Extended Cruising in the Caribbean
Installment 3 – Outbound Passage

We were scheduled to leave North Point Marina in Rock Hall, MD on Nov. 1 to begin the sail to the Caribbean aboard my Beneteau 445 but hurricane Noel that came up the Atlantic at that time forced us to delay 2 days. We finally left at 10:00 on Saturday, 3 Nov. and sailed directly to Norfolk. We exited the mouth of the bay through the bridge tunnel complex at 10:00 on Sunday, 4 Nov., just beating the 70+ boats in the Caribbean 1500 Rally out of the bay as they started at noon. We sailed down the coast to do our Gulf Stream crossing at the entry point (35 35.0 N, 074 50.0 W) recommended by Commander Weather who we were using for weather and routing service. The first night we saw the Carib1500 fleet lights stretched out like a parade behind us. Most of them went more easterly so by the second night we had lost contact with them.

The crossing of the Gulf Stream was reasonably smooth with light air following the passage of the hurricane. However, there was a huge eddy in the Stream that was against us for almost 3 days. It appeared to be between 1 and 3 knots. Once across the stream we had the wind off our stern quarter and it built to 25 – 30 knots and stayed off the quarter making for a modestly uncomfortable sail with the swell coming more off our beam. The weather deteriorated with a series of squalls overtaking us with winds topping 35 knots. I have been sailing over 35 years and have never sighted a water spout but on one day we sighted 5. These are the water equivalent of tornados so they certainly attracted our attention! The picture shows one that came all the way down to the water.

Figure 1 Water Spout from Cloud to Sea

One particularly nasty squall had winds that I saw register 53 knots on the wind instrument and it went higher but I had to concentrate on the wind direction indicator at the top of the mast to avoid an accidental gybe as the wind direction was quickly changing as much as 40 degrees. I estimate that the wind exceeded 65 knots for what felt like three days but was actually only about half hour. After the excitement was down to a dull roar we sighted a large cruise ship and called her on the VHF to ensure that they had a visual and radar sighting on us in the driving rain. The cruise ship responded “This is the QM2 and we have you on our radar. It appears that your mast is still up as we are receiving your radio signal quite clearly”. We thanked them for the confirmation as it was still raining so hard it was difficult to see the top of the mast! One of the crew who was off watch at the time slept through the entire episode and now refers to it as “the alleged 55 knot squall and encounter with the Queen Mary 2”. I have often said that the thing that I value most highly with off shore crew is their ability to

sleep when they are off watch as this keeps them fresh for their watch standing. However, this seemed to me to be a rather extreme case of sleep capability!

The next morning our damage assessment revealed that the cotter pin that holds the pin in the gooseneck fitting (holds the boom on to the mast) had sheared allowing the pin to drop a few inches before the stresses bent it preventing it from dropping completely out. This was quite fortunate since the boom would have been unattached if the pin had dropped completely out and we would likely have lost at least the mainsail if not the entire rigging. Fortunately, I carry a spare pin and we were able to use a hacksaw to remove the old bent pin and replace it with the spare. We also discovered a 10 inch tear in the mainsail with one of the slugs that attach the sail to the mast torn out. We had to drop the main and repair the tear by hand stitching. This took about two hours and we had to remove the slug from the sail track to relieve stress at the repair point.

Since our first landfall objective was the island of Saint Eustatius we plotted a course to Sombrero Rock then through Anegada Passage. We arrived at the entrance to the passage at 2200 on 14 Nov. and were greeted by 25 to 30 knots of wind directly on the nose. It is about 90 miles from the passage to Saint Eustatius and we spent the next 23 hours beating into this wind. It was truly exhausting. We arrived at the harbor on Saint Eustatius and were safely anchored at 2100. The captain then opened the bottle of wine that he had carefully kept hidden and the crew celebrated a difficult, exciting and educational passage.

The next day we met with the governor of the island and Joe Irr presented to him a document called a “Declaration of Interdependence”. This was to commemorate the delivery of a copy of the Declaration of Independence to the governor of Saint Eustatius on Nov. 16, 1776 by the captain of the American warship Andrew Doria. When he entered the harbor he fired a 13 gun salute while flying the new flag of the Continental Congress. The governor of the island, realizing the political implications instructed the commander at the fort to fire a return salute and this has been accepted as the first time that the United States was recognized as an independent country. The document we delivered lays out the mutual expectations between the governor of the island and an organization called The First Salute as they develop a plan to build a

Figure 3: Joe Irr and the Governor of Statia

Figure 2: From left: John Ingram, Randy Williamson, the Governor, Joe Irr, Donna Zimmerman

replica of the Andrew Doria to participate in future celebrations of this day. Joe and the governor both signed multiple copies of the document and they will be used in publicity for the First Salute Organization.

The governor then asked us if we would use our signal cannon (belonging to the Wilmington Power Squadron) to fire a salute to the fort at 8:00 pm to start a function that they were holding in the fort as part of their celebration of this national holiday for them. We were delighted to comply with his request and we got lots of attention from the diners at the restaurants along the water front as we fired a full 13 shot salute.

Unfortunately, the anchorage at Saint Eustatius has quite a bit of swell and sleeping with the boat rocking 20 degrees from side to side was more difficult than sleeping off watch during the squalls. We were glad to pull anchor on Saturday morning and head back north to Tortola in the BVI. As we entered the area of Road Town harbor the engine refused to start. I diagnosed the problem as a stuck solenoid and applied a small amount of force with a hammer and the engine started right away. We arrived safely just before noon and took up residence at the Village Cay Marina so that we would have access to services for repairs.

On Monday the crew did a great job of cleaning Windward Passage and packed their belongings for their return trip home. All got safely away on Tuesday and I then set about the task of repairing Windward Passage so she will be ready to receive family and friends over the next 7 months. Many of the boats that had participated in the Carib1500 were still in Village Cay Marina (their ending point) awaiting repairs. Several had been heavily damaged with torn sails, broken electronics and non-functioning alternators being the most common problem. In talking with the participants I came to really appreciate the value of the courses in engine maintenance, marine electronics, weather and navigation that are offered by the Wilmington Squadron of the U.S. Power Squadrons. I felt that the information that I had acquired through these courses helped me to repair or accommodate to the damage that we encountered.

Repairs are almost complete and I have been spending a couple of weeks single handing around the BVI while I await the arrival of family and friends for the next phase of this adventure. We will spend January and February cruising in the BVI then sail down island to St. Vincent and the Grenadines where we will cruise for the months of February and March. In April we will begin sailing up the island chain back to the BVI from where we will leave in mid- May to sail back to the Chesapeake. These adventures will be chronicled in future articles.