

Sea Anchoring

Sea Anchoring with a Parachute Sea Anchor

Article by Douglas Locke, Skipper of Dream Weaver

Douglas Locke, 71 in 2002, a Yachtmaster Offshore and retired **Internet Marketing Consultant** (October 2009). He has been sailing since he was 16. His career started as a Navigating Officer Apprentice with voyages round the world in a 10,000 ton general cargo ship before leaving the Merchant Navy because of the poor conditions at that time. He started sailing in dinghies that included a Skipper 14, Bosun and Flying Fifteen before moving up to sailing in charter and mate training yachts that included Sadler 25, Rival 34, Westerly Fulmar 32 and Ocean Youth Trust's 76 ft Tikoo. He was administrator for their West Coast of Scotland's Support Group for a period of five years. He is currently the Secretary of the Carrick Castle Boat Club having previously been Moorings Officer/Administrator since 2003. He and his partner, Liz Evans, 62, Retired Head of **Ardroy Outdoor Education Centre** (retired March 2009) and previously Chair of the Institute of Outdoor Learning Scotland (now retired in 2013), Chair of the Carrick Castle Boat Club and a Director of the new Ardroy, AOEC Trust Ltd., have been sailing their own Westerly Renown ketch, Dream Weaver, since 2000 covering over 12,500 nautical miles and 52 weeks on board, that has included a round trip to the Mediterranean and back to Scotland. Their **annual cruises** were shown on their web site **www.yacht-dream-weaver.co.uk** but now on **<http://www.ourholidayadventures.co.uk>**. After 14 years of great sailing in Dream Weaver she was sold in May 2014.

In life you sometimes have to make a decision that may only be able to be done once, so when Liz and I made the decision to both take three and a half months off work in the year ahead (2002), we had decided to take our yacht down to the Mediterranean from the west coast of Scotland and back again in that period. The adventure therefore started six months before the departure date of 1st May 2002.

We owned a 1973 31ft Westerly Renown ketch (32'6" with bowsprit), a strong and seaworthy yacht with plenty of headroom for my six-foot of height and masses of storage space for living aboard and ocean cruising. Although there are seven berths on board there was be just the two of us and Liz's son, aged ten, who was given permission by his primary school to be absent for the summer term.



Dream Weaver under full sail

We decided to make a comprehensive list of what would be needed for the cruise, the work that would have to be done to the yacht and a plan on the route we would take to and from the Mediterranean.

The first list included equipment - new standing and running rigging and all new sails – main, roller reef foresail and mizzen. We felt it important not to skimp in this, as we would be crossing the Atlantic between Ireland and Gibraltar, hundreds of miles from land.

In view of the importance of making the right decisions concerning the other equipment the yacht should be equipped with, we visited the London Boat Show to get first hand advice from the manufacturers. We upgraded our GPS and autopilot as an insurance requirement for having only two qualified watch keepers on board backed up by an Air Marine wind generator and six batteries. We added Navtex for weather reports and purchased a reconditioned satellite telephone with data connection.

We also purchased a six-man life raft and all new lifesaving equipment in case of a MOB situation. Whilst visiting the various stands we met Alby from ParaAnchors and were really intrigued by the parachute sea anchor he was selling. Although a fairly costly item, it appealed to us as an insurance item that we probably would never use.

The rest of the equipment purchased included a refrigeration unit for the hot weather of the Med, a drinking water filter system and a good selection of charts and pilots.

We now had just three months left to install our purchases and prepare the yacht for her forthcoming cruise. Everything was complete about month before departure at a total cost of around £12,000. We felt the yacht was now ready to be stocked with food, water (135 litres) and plenty of fuel (172 litres) plus clothes for hot and cold climates. Dream Weaver's fuel consumption is ½ litre per mile at a cruising speed of around six knots at 3,000 revs when not under sail.

