



ROLEX MIDDLE SEA RACE 2013

REFLECTIONS OF A JOURNEY

ROBERTO PERRONE CAPANO ON BOARD OF "LE COQ HARDI" ITA 4149

To me, the term 'the living sea' is not just a slogan. It is an experience that evokes several emotions that can only be felt after one has completed the 600 miles of the Rolex Middle Sea Race (RMSR).

The Grand Harbour is the incredible natural port of Malta, something right out of a fairytale. It was the naval base of the British fleet and has a wonderful framework of creeks and inlets. The new premises of the Royal Malta Yacht Club, is the centre of lively activity created by the buzzing and spontaneous participation of the 90 registered boats and 83 participants, all sub-divided into 6 classes for approximately 1000 sailors from 15 different nations, creating a classic event that can only be described as the Queen of all races in the Mediterranean. While it is somewhat less of a celebrated Offshore Race than the Fastnet or the Sidney Hobart, it is without a doubt the most beautiful and picturesque course that exists, set out over 3 seas, the Ionian, the Tyrrhenian and the Sicilian Channel. On to Capo Gallo and the San Vito lo Capo, followed by Erice, Trapani and the Egadi islands and towards the end, the Pelagie islands, Panetelleria, Linosa and Lampedusa, better known as the natural marker buoys of the course, that grace you with their incredible beauty during the daylight hours of our challenge.

The 2012 edition was dominated by a waxing moon and by light winds. This gave in to fantastic colours brought on by the hues of day & night, surreal visions of a coastline complimented by the silence typical of a dead calm. At night, the islands resembled sleepy giants, so long as the might of the sea did not change the scenario, transforming them into dangers worth keeping your distance from. The tropical climate of the autumn period offered new meteorological risks with the clashes of the cold fronts coming down from northern Europe, while hot air was still present in the southern Mediterranean. Tunisia is located 60 miles from Lampedusa and the calm weather should break on Friday 27th and Saturday 28th. There was a time when the notorious change of weather occurred during feast of Santa Maria (15 August), after the classic calm of summer!

In the end in the classification the Goliaths lose to a David, the 46 foot *Hi Fidelity*, a yacht that excels in all conditions and created to the specifications of Neil Pryde who was her first boat owner and is the icon of many a sailing boat: a master of the sea.

I had started to put things in order for the race some days ahead and from the experience I derived from other editions, I noted that security measures had been strengthened for ISAF Category 2 races, under which the RMSR is listed. This safety standard is enforced for offshore races of extended duration not far from coasts but for which yachts are required to have a high degree of self-sufficiency. The 2012 race came with some new rules which included the installation of the AIS system. Unfortunately this was not an abbreviation for the Association of Italian Sommeliers (wine connoisseurs!) but referred to the Automatic Identification System, a tracking system which can only be described as something between a radar and a GPS which works via VHF frequencies. Next is the requirement to have an alternative emergency steering/rudder system which needs to be totally independent of the yacht's permanent system, which can be used in the case of steering & rudder failure, and finally a fire blanket, obligatory as a result of the recent accident at the Montecarlo race – thankfully without victims. On board of our yacht, *Le Coq Hardi* we added some more of our own safety measures, which included a 'man overboard

rescue' card that we attached above the chart table, a procedure we went over the day before the actual race according to Appendix D of the regulations. To tie it all up very neatly, the spacious area surrounding the Royal Malta Yacht Club, allowed the organizers to set up and offer several containers for the participating yachts to store tools and luggage: exemplary hospitality!

And so it went on, until the 20th October, the Start Day, when the first warning signals scheduled for 11:00hrs and 11:30hrs, were announced by the distant rumbling of the army's cannons, ricocheting from the imposing walls of the Grand Harbour, right over to the small port of Marsamxetto.

The terraces of the military fortress lying on the North side of the harbour were full of people, allowing the sailors to indulge in the intense feelings of the maritime history of this island forever connected to the sea; such new sensations for those who practice this sport in the Mediterranean. The small boats leave first, followed by the giants of yachting: the 100 feet *Esimit Europe 2* (former Alfa Romeo) playing the main role of Goliath, runs with its mast level with the great walls of Valletta, positioning herself to the south side of the harbour, followed by two 72 feet *Baltics-Stig* and *Ran*, which both play the parts of demi-Gods. Their lines are more similar to formula 1 cars. Carbon boats as elegant as they are sharp, ensuring that apart from the owner, the only crew on board are the professionals.

The formula 1 drivers tell us tales of freeze-dried food and a limit of only 10lt storage per head for all weather gear, foul weather jacket excluded. We used at least double that allocation if not more and we feel cramped. Our luggage included fishing lines, pasta, ingredients for cooking a Pugliese pasta dish in the oven, as well as vital ingredients in anticipation of a freshly caught fish: ginger, pine nuts, raisins, different spices. Nothing was left to the imagination. Our pre-start dialogue was limited to what light fishing lines we were to use. Such was our mix of updated techniques, incorporated into a life on board which makes us happy, as passed down by our families. We feel like a rare species on the brink of extinction. However, for the RMSR gathering, even the smallest of boats rigged up with biminis proudly position themselves next to the Formula 1 challengers. Here, one will find it all, including a tiny yacht with solar panels. Unbelievable is the unanimous comment passed on board!

