

Log of the *HILDE M²*



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AT LAST! LETTER FROM THE CAPTAIN! The story below was written in longhand "on the spot" and then typed in Puerto Rico after things aboard were back to normal (?) and the computer was working. Parts 2 and 3 will be along in the next issues.

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"WELL, IT'S BEEN A HECKUVA WEEK on the *HILDE M²*.

"I'm starting to write this at 30,58N; 71,56W -- about 480 miles ENE of Jacksonville, FL -- and not nearly far enough along for nine days of sailing. The reason, of course, is that it hasn't been smooth sailing and I've covered many more miles backing and filling as conditions changed. But let's start from the first.

"PASSAGE 1, DAY 1 (WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29). We left the dock in Beaufort, NC just before 1 PM. That's when B had to leave to catch her bus home from Morehead City after our very nice interlude in North Carolina. It was a kind of honeymoon/vacation: one of our best times together ever. I didn't have to cast off then, but I partly wanted B to see me off and partly needed to do something to keep from crying. This solo cruising is not all perfect, you know.

"A weak high had come through and I counted on the weather being OK if not ideal for the start. The get-away was so abrupt that I didn't even have the sail covers off (broke my #1 rule right off the bat). Twenty minutes of motoring around in the harbor gave me time to get the boat in starting trim. By 2 PM I was well out Beaufort Inlet, motor-sailing against the tide and making fine progress under a gray sky that looked more like dusk than midday.

"Another couple hours saw us more than half way down the west side of Cape Lookout Shoals in beautiful clear water with a lively escort of about 20 porpoises playing along both sides of the boat. Big spotted gray ones and smaller dark ones continually crossed the bow, the smaller ones sometimes completely clearing the water and splashing me as I moved about the boat trying to get some photos in the poor light. I kept beaming friendly thoughts at them, asking them to stay with me. They did for quite a while.



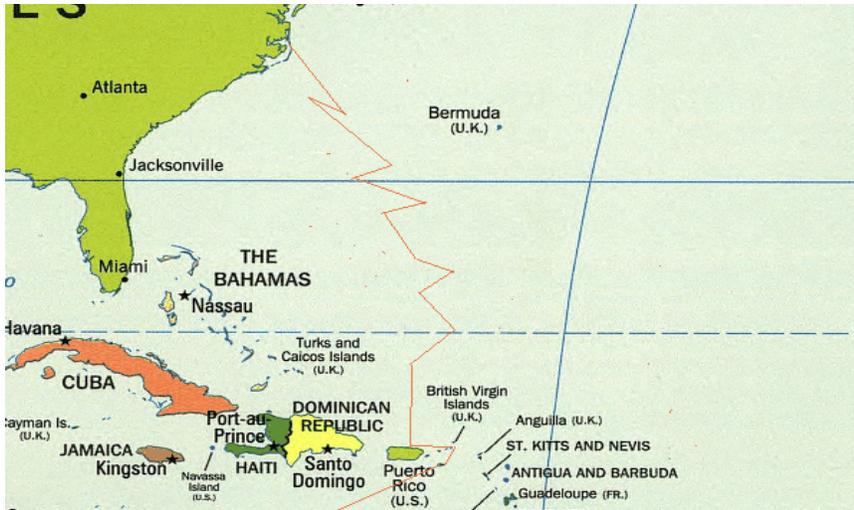
Dolphins play by the HM²

"We weren't far from land yet, though it was out of sight. A tiny black and gray bird appeared and landed on the edge of the cockpit. Knowing it wouldn't survive long on the boat I frightened it off time after time only to have it fight upwind to land again on the only solid thing it could see. A short downwind flight would have had it safely ashore. Perhaps it finally made it, because it did eventually disappear into the gray. I got to thinking how often we struggle upwind toward something tangible when we'd be better off "going with the flow". B knows I get these powerful insights sometimes when sailing offshore.

"About 6:30, a little after dark the engine began to run roughly and stopped; the first sign of a problem with fuel we had bought in Beaufort at the Gulf Dock. At the time I hadn't even thought about it when the young man at the pump said he'd just taken over a closed business. So HM sailed along at a slower pace while I worked at blowing out the fuel line, barfing from time to time as the ocean swell and the smell and taste of diesel oil worked on me. In due course I got the engine started again and we motor-sailed in order to get as much offing as possible.

"PASSAGE 1, DAY 2 (THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30). We passed a couple fishing ships moving up or down the coast in the wee hours of the 30th. By 4 am it was drizzling. I took catnaps, checking our course every 15 minutes or so and looking around for any ships that might want to plow us under. By daylight it was raining pretty hard and blowing briskly from the NE. I reefed the main and genny before 9, and kept a 140 degree magnetic course - about the best I could hope to do.

"The plan, incidentally, was to sail ESE from Beaufort about 5 days, then SSE about nine more days to St. Thomas. The dog leg course would add about 3 days more than a rhumb line 1100 mile course, but might provide more comfortable beam reach sailing in the trades further south. So much for the plan.