The 1st May was soon upon us and friends from the village were out ready to wave us Bon Voyage, so we left Carrick Castle on Loch Goil in Argyll at the appointed time, deciding to leave our mooring and go into the local marina for the night as there were finer points not finished that included laying out the parachute sea anchors deck lines ready in case we should ever need them.

Two lines were laid one from the main cleat on the foredeck out over the bow roller to a shackle and the other back from the shackle over the deck that could then be attached to a cockpit winch and cleat. The shackle with both lines, now made up as a bridle, was returned and fastened to a deck fitting for ease of use should the need arise. Setting this up in advance was easy; it would not be so in gale force winds and a pitching sea.

That night and ready to set forth in the morning our friends at the marina, chandlery and marine engineer, who had done so much work on the yacht for us, enjoyed a bottle of Champagne to celebrate the real start of our adventure.

The first week of our cruise was port hopping down the Clyde to Northern Ireland and on to the southern coast of Ireland to Kilmore Quay where we would depart to cross the Bay of Biscay some 200 miles off the west coast of France. It had been our intention to sail directly to Lisbon with favourable winds. Liz and I decided on three-hour watches at night and two-hour watches during the day.

For the first part of the cruise to Kilmore Quay we had little wind and motor sailed most of the way however on leaving the marina there we had a favourable westerly force 2-4 for three days of very enjoyable sailing on a beam reach day and night. At night we dropped the main and sailed on genoa and mizzen only as one person could manage those sail's adjustments alone.

During the day the main was also hoisted and we covered an average 123 miles a day at over 5 knots for the first three days.

The weather forecast so far had been fairly accurate. We sent e-mails via the satellite connection to our family daily giving our position and they plotted our course and sent weather forecasts back to us to compliment the Navtex forecasts.

During the day Liz and Calum saw Fin whales whilst Douglas was asleep. On the evening of day three, 392 miles from Kilmore Quay, there was the most beautiful red sky sunset – 'red sky at night, sailor's delight?'

During the night the wind direction backed to southwest and by the morning to the south right on Dream Weaver's nose and the wind was rising very quickly. Now reefed up and under engine we began ploughing into rough seas and the swell was increasing all the time. By the time the wind had reached gale force and it was raining with poor visibility we were under engine alone making just 1 – 3 knots into the wind. The low was deepening faster than expected and at force 9 we were making little headway. At this point we decided that perhaps it was a good move to have bought the parachute sea anchor as it looked as though we would have to use it!

The forecast was for worse weather to come, we were 200 miles off the French west coast and 134 miles past the continental shelf in 4,483 metres depth of water. There was a short break in the gale with a drop in the wind to SSW 5-7 for a short time during which we took the decision in view of the forecast for further gales to launch the parachute sea anchor.

This was something we had never done before so with 100 metres of rode to connect between the parachute and the bridle, we had already set up; we did not know how best it should be launched in these conditions? It would be a case of trial and error in very rough seas with at that time a 5-metre swell.

The parachute was a 12-foot one and to this is connected a buoy that keeps it up near the surface and to this buoy there is another long line to a pick up buoy. Liz, harnessed, went forward on deck to connect the 16mm rode to the bridle shackle whilst I kept the yacht under engine head to the wind as stable as I could. Having connected all the tackle and cleated the movable bridle line, after going around the cockpit winch, all was ready for the launch of the sea anchor from the cockpit.

Remembering that we still have to try and keep the yacht heading into the wind under reduced power, care has to be taken not to let the rode, parachute or pick up go under the boat. So despite our care the pick up buoy and line was launched first on the port side too quickly and was pulled under the boat. As quick as a flash the engine was knocked out of gear and the buoy popped up on the starboard side. We realised it would be impossible to drag it back without being caught on either the prop or rudder so retrieving the pick up buoy on the starboard side I cut the line and Liz pulled in the rest of the line on the port side and then we put the engine into gear heading us back into the wind just underway for stability.

