



*Cochise dismantled
Mid-Atlantic as seen
from Belle*

Dismasted Mid-Atlantic

It is a moment that any skipper dreads; a loud crack and the awful realisation that the mast has broken. How would you cope on your boat? During this year's ARC Europe, Swan 46 Cochise, skippered by Nick Eaton, was dismantled mid-Atlantic. With 866 nautical miles to run to the Azores and worsening weather forecast, the teamwork and organisation of the crew, together with the selfless assistance provided by rally yacht Belle, truly summarizes the spirit and camaraderie of World Cruising Club events. Crew member Steve Jones recounts their experience.

**30 May, 928nm from Bermuda
866nm to the Azores.**

We had been sailing for a few days in light winds, but around first light the wind gradually headed so we dropped the spinnaker and set the genoa and staysail with full main. The wind very slowly increased during the morning, until we had wind speeds of around 20 knots. It was looking like it would be an excellent day's sail reaching at 7 to 8 knots boat speed and after several days' light winds the sea was relatively calm.

Around mid-morning, whilst lying in my bunk I felt the boat fall off yet another wave, but this time there was a terrible crashing noise; far worse than any previous waves. A quick look through the hatch above my bunk confirmed my worst fears, the mast had broken and we were around 850nm from the nearest landfall – our planned destination Horta, Faial in the Azores.

The scene on deck was distressing. The mast had broken in two places: at the first spreaders and at deck level. The lower shrouds were still attached to the bottom section of mast and with the boom resting on the deck the hydraulic vang held the bottom section of the mast up. Chris, who was on the helm at the time, described the mast going

forward before breaking twice with the top ending in the water close to the port quarter. We realised that we would have to act quickly as, although there were only 20knots of wind at the time, 40knots were forecast in 12hours.

A quick inspection followed and it was decided that we should salvage what sails we could and disconnect the top section of the mast. Luckily the sea state was slight, but there was still an ominous crashing as the mast slammed against the hull with each wave. On the third or fourth attempt we managed to get a fender in between the mast and the hull, not an easy job but, for a short while at least, the hull was protected. Next we took photos of the damage to document the scene for the insurance company. Then, after struggling for over half an hour trying to get the sails onboard, the tough decision was made that the brand new mainsail and genoa could not be recovered. With brute force we managed to get the staysail onboard, but a combination of the size of the sails and the fact that halyards do not run at all easily through broken masts meant that the only option was to leave the sails attached to the broken mast and dump the lot. However, with thoughts of a jury rig in mind, we were able to keep the lower section of the main sail by cutting across it just above the second reef.

At around 1230 we had our first major success, not a conventional success though! We had managed to release the top section of mast along with the top of the main, the genoa and furling system, our masthead instruments and VHF aerial and the backstay SSB aerial from the yacht, all of which promptly disappeared in 4km deep water. We did this by removing the split pins from the chain plates on the deck or, where possible, pins in the rigging. We were very lucky that there was only 20knots of wind at this time and that the sea was relatively calm because the rod rigging of the Swan 46 is so substantial that conventional bolt croppers were not able to cut it. Thankfully apart from minor cuts and bruises nobody had been hurt in the whole exercise and now that the initial danger from the mast holing the hull was over our thoughts quickly turned to getting to land. It was decided that the best option for a rig was to erect the lower section of the mast that was about 15ft long and weighed approximately 75kg. Deciding what to do of course was the easy part!

Mid afternoon, after much careful investigation, we had the pieces in place for our plan. The mast luckily was just the right size to allow the spinnaker pole to slide inside and as the mast was keel stepped it would then go inside the section of mast below the deck and provide support for the mast. We put a strop, protected from fraying by plastic tube, around the top of the mast and to this we connected the stays and blocks for the halyards. The plan was to raise the mast using the forestay and forward rope shrouds through turning blocks to some of the many deck winches. Now all that remained was the difficult job of actually raising it on an increasingly unstable deck.

At dusk, having been carefully lifted, guided and winched it into position, the 15ft section of broken mast finally stood proudly vertical above the deck in the fading light, secured with the remaining lowers, a rope forestay 4 rope stays and 2 backstays. Having lost one mast we were keen not to lose another! We raised the storm jib as a trysail and set a course towards Horta knowing that 40 knots of wind was forecast to be with us within a few hours.

