

Atlantic Crossing: Three Men in a Boat

BY SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

Washington, N.C., April 15, 2017: "As departure time looms large, all three of us are dealing with last minute issues. Scott Wilson, the current owner of the boat, has engaged an engine mechanic recommended by Pacific Seacraft. The mechanic has pushed for an engine re-build."

The above is the first entry in Will Matheson's travel log. He will journal often as he sets out on a seafaring adventure with two life-long friends, Bill Chalmers and Scott Wilson. Matheson and Chalmers are both residents of Dickinson, Texas; Wilson lives in California. They are about to sail 3,695 nautical miles across the Atlantic aboard a 1998

Pacific Seacraft 40, appropriately named *FREYA*. Before setting sail, the men had taken the boat to Washington, N.C. where the Pacific Seacraft factory is located and did an entire refit. They will be leaving out of Morehead City, N.C. to their final destination—Marbella, Spain. They got underway on May 18.

Matheson, 79; Chalmers, 63; and Wilson, 60, are experienced sailors and had no reservations about embarking on a voyage they'd been planning for three years. It was "now or never," and since no one had a crystal ball predicting the future, they decided, "let's do this!" Matheson's journal entries are filled with descriptive details of good days, challenging days and absolutely glorious days. There are photos, postage stamps from ports-of-call, a memento from a bar, but the documented details of their 29* days of sailing time really tell the whole story. (*This does not include a two-week stop in Bermuda, four weeks exploring the Azores Island chain and two days in Lagos, Portugal.) Each sailor was in charge of a particular task: Wilson would act as captain and navigator; Chalmers was the designated medic, mechanic, bartender and cruise director, "I chose the music and what we drank at night;" and Matheson was in charge of provisioning and the galley.

Although the autopilot wasn't quite up to par when the threesome set sail, the equipment they needed to fix it would be forwarded to Bermuda, their first stop. When they arrived in Bermuda, not only was the equipment there, but so was the America's Cup. "It was a nice surprise," Matheson said. "We ended up staying two weeks, working on the autopilot, and taking off a day to watch the race." Equipped with a tracking device, SPOT, that sends out a signal so others can see where you are, was important to friends and family. The team brought along two satellite phones, and Wilson subscribed to a weather service that would contact him for weather updates as necessary. "Still, prior to our departure, I had some sleepless nights worrying about getting



FREYA under sail

Here's to the tall ships; here's to the small ships and all the ships at sea. But the best ships are friendships. Here's to you and me! (Maritime Blessing)

caught in some monster storm," Wilson said, "but what I discovered is that once we were underway and out on the ocean all those apprehensions disappeared. The worst weather we saw were winds gusting to 38 knots and seas maybe 15 feet for a few hours, but from a comfortable direction."

Taking three-hour watches with six hours off, didn't always mean they each got that

amount of sleep due to weather and things that go bump in the night. "There was always one of us awake either handling the sails due to a wind shift or getting too close to another boat," said Chalmers, who reflected how they had a few scary incidents. "You'd think that in the middle of the Atlantic, where we didn't see ships for days, that wouldn't happen, but it did." Matheson explains: "There are rules of the road out on the ocean, and if you're in a sailboat, you have the right of way because a power boat has more ease in changing course, but if something much bigger than you is approaching, you don't insist on your right of way. We were all amazed with the vastness of the ocean, yet still had encounters that could have caused a collision at sea without us taking evasive action. This happened about a-half-dozen times throughout the voyage, the scariest was when an 1,100-foot container ship was headed toward us."

And then came the whales. "We were on our way to the Azores, and we saw a large pod of fin whales—well over a hundred of them," Matheson said. "They were headed in the same direction as us, swimming 20 feet beside us, traveling fast. You could see them up close and it was exciting. They were around us for about half an hour, and it was a real highlight of the trip." That is, until the crew subsequently heard how some fin whales had capsized a boat northwest of the Azores Island, Terceira. "Three British sailors had to be rescued right before their boat sank, due to the whales ramming their boat," Chalmers said, "punching a hole in the bottom of it. Had we known that beforehand, not sure getting so up close and personal with the whales would have been such a thrill."

