

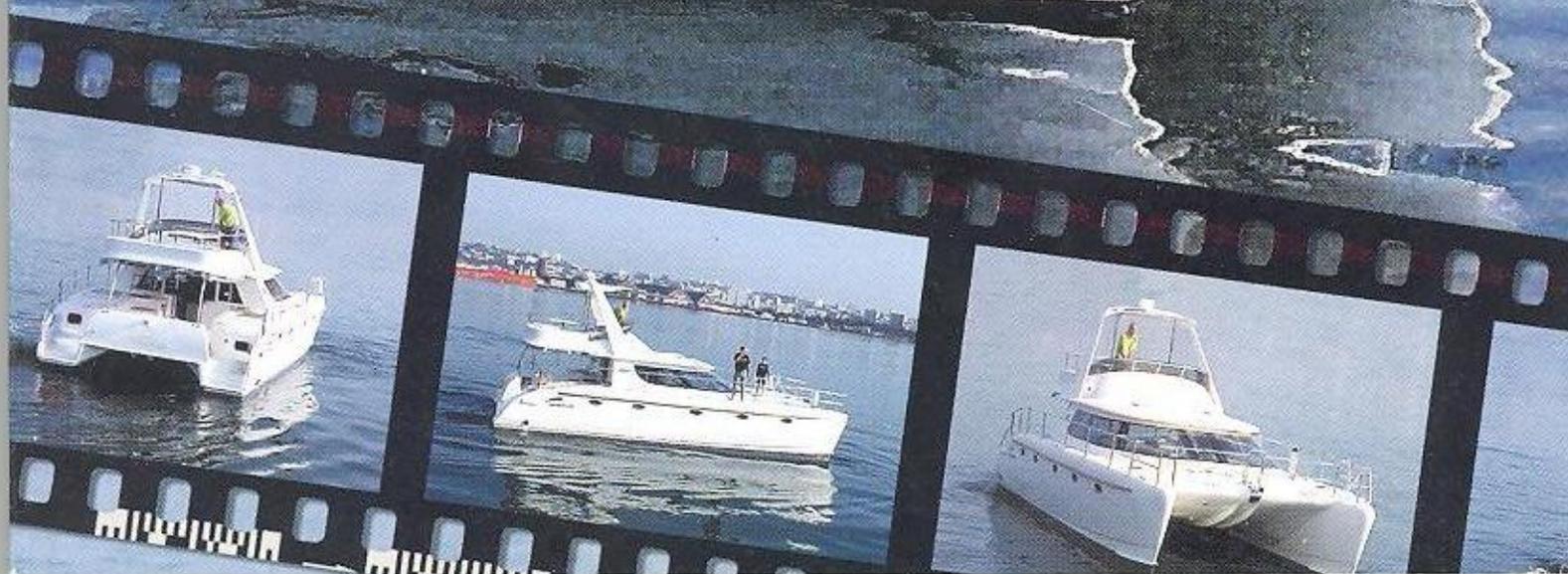
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THE BERMUDA CHALLENGE

by Bill Ratlieff



Prowler at the marina waiting to depart



Prowler during a ride in Bermuda



Prowler enjoys a beautiful day on the ocean.

7:30: We arrive at the marina. The boat has been in storage for one week, waiting for the right weather.

Breakfast

8:30: We are back at the marina and the boat is in the water.

We unload and begin setup for the trip.

9:00: Carl Erickson from Honda arrives for final engine check. Nothing is wrong, which is more of a reassurance and confidence builder.

10:45 or 11:00: Neil arrives with 3 GPS, one handheld, one Garmin mounted on a piece of board, and one fix-mounted Simrad all with routes over the treacherous reefs in Bermuda. This boat was equipped with 16K of top-of-the-line electronics from Simrad. At the time I felt the two additional Garmins were overkill.

Neil begins to duct tape the starboard-mounted Garmin to the top of the console. Then begins the programming of the Simrad radar. The radar was installed in Florida but was never tested, because Neil had the operating manuals in Bermuda to familiarize himself with the electronics.