My approximate (very simplified) track to the Caribbean

"Wind shifts between NE and SE made course adjustments necessary hourly or more often, and confused seas kept the Aries working to keep any kind of course at all, yet we made some progress in a generally SSE direction. Lots of spray was coming on board but temperature remained in the 70's and the water was warmer than that - not uncomfortable.

"PASSAGE 1, DAY 3 (FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31). Only a very occasional light was seen during the night which was black, black and starry until 2 AM, then overcast and drizzly again. The increased wind about 4 AM had us going more than 6 knots and slamming so I pulled in another third of the genny.

"About 12 hours later at 4:30 Friday afternoon we were still roaring along and taking more water over the side. I pulled down the main altogether and left only a tiny patch of genny up for control. That brought us down to 3.5 knots, going SW with much rolling. The constant working of the Aries kept wearing the dacron cords that fasten the control line sheaves, and I had to replace them twice. With several deck leaks and the water from my rain gear coming in the only dry place in the cabin was my bunk on the starboard settee. That's where I spent every moment I could, spaced out from the scopoderm ear patches and general fatigue.

"PASSAGE 1, DAY 4 (SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1). At 8:00 AM we were in our 32nd hour of hard rain; wind averaging 28 knots, gusting to 37; and seas running from two directions. Some of the waves hit us hard and we couldn't move in a fashion to avoid them all. Alice, the aloe plant, was taking things hard. She had been dislodged from her perch behind the galley sink numerous times, drenched with salt water from a deck leak overhead, and at one point spread around the cabin after becoming airborne as we dropped off a wave.

"At noon I was in the cockpit pulling in the last scrap of genny when we were struck by a freak wave I heard it coming like an freight train but couldn't turn in time to see. It came down on me from above, pushing me face down against the starboard side of the cockpit floor, at the same time smashing down the cockpit dodger and awning. The 3/4" metal awning spreader was bent into a V shape and the dodger was torn along its forward frame. The cockpit was filled to overflowing, water going over the single hatchboard in the companionway with such force that the forward cabin bulkhead was soaked from top to bottom.

"With much water aboard and more coming in through cracks in the cockpit lockers, I got the engine started to run the large electric bilge pump. It cleared most of the water in 6 minutes, working at about 35 gpm, so I figure more than 200 gallons made it to the bilge. With the water out, I kept the engine going to top up the batteries, but after about 20 minutes it stopped abruptly. I found the filters completely clogged with water and sludge, apparently from the fuel we picked up in Beaufort.

"Not knowing when or if I'd get it started again, I switched off everything but the instruments to save juice. It took hours to sort things out. We were running SW down wind under bare poles and managed to take only occasional dollops of water in the cockpit. Once in a while I could see a huge breaking curler moving like an express train at an angle across the general trend of waves. That's the kind of thing that must have done us in.

"The main casualties of the deluge were the ham radio which took it full in the face and the Tillermaster which was completely submerged in the cockpit. Neither worked but after flushing with fresh water and baking in the sun they both showed some signs of life (verdict still not in as this is typed).

"PASSAGE 1, DAY 5 (SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 2). Sunday morning found us about 120 miles SE of Beaufort and headed back under a double reefed main in the still strong wind with the idea of regrouping. I spent my time mopping up and wringing out clothes. The seasick depression was leaving me finally and that evening I ate my first warm meal of the trip: canned Chicken a la King and garden peas. Adversity continued though, because by 9 PM we couldn't hold a course in the dying wind. The sails began to slat about as we rocked in the still-confused seas.

"PASSAGE 1, DAY 6 (MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3). We couldn't get underway again until Monday morning but we were sailing back at five knots by 10 AM. Gradually the wind came around to the north and strengthened again and I found myself reefing both the main and the genoa so that by 2 PM we had very little sail up. We were forced off to the south toward Charleston, SC - or worse, Frying Pan Shoals off Cape Fear. Not liking that alternative, I came about to 150 degrees in the dusk.

"It was about then that I changed my mind again. Instead of fighting my way back to Beaufort with its busy complicated harbor and tidal currents I'd continue on to the original destination in the Virgins which offered no worse problems for a powerless boat. The only questions were whether electricity would hold out to give me backup for my rusty navigation - and what might the weather be. I decided to cut off all lights and all instruments except the speed/log and go for it. The one operating short wave

receiver didn't pull in anything except an almost non-understandable north Atlantic weather announcement at 8 minutes after the hour on WWV. The best I could make it from the two 30 second blurbs, everything was ok except for some really heavy stuff way up above 40N 30W or so. The barometer was encouraging at about 32" and steady.

"In all this time I hadn't seen any ship except the fishing fleet off Beaufort last Wednesday, but I did alter course Monday night to stay away from a northbound freighter since I was unlit.

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