take measures to do what they think is best. In a survival storm, with wind speeds approaching hurricane strength, wind and sea become masters. The crew struggle to stay alive one minute at a time, hoping conditions will ease enough to give them back control of the boat. There is no navigation per se, because the boat is blown along by the force of the wind. The waves are breaking and tumbling like surf on the beach, sometimes burying the boat under tons of water.

The difference between conditions at the upper end of Force 8 and Force 10 is the difference between sniffles and pneumonia. At Force 8, about 46 mph, the spray is blinding, it is difficult to be heard above the noise of the wind, and every muscle is clenched in order to move or brace against the boat's movement. Small children will fly. It takes enormous strength to hold a course, and seasickness may be knocking off the crew one by one. At Force 10, with the speed at 63 mph, you hang on and pray.

His back to the wind, Nick DeGrazia wedged himself in *Magistri*'s cockpit to stop from sliding. The distressing answer to his earlier question, "How bad can it get?" was now clear. It was, lamentably, much, much worse. He had raced in squalls of 35 knots (1 knot = 1.15 miles) on the Great Lakes, but there winds like that don't last long, certainly not long enough to create waves like this: 30, 40 feet high, with spray flying even higher. He could see the spume illuminated in the masthead light. DeGrazia was an economics professor and dean at the University of Detroit and had met the *Magistri* crew during one of the many summer races of the Great Lakes circuit. Although *Magistri* sailed out of Toronto's Royal Canadian Yacht Club, DeGrazia fit in well and was invited aboard their long distance races.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the wind-speed indicator, which was attached to the bulkhead just forward of the hatch leading down to the cabin. For as long as he stared at the instrument, the needle was stuck on the far side, a reading of 60 knots. He bent over and tapped the glass, but the needle stayed put. Must be broken, he thought. This put the wind speed at Beaufort Force 10, just shy of a hurricane. The sea was now covered in long white patches of foam, and everywhere the edges of the waves were blown into froth, pretty much as Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort predicted when he created the scale in 1805. To DeGrazia, it seemed as if the needle was trying to bend past 60. *Magistri* dove off a wave and for the briefest moment in its lee, the needle flickered and dropped back. He was startled: "That's when I realized it wasn't broken and that it was blowing more than 60," he says.

For more than hour, Peter Milligan had been peering at the compass, reading the course and relaying that to other crew like DeGrazia, who in turn shouted it into the ear of the next person and so on down the line until finally it reached the helmsman's ear. Milligan, a Toronto real estate lawyer, was first in line and had been squinting into the spray without the protection of glasses or goggles. The sensation was painful, akin to having needles driven through the retina without anaesthetic. He could stick his nose right up against the compass, shielding his eyes with his hands. He could turn his face a bit to one side and peer at the compass from an angle, or he could stay low and close and squint. All at once he realized that the red glow of the compass was a blur and he could not read the numbers at all. In fact, he couldn't see anything.


"My eyes just ceased to work," Milligan says. "I couldn't get them to focus. I was terrified."

He stumbled below and collapsed at the bottom of the companionway, with his head to the back of the boat. It was about as comfortable as "lying in a sewer," he says. He rinsed his eyes with fresh water and gradually his sight returned.

Milligan remembers hearing an incredible crash and being hurled from the floor into the ceiling of the cabin roof and then falling onto the starboard side of the boat. The boat appeared to be upside down and there were bodies and gear lying in a heap of confusion. There was blood running from

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a cry in his case, the lights were out and there was a sense of suspended time. "I thought we had either been run down or hit a rock."

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DeGrazia was coming down the companionway into the cabin and had just closed the hatch when the boat went over. He was undoing his foul weather jacket when the boat lurched and "what flashed through my mind was rocks, but then I thought it can't be rocks, we're in the middle of the damn ocean for God sake," he says.

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Chris Punter had been dozing, feeling that this was all still manageable and conditions would improve. Punter, a Toronto Crown attorney who had sailed all his life, heard the wind howling, the halyards slapping inside the mast, the hammer blows of the waves. It wasn't comfortable, but it was warm and he was in a half sleep. Punter's biggest fears are being run down by a boat in fog, or being trapped inside a boat that is sinking. He met one fear the previous day in the English Channel with the narrow miss of a freighter and now was about to meet the second. He felt a sense of weightlessness and then the boat fell on its side with a wind-sucking thump and stopped.

Punter believed they had run into a ship and were being crushed, pinned underneath it as it drove over them. His fear, bordering on panic, released a surge of adrenaline and he threw off the bodies around him and made for the companionway hatch to escape. This was no way to die, he thought, trapped in a small space with the air gradually leaking out, suffocating and finally inhaling and choking on salt water, entombed in a dark, cold grave.

Chuck Bentley had also regained his senses and got to the hatch first with Punter behind him. Bentley couldn't see the look on Punter's face, or the tightly clenched spoon in Punter's right hand. A little earlier Punter had been eating yogourt and put the spoon in his pocket.

"I was conscious of thinking: `If this bastard doesn't get out of my way I'm going to stab him with my spoon because I have to get out of here," Punter says.

They laugh about it now, but at that moment, Punter's body was telling him he had to survive at all costs and if that meant climbing over the person in front of him he had to go. "I felt panic, because my greatest fear had come to pass," Punter says.

The big question as they opened the hatch was whether there was anybody left on deck.

Adam Mayers is an editor at thestar.com. Reprinted by permission.

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