The problems begin. The radar is up and will not program properly. Neil reaches the Simrad technician who attempts to guide Neil through. It gets worse. Now the radar has knocked out the main GPS unit. Simrad seems to think the radar is not wired properly. We remove the cover and inspect the wiring. All appears well. Then Tom Ratlieff, my brother and our newest addition to the Renaissance team, noticed that the gears on the radar were not aligned properly. Even if we had got it to work, it would not have worked for long. Time was wasting away. We were in a very narrow weather window and the sooner we'd leave, the better. We were able to get the main Simrad GPS reset, but, I feared that further activation of the radar would have ill effects on the main GPS. This is not the way I wanted our trip to start. The clock is ticking. We are behind schedule and it's obvious to me that the radar is not going to work.

It is about 1 p.m. and we are two hours late from our departure time already. I make the decision to go without the radar, with some colorful words, I might add. Neil asks whether I am comfortable with that, and I reply: what choice do we have?

I call the weather service and conditions are still favorable. We are as ready as we can be.

I see my brother off and tell him I'll call during the night, around 9 p.m. We have two satellite phones for communications with land. We go for fuel. Neil fuels the boat and I get a couple of sandwiches. We already had had some protein bars, water and Gatorade. We had planned to have lunch but there isn't time. When I get back with the sandwiches, Neil is covered with gas. The extra fuel tanks on deck are tar coated black and had got very hot during the day. So, when he began fueling he did get some blow back. The one thing I was concerned about was that our water line was lowered about 6 inches due to the extra fuel. We are carrying 4 tanks at 116 gallons and 1 tank at 80 gallons, a total of 544. I had calculated we would need about 470 - 500 depending on conditions.

The time has come to put up or shut up. Don't think about what could go wrong or you won't go. We had already lost our radar and almost one GPS. After some quick video with us in the New York skyline we are off. Neil starts our own clock so we will know how we are doing.

Oh shoot! I almost hit a log! We are 2 minutes into our run and it could almost have been over. There is a boat ahead of me, about a mile, so I think it safer to follow him out. I advise Neil to get to the bow and be a lookout.

We make it out okay, but now we have a pretty stiff headwind. I guess about 15-17 knots, solid whitecaps and about 3 to 4-foot chop. We were told that there would be an onshore breeze that would go away when about 20 miles out. At about 20 miles out we think it safe to engage the autopilot only to find it won't engage. It was using one of the Simrad GPS for its fix, but something must have happened to it because of the faulty radar. We stop and attempt to fix the unit. It appears it is not getting an antenna signal. Neil wants to try swapping the antenna with the other Simrad. I am afraid we will lose another GPS. So, I asked: do we need it? Neil says, yes, it's going to guide the autopilot. Having spent about 60 hours on this boat flooring, I knew we would enter a compass heading to the GPS and it would maintain that heading. We might have to make course corrections but we wouldn't have to drive for 20 plus hours. The big moment! Would it work? I steer the boat to the proper heading and Neil engages the autopilot. It works! What a relief. Just 640 n.m. to North Rock, then another 10 n.m.

We are behind schedule, have lost radar and one GPS. It has picked up by about 3 to 5. Running about 32 knots and getting beat pretty good. I bitch at Neil about the weather, which is supposed to be less than 10 mph... we're about 35 off. So, this must not be an onshore breeze and it has picked up. Almost launching out of the water with 540 gallons of gas, I said, trying to make light of the situation, "Well, if it were easy, everyone would do it." Minutes later our starboard-mounted Garmin goes out. Then I hear words out of Neil's mouth that I didn't think I would ever hear. "Come on, Bill, let's turn around. It's over. Let's go back." I said "What?" and Neil states, "Let's go back. We don't have any navigation." "I attempted this trip two years ago, only to go home with my tail between my legs because of bad weather." I wasn't going to give up that easy. I tell Neil that maybe it is a bad connection and let's try to fix it. After a few minutes and some duct tape, Neil gets the Garmin GPS working. For how long, I don't know. But, for now, it is good enough for me.