Jochen Schumann leads the show, the sailor who represented the then East Germany in the Soling Class at several Olympics, winner of numerous races and then team leader of Alinghi, a myth in the sailing world. He must be about 50 years old, like the rest of us on our own boat, but he maneuvers *Esimit* with the ease and strength of a much younger man. This *Esimit* seems to be constructed from steel not carbon, wrapped up in Baltic colours with technical equipment in microfibre. Cotton is stuff of the times of Christopher Columbus. Today Jochen greets us all, as he sails in control of the imposing 100ft *Esimit*, steering well clear of other boats as they cross. He will definitely make the owner very proud and rightly so. In the 80's in the Soling class, we rarely managed to keep up with him and I remember how he looked with sincere pity at us mere mortal sailors, pitched against his crew of silent state professionals. He is a prince sailing.

Just ahead of Jochen, at the fire of the cannon, is captain de Angelis on *Stig* with Lorenzo Bressani on the helm. But it is *Hi Fidelity* that eventually wins the first overall place, an Australian design flying a South African flag, with two men from Gaeta including Luca Simeone, who takes care of

the technical side onshore. The figurehead drawn on her bow is beautiful. It is a combination of the faces of Diana and Venus, with long seductive hair flowing in the wind in wavelike patterns.

Back to sailing: Saturday 20 October, it is morning, the Easterly wind blowing at 20 knots pushes the fleet quickly out from the Harbour. We risk a collision. Someone mixed up the colours of the class flags which identify the various starting groups! It seems that the start will be 20 minutes earlier than anticipated, using the blue flag? Our doubts soon evaporate when the flag is hoisted high above the bastions.

Only *Esimit Europe 2*, playing the giant, first makes way for the "young" then cracks her sheets and glides away off wind, the dirty wind of the smaller yachts hardly affecting her high sails. We sail on for 3 miles under spinnaker to the North-West, reaching the second buoy with only 9 knots and then close hauled until sunset in the direction of Capo Passero, the South East corner of Sicily.

Slowly the calm claims the entire fleet and it will take 36 hours for the 'small' 40ft boats to round Stromboli. Half a knot, a bit more a bit less, the display shows less than 1 knot for several hours. The only breeze in sight is being made by the RMSR helicopter and so we invite him to stay next to us, but it flies away like a bee searching for fertile flowers!

Patience becomes a required quality for the sailors, while the windex starts asking where the lord of all winds has disappeared to. Aboard we turn to SOG and LOG which are not word games, but the means to evaluate the effects of currents measuring the boat speed through a small propeller held under water which in turn is compared to data from a satellite. The helmsman sighs as his rest period arrives like oxygen to a diver when he surfaces from a dive.

We are divided into 3 shifts: 2 hours on duty for each member and 2 hours on standby and 2 for rest. Waking up is not easy, but it is always sweet when you sail with passion and without risk. The dead of calm that follows us into the 3rd day, sees us together with a part of the fleet sailing somewhere high up between Stromboli and Trapani, praying for the North-West breeze (Maestrale) which gave way instead to silence and other sights. Stromboli was rumbling and by day one can see clouds of gas that rise from its fumaroles and the occasional small avalanche of stones. By night it is lava and fire.

The tired eye can easily confuse the light of stars in the sky reflected on the calm sea for the lights of plankton and a group of jellyfish. Falling into the sea would be painful since their filaments are extremely long, such a far cry from the pleasant design on *Hi Fidelity's* hull!

At sunrise the calm sea of the Eolie islands made room for a dance put on by a school of Tuna, which broke the boring silence amongst our crew. We are six "uncles" who have been sailing together since the 80's and three of us younger members, well trained members of the dinghy school of the Circolo Italia di Napoli where we always race and are known as the St. Gennarino boys taken from the name of the Captain.

By the time we returned to Malta we had caught five tuna that were marinated raw with ginger and onion, or served with spaghetti with tomatoes, pine nuts and raisins. All thanks to the finishing touches of Gianpaolo our chef. Gianpaolo is the man with all the spices and music, that is, when he is free from his role as bowman & spinnaker king. At sea, our radio plays rhythms from far away Maghreb to the best jazz.

By Stromboli, 1-2 kg tuna are jumping out of the water at an impressive speed. These are things never seen in a city, the miracles of autumn. Then come anchovies, garfish, dolphins and swordfish that cut the water with their blades held up out of the water like a periscope.

Rounding Strombolicchio (little Stromboli), we passed a very pretty sea turtle that was sleeping but which swam away as soon as we approached it. The following morning we leave Alicudi behind us and after 72 hours of sailing there are only 40 miles left for our X41 to reach Palermo. Our decision to sail high on the course left us becalmed and when the wind came in from the NW, we lost out to the 44ft XPact, the eventual winner in IRC and ORC class 3.

