

Sailing on a Tall Ship with The Jubilee Sailing Trust

Chapter 1



Imagine that you have been transported to The STS Tenacious which you have just joined in Southampton and you are setting off into The English Channel along with fifty two other assorted characters and you have never sailed before.

You have been sent a booklet which tells you that Tenacious is only 4 years old and is the largest all wood hulled Tall Ship in the world and was designed especially to take not only able bodied but also physically disabled people. She is 213ft long with a beam of 34ft 6inches, has a draught of 15ft. She weighs 714 tonnes has three masts, the tallest being 125ft from the deck. She has 21 sails and 10 kilometres of running ropes to make it all work.

BUT you are in a wheelchair and are feeling pretty nervous as this is a totally different environment to anything you have experienced before.

You have arrived at the dock and facing you is a long gangplank that rises high over you onto the Bridge Deck. Before you can turn around and head off home, a team of friendly people come down to meet you and before you know where you are, a reassuring rope is fixed to your chair and you are smoothly pulled up the gangplank to be met by the Mate. He is a real professional and he quickly passes you over to your Watchleader.

This where I come on the scene. Having sailed many different types of sailing craft all my life I found that for my 60th birthday Cally had given me a fortnight's trip on Tenacious to sail from Southampton to Lisbon. After the trip the Mate reckoned that I knew what I was doing and I was invited to become a Watchleader. A special 2 day intensive course followed, not on how to sail but how to lead a Watch of ten people of which five would be disabled.

There are four Watches on Tenacious and each Watch, along with the Officer of the Watch, run and sail the boat for four hours. You then have twelve hours off and then back on again so that you work 8 hours every 24. So I greet you and show you the several lifts that operate through the boat and very soon you find yourself in a small curtained cabin with two bunks. Fortunately yours is the lower bunk as your Buddy will be on the top one. Your Buddy is also with you now and his (or her) job is to be there if you want help and to ensure that if you start getting things wrong there is a careful helping hand to guide you out of trouble.

Before you have time to think about unpacking, you have to go to the Mess where you meet the Medical Purser. She has already been briefed by the Mate (as has your Watchleader) on your medical condition and what medication and care you may require. Your first task is to sign the Ships Papers as you are now on a Merchant Vessel.

As soon as all are aboard, the Captain calls all hands and after the introduction of the permanent crew comes the all important Safety Lecture. Our main concern at all times is the safety of the crew, how we carry out an emergency evacuation and how we abandon ship and take to the life rafts. So alarms ring and after a lot of rushing around the 'Evac' drill is completed and you find yourself being carefully hauled up from the lower deck, donning a lifejacket and learning where your Evac station is. It is nice to be on deck and you notice that there are points for you to clip your special wheelchair straps onto so that your wheelchair does not roll around. You look up the main mast and see a forest of ropes and spars and wonder how it all works but it is time for supper so that will have to wait. Thankfully you find from your Watch card that you are not on Mess Duty today so into the lift and down to the lower mess.

This is your first real opportunity to meet some of your Watch and have the first of many really good meals on board. Lots of fresh vegetables, fruit and as many soft drinks, tea and coffee as you want. After supper you grab a few minutes to unpack and with the help of your Buddy make up your bunk. It looks rather small, but you are assured that after the first 24 hours you will start craving for sleep and it becomes your little home for short periods of time over the next ten days.

All hands on deck! We are casting off and motoring down the Solent. Two hours later we drop anchor near Cowes and all are allowed to go to bed, with most going via the excellent bar for a nightcap.

11.40pm you are deeply asleep and you are being woken up. Your Watch is due on at midnight, so you quickly dress and assemble on the Bridge. Your job is to ensure that the anchor does not drag and you have to keep a wary eye open for other shipping that may not see you. That seems pretty daft as Tenacious is lit up like a Christmas Tree. 4.00am into bed. 7.20am called again and up for breakfast at 8 o'clock. Your Watchleader goes off to be briefed on the day's activities and we all assemble at 8.50 am to be told what is happening.

9.00am is 'Happy Hour' - Oh what fun this is cleaning the boat. Our watch is on deck today and we have the job of cleaning the brass, whilst the others wash the dirt from Southampton off the decks.