Again underway Neil shouts, "The radar arch is broken." One of the main supports for the radar has broken clear through. It is in a bad position where Neil is holding his hand. I am worried he will get his hand caught. Out comes the duct tape again and a pair of vise grip pliers, which seem to secure the break. All is well the next couple of hours except for dodging the long line of buoys on which you could almost jump from one to another. All right, I'm slightly exaggerating, but there were a lot of them.

We are approaching "The Stream"... Everyone has warned us that the Gulf Stream is the most dangerous place due to the debris and high-sea conduct, and that we need to get through before dark. I don't think we are going to make it. It's around 6 p.m. when I notice very unusual rips and swells. Then it dawns on me. We are at the edge of the Stream. Now I can see some sea grass. Being from South Florida, I'm very familiar with it. Now we must be on the lookout for floating debris... my worst fear is hitting a partially submerged container.

The Wind Gods... All that praying Neil had done to the Wind Gods is starting to work. It is finally dying down, thank God. We have been beat for about 120 n.m. - need a break. I kick it up to about 43 rpm, the GPS reads 41.6 mph. I'm happy now. It seems the worst is over. Neil says, "How about that weather report now?" I told him I'd have liked to kick his a.. two hours ago.



A shot of Prowler's bow.



Neil waving from aboard Prowler



Prowler takes a ride by the shore

I told Neil before dark that we needed to get ready for the night. We hadn't even had time to learn how to deploy the life raft; and, to be honest, the night scares hell out of me. We are about 200 miles out when we slow to rig for the night. We remove the broken radar from the broken radar arch, to reduce the load on the arch. We don our life jackets and tether the life raft. We shoot a little video and Neil calls Bermuda to let them know "all is well." I try to call my brother, Tom, in Ft. Lauderdale, but the call won't go through. I take some pictures and hope they will come out good.

Time to get going again. Night is coming, and who knows what else. Back up to 41.6 mph. Neil is concerned about fuel consumption, about 25 GPH, but quick calculation shows we're still fine. I tell him we better go while we can because who knows what's ahead. It's hard to push when you're running against the clock and have no one next to you, but I want as good a time as we can get. We are feeling pretty cocky now, almost 43 mph, good conditions, what could stop us...

I lie down for a while. There's no way I am going to sleep, but I have three herniated disks. So, I'll rest my back while I can. It's totally black now. There's about a half moon low on our starboard side. I wish the moon were in front of us so we can see something... 40 plus 250 out. You don't even have to hold onto the seat (if you know what I mean). We are about 270 miles, making good time, feeling good. I was dying on the starboard side of the console when we feel 3 waves that come out of nowhere. Then we hit something, something big. It rocks the boat pretty good and hit the starboard engine. Neil slows the boat and, needless to say, we are both very concerned. Both engines are still running, a good sign. I look at the starboard engine and we still have the lower unit. Neil shouts, "We're done. We broke the engine." Neil hands me the spotlight and the engine looks good. I lean over the side to see if the bilge pump is running. It isn't. What a relief! I tell Neil to turn off the engine and tilt it up. Neil looks over my shoulder and shouts, "Look! It's cracked. It has a hole in it, we're done." I inspect the prop; it isn't bent, broken or scratched. No rope. It looks fine. The lower unit looks fine as well. Not a scratch. Neil persists that the lower unit is cracked. I ask him to show me where. It turns out what he thought was a crack was only a casting line. So we lower the engine, fire it up, and start off slowly. It appears to be undamaged. The Gods must be on our side.

When we discuss what we may have hit, I tell Neil that it didn't sound hard when it hit the boat. Then there had been the series of waves before we hit. We come to the conclusion that it might have been a whale. We had seen several whales feeding before dark.

We now slow to about 33 knots... being a bit more cautious. I lie down and try to sleep. I must have dozed off for about an hour when Neil starts yelling, "Bill, Bill, the starboard engine is revving high and we've slowed down." I think we must have damaged a prop when we hit something earlier. It turns out we had picked up some heavy-duty netting, wrapped up pretty good on the starboard prop. Neil breaks out his knife and makes quick work of it.