The 3rd night of calm. At dawn Aurelio spots a whale just 100m off our bow. It blows water, making it clear that it is still sleeping with this "please do not disturb" sign, warning us that we were on collision course with it. It slides under the water showing us a beautiful tail, without creating so much as a ripple on the surface.

San Vito Lo Capo seems to take us back in time because as we pass the Egadi Islands it is the 4th night with light wind. As we approach Pantelleria the fleet is hit by a 40 knot squall. The storm jib took the place of light foresail just in time to save it before the sky turned black. The sirens of ships could be heard through the thick fog and only the distance that we perceived from that dull long sound kept us calm. By afternoon, a tornado passed our bow but the experience of the 2007 RMSR aboard the Cookson 50 *Cippa Lipa* - which eventually would take second place overall in ORC behind *Hi Fidelity* in this edition of the RMSR - had taught us to deploy the storm sails prepared with sheets very quickly. After the squall, in a light North wind we proceed in good time for the time limit allocated to the race. Pantelleria goes by us to our Port, like the frames of a slow-motion movie. This would be the 5th night with very little wind. Francesco de Angelis greets us via sms. He is already on the continent as Stig had crossed the finish line in less than 4 days, which is an eternity for a 72-foot hi-tech yacht. The record remains that of 47 hours as registered in 2007 by the US yacht Rambler, skipper Ken Read.

Lampedusa presents us with a sea teeming with fish, while the tents of the Civil Protection Division can be clearly seen on the Eastern side of the Island, exposed to the Libeccio (South Westerly Wind).

The 6th and last night is a match head to head against a J111, fought out between a dead calm and a light breeze that filled our sails without leaving any trace on the sea. Aeolus and Neptune seem to be so very far away from us. Perhaps they argued! The lights of Malta and the petagni (the small buoys of the fishermen) keep us awake. At 4am we are almost 2 miles from the channel that divides Malta from Gozo. The island in between them is called Comino and we are only 12 miles to the finish! We will need at least another 6 hours to cross the line in Marsamxett bay. Whoever had a 'wind seeker', an extremely light sail like tissue paper, certainly used it. We enter harbour after over 600 miles battling tack to tack with the Maltese yacht *Elusive 2*, the J111, the German *Rebel* and some other boat.

The high concrete buildings on the harbour point before the finish line and the old iron bridge of the Grand Harbour make it unnecessary to use the GPS. The audience ashore, lined the rocks and walls and clapped for every boat that arrived and that was wonderful indeed. It made us feel like marathon runners in the New York classic road race! At the end of the day, we finished 5th in Class 3 and the beautiful emotions experienced in this race shall remain with us for a long time.

"None of us remember an edition so slow", stated the smiling John Ripard as he stood with his dear friend Carlo Rolandi, the Honorary President of FIV, two men wearing RMSR polo shirts and who have spent many years sailing together. John is smiling, with eyes the colour of the Sicilian and Maltese sea. He is member of the international jury and was first name on the winner's tablet of the MSR on *Josian*, a legendary Swan 35, designed by Sparkman and Stephens and later sold to a Neapolitan owner, and therefore now she is a local boat too! It is the wooden winner's tablet you can see at the RMYC, a museum piece, a piece of history in fact.

I decide to jot down the memories of this race during my return flight home, high above Sicily inspired by the emotions the coast below instills in me. And here we are, on our way back to the usual working routine. Who knows what world we'll leave behind to the sailing youth of tomorrow and to our children? However, thanks to races like the RMSR, there remains an optimism and hope that these three living seas that meet as one, will always give rise to peaceful feelings amongst all.

I thank Aurelio, first helmsman and great master of sailing in dead calm since the well known 'Minaldo' times or the 'Soling versus Mr. Schumann' period. I also give thanks to my crewmate 'Albatros' for his onboard stitching of the code zero and for his unparalleled maritime spirit, to Michele for his contributions with his hands and feet, to Simon my partner who lived up to his real age during our 2 hour shifts, to Stefano the skipper and main master on board, a product of the Positanese School, during Amalfi's golden age, to Vittorio who is just back from his Master's studies in Southampton, as future maritime engineer, to Gianpaolo and Maurizio, the wonderful boat owners and producers of the RMSR 2012 for *Le Coq Hardi*, a small boat with in all of its 41ft glory. Finally thanks to Sara, from the RMYC for her welcoming smile once we were back ashore for the delivery of the keys of the container N°8 and the check out up until we boarded the mini-bus to return to Italy.

Only when we are here up in the sky do we encounter strong wind! The bad weather runs over Fiumicino airport while we sailors on board this jet are free today and our skipper is navigating using other communication systems. The flight was full, the overbooking of the weekend made it difficult to make any changes. Hopefully, John and the RMYC will therefore forgive our absence at the prize-giving. We certainly hope to be back and to meet each other again in Malta!

Translated from an original Italian text by Roberto Perrone Capone