10.00am 'Smoko' is called. This is tea, coffee, cakes and biscuits around the mainmast.

10.30am Volunteers to go aloft. As we are about to sail, able bodied crew are fitted with safety harnesses and with great skill and care all are shown how to go aloft and walk out onto the yards so that the sails can be untied from their stowed position. It looks terrifying and suddenly you are surrounded by people who grin from ear to ear and are told that the view was fantastic and they have never done anything quite like this before.

So slowly and with no shouting you find that a rope has been put into your hand and when 'Heave' is called you are to pull. You are beginning to enjoy yourself as for the first time in your life you are part of team and everyone is going at your speed and you are not being left behind. 'Jolly glad I brought some sailing gloves as we seem to be hauling so many ropes (oh no they are Sheets, halliards and braces)'. Gracefully we pull away into the Solent and head for the Needles.

Lunch is called which is just what we wanted and you see that you are on Watch again at 4.00pm so you turn into your bunk for a couple of hours sleep. Between lunch and tea we have 'Quiet' time and to any observer Tenacious looks like the Marie Celeste as it is the best sleep of the day and as many as possible take advantage.

4.00pm you are on wheel steering....' Help which way do I turn it.....left and she goes left..... ah yes I see, but I have to follow a compass course as I cannot see where I am going and if I turn the wheel left the compass card goes right.....' thankfully your watchleader is at hand and he shows you how to correct the mistake and in no time the boat speed rises and above the vast white sails filling and pulling us along. The rest of the watch are keeping a good lookout for other boats as well as writing up the log and the many other tasks of sailing this magnificent boat. In no time at all you are relieved and soon your watch is at an end

Time for a quick drink, dinner and then back to your bunk!

3.40am you are called and find yourself on the 4.00am watch. 'Crikey it is blowing like stink, pouring with rain, the boat is heeling over and how on earth am I going to manage.' Buddy is to hand as well your Watchleader and in no time you are kitted out in foul weather gear and your wheelchair is strapped to the deck. 'Ok this sailing game is supposed to be fun but I cannot see anything, I am very wet we are thundering down the English Channel.....I just hope they know what they are doing.'

8.00am Breakfast. Never have sausage, egg and beans tasted so good!

So your first twenty four hours sailing has been pretty good, but as you get into the routine, each new sail change becomes a challenge to do it better and faster. Each watch strives to complete their tasks ahead of the others. You are finding that for the first time in your life are able to face challenges that you never dreamt you could complete and your confidence grows and grows as the days pass.

'Everyone is so kind..... I am treated as a normal human being, as if I had no disability..... I look and see another who is totally blind and yet she walks around as if she was fully sighted..... another who has no legs he is deaf.....he is 83, crippled deaf and blind and was a rear gunner in a Lancaster in the last war.....and I have MS.....what have I to complain about.

Wheelchairs aloft! We are tied up in port and all the 'Wheelies' are hauled in their chairs up to the first platform which is about 50ft up. The whole exercise is completed with great care and precision and the view from up there is fantastic!

Chapter 2

'Being unable to see is not a handicap'



On one of my voyages I had the honour of having a totally blind woman in my watch. I learnt a lot from her, especially how important it is to not take people with any form of disability for granted. Always give them a choice and let them make up their own minds.

This woman was 52 and she was determined to climb the mast so after her climb I asked her questions and wrote down what she said:

“Ellen, what was your first feeling when told that you would be going aloft?”

Genuine heart sinking, I thought that I could have escaped, but faced directly with the challenge I couldn't say no

“What happened then in preparation?”

Adam had to fiddle with private parts to fit my harness and being an obliging person I just smiled.

“What briefing did you have?”

I had to practice using the safety line hooks and I found working the clips very difficult. Even in the rigging, it was quite complex, but I improved with practice. Being in mortal danger does focus one's mind somewhat.

“Did you feel in mortal danger?”

Yes I did! We used the harness a lot less than I thought we would, so I found that my own physical strength was important, but I had to block the thought of danger out and only listen to each instruction. Each action was talked through so that I was totally focussed on only the next step and this made me able to mentally block out the totality of the situation.