The fastest rope splice I had ever done was now achieved in minutes... The tackle was now ready again for launch. This time we decided to let out the sea anchor, the rode and the pick up line and buoy very slowly again from the port side but in the lee with a few degrees off the yacht's heading off the wind. The engine was knocked out of gear and idled whilst this was achieved. Success, the launch went perfectly and after a while we felt the parachute take the strain ahead of the yacht as the bridle tightened. The rode apparently stretches when under tension for up to 150 metres.



The parachute sea anchor has just been laid

We then had to adjust the bridle on the winch to get the best angle to ride the swell. This appeared to work best around 10 – 20 degrees off the wind. Relief and rest at this point were very welcome as it was 18.15 and we were able to turn off the engine. The wind steadily rose back to gale force. We telephoned MRCC Finisterre to advise our position and that we were at sea anchor. They asked us if we needed assistance but we said we were fine. They said they would call us every 4 hours and advise shipping of our position. Fortunately we were not in any shipping lanes.

To make our day, after the sea anchor had been set and our position reported, about forty dolphins came up to the yacht and started playing in the huge long swell alongside us that was getting bigger and bigger eventually reaching 10 metres. We felt they were saying don't worry – this is fun! They gave us a spectacular display for about 20 minutes that we will remember for the rest of our lives!

See short video on 2002 history page on www.ourholidayadventures.co.uk.

The forecast was not good, SSW veering to westerly and then backing southerly again over the next two days with winds up to force 9. The Atlantic swell was long and reached 10 metres in height. Dream Weaver remained stable riding up and down the swell as it passed by. MRCC Finisterre called four hours later on schedule, again asking if we needed assistance, again we said we were fine. They called us again at midnight and said go to bed and we will call you at 08.00 in the morning...



The scale of these waves was difficult to capture on a camera

Officially a vessel at sea anchor should display two all round red lights one over the other, but that we had not allowed for so we just showed an all round white anchor light. Power was not a problem as the wind generator provided so much electricity the batteries were permanently charged up. In fact the wind was so strong at 40 knots and over the wind generator made incredible noise before correctly feathering.

In seas like this watch keeping is fairly useless, as you can't see anything in the troughs and when on top of the troughs the sea is so rough the visibility from spray gives little visibility of a shortened horizon. When you are at sea anchor you can't move out of the way of any vessel so one is reliant on ships being able to spot you during the day or see your lights at night.

Our watch keeping was reduced to our radar watch system that would tell us if a vessel with radar entered our 2-mile surveillance area and the radar itself that again has an alarm for any vessel approaching preset distances. Both of these would sound an alarm if a vessel got close to us but none did. We put this down to the excellent monitoring by MRCC Finisterre. The first night Calum slept in the middle between Liz and I in the fore cabin. It was a roller-coaster sleep but we did sleep and that's important in such a situation.



Long Atlantic swell, the wind was screaming as can be heard on the video

The next morning we knew we had at least another day of being at sea anchor. We passed our position over every four hours when MRCC called and exchanged weather details - forecast from them, reality from us! It became almost impossible to stand on deck in the cockpit with the wind and the riding over the huge swell for safety reasons. During this time we could not venture out to video or photograph the seas so we listened to Harry Potter audiotapes for two days... It passed the time particularly for Calum who at the age of 10 was not so sure of the safety of the yacht. We never had a worry about the seaworthiness of Dream Weaver and felt quite safe in her.

Late in the afternoon of day two at sea anchor the sea became very confused with very, very big waves over the swell in severe gale 9, but the yacht rode over them and they passed by. The colours of the sea were spectacular – turquoise, deep blues and white crests and foam. It was as comfortable as you could ever have expected to ride out such conditions under sea anchor. We were able to cook on the stove and eat our meals, although it really was another world – one that we were living on our own. That day we heard on the VHF a Pan Pan from a yacht giving its position that we plotted as being on the continental shelf off France. That would have been pretty unbearable as the seas would be highly disturbed over the shelf. It was taking on water. We never heard more on the VHF after that but they were certainly in our thoughts at that time.