31 May, 826nm from the Azores

During the night the forecasted wind arrived and blew a full 40 knots for most of the night bringing with it huge waves. Although this made living conditions difficult, at least the wind direction was ideal for us to make good progress towards Horta. Our first day of sailing with the jury rig had brought us 94nm closer to safety with mostly 4 to 5 knots on the log and a top of 10 knots on one particularly large wave. However, as the storm abated and our boat speed gradually dropped to 2 knots and our progress slowed.

We had managed to e-mail World Cruising Club using our Inmarsat C system to inform them of our situation. Whilst we are now ship-shape and in no immediate danger, we were in dire need of diesel fuel having only around 200 litres left on board. A light weather system was forecast to arrive within 48 hours and we would need extra fuel if we were to motor through the notorious Azores High. A fleet message was sent by rally control, and to our relief, a response quickly came from Belle, the largest yacht in the fleet. She was close by and had generously offered to divert and transfer spare fuel to us. We were all very relieved by this excellent news!

1 June, 732nm from the Azores

Late morning and Dave spotted the huge dark sails of Belle passing to leeward of us against an overcast sky. A quick exchange on the VHF followed – one requirement of the rally is that all yachts carry an emergency antenna – and we saw them tack over to meet us. We were all very pleased to see them! It was soon agreed that Belle would launch their RIB and transfer the fuel, around 200 litres from Belle's capacious 900 litre tanks, using four 20l jerry cans. After a busy afternoon's work we had full tanks and in an act of extreme generosity Belle's skipper George Gamble offered to stay with us for a further day and refuel us again, which would then enable us to motor nearly all the way.

Next morning, Belle left us to sail into the distance, but not before they had given us some further gifts along with the fuel – a fresh loaf of bread, a nice bottle of French red wine and an infamous rubber chicken stolen from fleet favourite Brigand!

After seeing Belle disappear we motored straight towards Horta, we set our minds to creating a better jury rig. Moving the storm jib to the forestay we cut the remnants of the mainsail into a useable sail and set it on the mainsail track. Over the next few days we sailed when we could make over 3knots and motor sailed when we couldn't make this until we reached a point when we knew that we had ample fuel to motor for the remaining distance.

On the morning of 6 June, with only 120nm to Horta, we received the latest weather forecast: 50-knot northerly winds expected within 24 hours. Skipper Nick Eaton decided that we could not continue on our planned course, as we would arrive at Horta in the worst of the storm. And so, though agonizingly close to land and safety, he decided that we must sail due west for 12 hours and then east for 12 hours to miss the worst of the weather, staying as far upwind as the rig will allow. A long and frustrating 24-hour battle to stay upwind under only storm jib followed, with each large wave swinging the bows south away from the wind.

The next day brought much better conditions and with the forecast looking favourable we restarted the engine and continued towards Horta. We later found out that Horta had been hit with the full force of the gale, causing damage to pontoons and yachts in the marina.

June 8, our final day at sea and the island of Faial gradually appeared from the grey early morning gloom, its peak hidden by cloud. After sighting the island we still had more miles to go and it was mid-afternoon before we finally docked in Horta, extremely happy and relieved to be on shore again and looking forward to some Azorean hospitality!



▼ Cochise arriving in Horta

Lessons Learned

1. Being involved in an organised event helped us hugely with the rally organisers able to contact yachts around us that were out of range of our VHF radio. This enabled Belle to find and transfer to us the fuel that we needed, invaluable assistance that otherwise would have been near enough impossible to organize.
2. Having lost our backstay, we could no longer use our SSB radio. Having a satellite system as well meant we had a backup and could still communicate with the outside world. If relying solely on SSB radio yachts should consider carrying an emergency antenna for the SSB.
3. Bolt croppers are difficult to use with larger rod rigging. Different types of cutters such as "Shoot-it" should definitely be considered if undertaking this kind of journey.
4. Storm trysail, Cochise relied upon a deep third reef in the main instead of a trysail, but in retrospect a trysail would have been a very useful for use in a jury rig.

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4 Barnack Centre, Blakey Road, Salisbury, SP1 2LP, UK
Telephone: +44 (0)1722 416106 Facsimile: +44 (0)1722 324455
E-mail: info@admiralyacht.com Web site: www.admiralyacht.com