“When you climbed the ratlines up to the first platform, did you have any problems?”

I found getting onto the base of the ratlines very hard as I was now on the outside of the rigging. Stepping out and around was my first big psychological test. Paul was very helpful on deck by being very matter of fact and this stopped me getting into a catastrophic panic mode.

Going up the ratlines was fine, and as the ladder narrowed I had no problems.

I was respectful of my physicality at this time (I am 52), so I hauled myself onto the first platform. It felt really solid thank goodness. Adam placed me on the shooting platform and told me that it was from this platform that a French sniper had shot Lord Nelson.

The vocal support from below was wonderful and I called for a photo, because I thought that I had completed the task. Not a bit of it. Adam said that we were going on up and out onto the course to feel what the yard was like.

So I started climbing again, up and over the handrail and hooked on, again now on the outside of the rigging and then half way up I had to step off onto a rope and slide sideways, hand over hand, until I reached the yard. But the footrope was shuddering and my nerve was in danger of breaking. Adam and Gillian encouraged me on and I clipped onto a very thin wire and stepped out onto the yard rope. There was a fixed metal hand rail running along the top of the yard to which I clung with white knuckle determination.

I moved out along the yard sliding my feet side to side along the footrope. The sheer size of the yard amazed me. It felt like an upturned racing shell. I moved way out on the port side and then they said that we must now move back and go out onto the starboard side.

I said 'I do not think that I can do it' – and then I felt that I had betrayed myself, but maybe two big things in one day was enough. Adam said that it was a lot easier, I thought and said 'Oh well, what the hell!'

At this stage I was not conscious of anyone below, or the water, just me, Gillian and Adam. I felt wobbly and not up to it mentally and that shocked me as I have lived my life with my mental strength being my powerhouse.

Once I had said 'what the hell' I moved back along the yard with more ease, but the wobbly line was still most nerve racking.

So I was now just following instructions. They gave me some instruction on knot tying, but that is just a blur. I passed by the mast and went out onto the starboard yard. So much easier this side as you stepped on. As I did not have to use the wobbly rope I felt very much more confident.

Stupidly I asked what the clew ring was, so Adam took me right to the end of the yard so that I could feel it. The yard is 7 metres long on each side of the mast. It felt like a mile.

Now time to come back. No problems coming back along the yard. Clipping off and on now very important and I seem to be getting the hang of the clips. Back along the wobbly rope and then down onto the platform. I was now looking forward to getting down to the deck and I imagined coming down would be more difficult than going up. But it wasn't.

The most frightening part was coming off the platform onto the ratlines. I confess that I was now starting to lose confidence in my co-ordination as I kept forgetting to lower my handholds as I lowered my feet, as I hung on for grim death.

Once onto the main ratlines, I was OK and all I had to face was swinging back onto the deck. Many of the crew awaited my safe return and I received much applause as I touched the deck.

“Did I enjoy it?”

Enjoy is not the word I would use but I was 100% glad that I had done it. Adam told me that I had done much more than most first timers and at sea and in force four wind. ‘Oh wow’.

I should say that Ellen at the end of the voyage climbed unaided right to the very top of the mainmast and touched the button. A very brave lady. I remember also on about Day 3 Ellen said to me ‘*I think we should have a concert party*’. Who will organise it I asked ‘*I will*’ she said and 7 days later anchored off a sandy beach in Spain we had 2 hours of wonderful entertainment performed by every member of the voyage crew and she organised everything.

Steering a Tall Ship (or any boat for that matter) when you are blind can be quite a challenge. Beside the large spoked wheel on the upper bridge is a voice synthesiser that calls out every 3 seconds the compass bearing that the ship is heading. So imagine that you have been told to steer 180 (Due South) and the synthesiser says 178....176...175... Which way do you turn the wheel? Easy if you have sight but having to concentrate for 30 minutes and steer a straight course is not easy when you cannot see the compass.

The stories of personal achievement with JST are many, I feel honoured to be involved and able to do what I do and meet so many fine and brave people.

David Horton, resident of Checkendon 12th December 2004