While visiting the Azores, the crew stayed longer than anticipated, but it was a good time to visit three of the islands—Flores, Faial and Sao Miguel. "They were very beautiful, with pastures separated by stone walls, fields of flowers; just so much beauty," Matheson said. There were other highlights—like seeing schools of dolphins, and what each

individual sailor experienced while on watch. Most of the time, the nights were quiet, the stars were the only light in the dark sky and the sounds of the ocean reminded them of just how isolated they were from the rest of humankind. "Once, when we were right in the middle of the Atlantic, I got a text from a friend who was following us on SPOT," Chalmers said. "He texted that the closest person to us at that very moment was on the International Space Station, and that's when I realized how remote we actually were. We'd often go days and days without seeing any vessels at all."

The next stop was Lagos, Portugal where they docked for a couple of days, and then headed to the Strait of Gibraltar. As the Rock of Gibraltar loomed large, it was quite impressive. "We entered on my watch," Matheson said, "with the radar set at 12 miles, and I had 27 vessels on the radar at one time, all going north and south; it was like trying to cross I-45." As they sailed toward Marbella, Spain, visiting three or four ports before arriving, they had come to the end of the trail. It was mid-July—Chalmers and Matheson were flying back to the U.S., but Wilson was taking the boat on to Barcelona. They had sailed a total of 3,695 nautical miles in 29 days—127 nautical miles per day.

Back home, Matheson made his final journal entry: "The wrap-up of this adventure was encapsulated so well by my crewmates who sent me the following comments": Chalmers wrote: "It gave us a lot better appreciation of the hardships our military men and women endure when they are away from their families for months at a time." Wilson penned: "I said goodbye to two of the best friends/crewmates a guy could have...it's been an adventure of a lifetime."



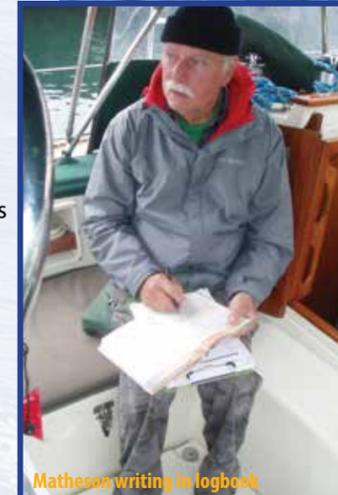
Matheson, Wilson and Chalmers Departing North Carolina



Chalmers on watch



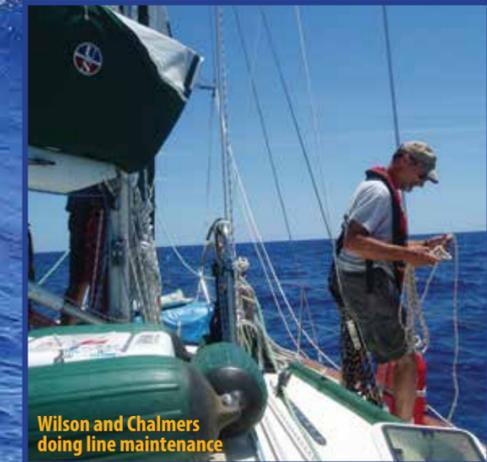
Pod of Fin Whales



Matheson writing in logbook



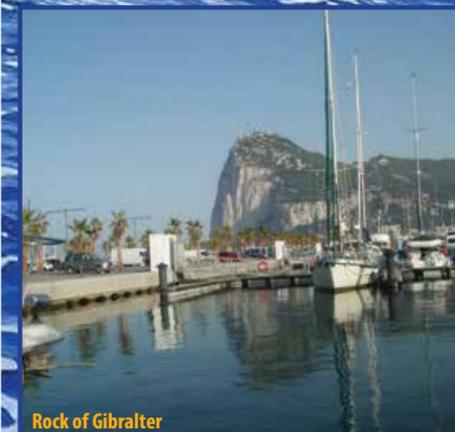
Wilson making Dywidag loop



Wilson and Chalmers doing line maintenance



Prepared for everything



Rock of Gibraltar



Final Destination: Marbella, Spain