The weather is picking up again, so I ask Neil to check with the weather center to see what were up against - and he gets an answering machine. I ask him what he wants to do, and he says, "Let's press on." So we do. We are now 300 NM out of New York City - 370 to go. Neil needs a break so I take over. Talk about feeling useless, you can't see a thing, other than the gauges and the stars. The moon is setting fast. It wasn't helping with the driving, but it did provide a little comfort being able to see something.

Now the moon has set - 335 n.m. Halfway! Yea, it's all downhill from here, I thought. "What am I doing out here,"

I think to myself? I wish the sun would come up. Nothing I can do but hope for the best. Neil seems to be sleeping. I'll let him rest. He's been great so far.

About 300 n.m. from Bermuda. Neil wakes up and seems rested. I'm glad he's up now because my back is starting to hurt again. Neil takes over and I lie back down. I am getting to feel cold now and it won't go away. I'm in my raingear, long sleeve shirt, but I'm still cold. Neil suggests I lie between the cushions to help keep warm. It helps a little. I also wrap my head in a beanbag chair, which helps. Then Neil throws me my wet suit. I put it on, but I am still cold. So Neil lets me stay between the cushions. I look up now and then, to make sure Neil hasn't fallen overboard. "Oh no, where is Neil?" I didn't see him at the helm! "Where is he?" Then he appears from around the console and says, "Still here, Bill." Neil explains that he was checking out one of the night vision scopes.

It's starting to get light out. The sun might come up in about 40 minutes. What a relief! When the sun comes up, we have about 220 n.m. left. We take a quick break and shoot some more video. Now we can see the sea conditions, about a 3-5 feet, close, confused swell with 2-foot chop on top. We had slowed a little after we hit the net, and we're on a 23-hour pace. I ask Neil "Can we pick it up to a 22-hour pace?" We recalculate the fuel and there is no problem. We pick up the pace by 3 knots, to 36 knots.

As we plow through the swells we slow to 32 knots. We are still far off, so I don't want to push it too hard. That speed will have to do. Neil notices a fuel leak from our 80-gallon tank. So I reclamp the fitting and that seems to make it worse. We decide to run the boat's main tanks empty until the engines sputter, which came very early on the starboard engine. I switched the fuel lines to the 80-gallon tank around 95 n.m. from Bermuda. A little less than 3 hours to go, 22.5 gph. Close, but no problem - 59 n.m. from Bermuda. Neil says we burned 35 of our 80 gallons remaining. Now it is very close. The 4- to 5-foot swells are killing our fuel economy. I change to the port tank to run it down completely at 40 n.m. from Bermuda. We will run it until the engine sputters. I know that the on-deck 116-gallon tanks have 10-15 gallons left, if I need to change back to them. Neil calls his wife and asks her to get a couple of cans of gas just in case. I told him no way was gas coming aboard unless I can't get anything out of the remaining tank, because I think it would disqualify us. Seven n.m. out from North Rock. Finally I can see Bermuda. We are still running on the port tank, no problem now. But, we had been a little nervous for awhile.

Neil has radioed ahead to his friends who will meet us at North Rock. As we approach North Rock, we are met by a small fleet of cats. I think there was every manufacturer except me. They pull alongside taking pictures and cheering us on. As Neil carefully navigates us through the tricky Bermuda reefs, I briefly open her up. She pulls ahead without hesitation. We are running about 44 knots when Neil says, "We have to slow down. We are outrunning the official timing boat." The port engine is starting to sputter. Now I have to switch to the 80-gallon tank again.

About 3 miles to go. One more hard right.

We've done it! Wow! 3 years I have waited to prove our boats! Even though we had some setbacks, we still managed just over 22 hours, beating the current time by 7 hours.

A very warm welcome by everyone. I think I'm too tired to show it, but I'm elated. Did I forget to say that I forgot my passport?

Neil and I have already discussed Miami to Bermuda, maybe next year. I think we used about 470-495 worth of fuel. I'll know in a day or so when Neil refuels the boat.