The second night at sea anchor followed the same routine with MRCC Finistere. At midnight again they called us, said go to sleep and they would call us again at 08.00, which they did. The forecast was looking a little better but the conditions locally were wild still. At 11.15 I telephoned the Met Office in England for a detailed weather report for our area. Giving one's credit card details in such circumstances was bizarre but we were very grateful to speak to a personal weather forecaster who said there would be a slot of a few hours to escape our position in three hours time. If we didn't leave then we would be hit by another gale!

At 14.20 we retrieved the parachute sea anchor in force 5 by turning on the engine and sweeping slowly round to the pick up buoy that was lying at right angles to the parachute. I had to be very careful to steer clear of the rode and Liz picked up the buoy first time harnessed to the bow deck. Retrieving the wet parachute and rode was done with the engine in neutral from

the port side of the cockpit. Together we pulled in the 100 metres of rode from the parachute end as by pulling the parachute first from the pick up line it collapses. Once all the line was aboard the engine was put into gear and very slowly we head into the wind again.

We now decided to head for La Coruna in Spain to refuel, as we had had to use a lot more fuel than ever expected prior to sea anchoring. Whilst at sea anchor we had moved just 15 miles in 43 hours from our original anchoring position. We let MRCC Finisterre know we were now heading for La Coruna under engine and also that we were getting short of fuel. They decided to call us now every two hours. We gave our ETA as 21.00 hours the next day.

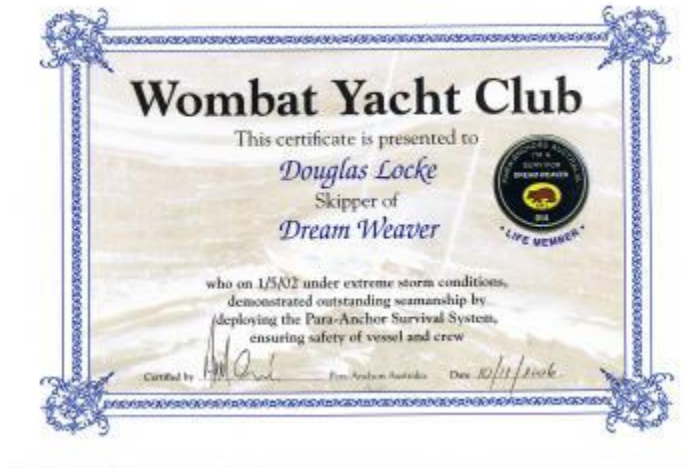
We crashed through heavy and confused seas, easing back on the throttle for our comfort, eventually we escaped the huge swell and entered rough and then moderate seas before crossing the south/north shipping lanes at 45deg 05.948' N 08deg 29.039' W where it was like a shipping motorway! The radar was exceptionally useful at this point as there were so many ships going either north or south that we had to find a path through them in the dark...

Soon after, more dolphins accompanied us, then a spotter plane was checking on us. Fuel was now getting very low. With 75 miles still to go to reach the port, the tank dipped at 28 litres, not enough at ½ litre/mile, so every chance we had to sail we did. It was a little concerning that the wind dropped completely as we neared La Coruna, MRCC Finisterre continued to monitor us, we motored slowly into the Real Club Nautica at 21.45 just 45 minutes later than the ETA given the day before. On dipping the tank we had just 1 litre of diesel left! We had just covered 596 miles from Ireland. Would we ever do ocean sailing again without a parachute sea anchor – No! Would we do such a cruise again, Yes!



Dream Weaver arrived safely in La Coruna, Spain

The full cruise Scotland to the Med and back can be seen by clicking <http://www.ourholidayadventures.co.uk> with photos in the gallery and a video taken whilst in 10 metre seas at sea anchor. We were awarded Life Membership No 014 of the Wombat Yacht Club following the use of the parachute sea anchor under extreme conditions.



Regretfully, Douglas' wife, Liz Evans died on 31st December 2017.