

The Story of "Charm"

A sequel to "The Home-Coming of Charm"
written by H.C. Gordon McCormick and Published in Yachting Month
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The Group Captain was amazed at the extent of the wreckage as he tramped along the south eastern coast of the Inner Hebridean island of Tiree, from Scarinish into Hynish Bay on a damp Monday morning, the 17th September 1945. It stretched for nearly five miles and consisted of parts of a hull, deck, sticks of furniture, flag pole, deckhouse, two gallon petrol tin (full), red saloon cushion and a charred rail board with the name "Charm" written in bronze lettering.

As Senior Air Staff officer he had initiated a coast and sea search the previous Thursday for some personnel who had not returned from leave following a sailing trip from Rosses Point, Co. Sligo. The four people missing were Ninian Warrington of H Q RAF Northern Ireland, his wife, a WAAF flight officer and a Flying Officer. He learnt that "Charm", a 46ft Bermudan ketch had been bought by Ninian and sailed with his wife and the two friends from Rosses Point on Saturday 8th September with Bangor, Co Down as their planned destination. The search was thorough as befits the services looking for their own. Coastguards, lighthouse keepers, lifeboats, Caledonian-McBride ferries were all recruited to join in and with the war ended there were a large number of aircraft and flying personnel available for deployment. A variety of aircraft took part in the search including a Sea Otter, Ansons, Warwicks, Wellingtons, Seafires and even a Liberator from Coastal Command.

Despite a report that a boat resembling Charm had been seen standing off and on near the Kintyre coast early the previous week the search proved fruitless and was called off when the wreckage was found on Tiree.

In his report, the Group Captain said " From an examination of the wreckage, I gained the impression that the vessel may have been blown up by a mine. My reasons for believing this are that the main deck had been blown away intact from the hull, that the nails holding the main stringers had either pulled cleanly out of the wood or failed in tension. This to my mind is not consistent with the damage to be expected from heavy seas or striking rocks." He went on to say " On the morning of Tuesday 18th September, I was informed of a report from A/S.R Boisdale to the effect that about a dozen mines had been washed up in that area during the past few days. This information, in my opinion, lends colour to the theory that the vessel may have struck a mine"

Thousands of mines were sown around the coasts by both sides in the conflict both to protect them and waylay the other sides' shipping. Subjected to frequent storms and strong tides, these mines would part company with their moorings and float to the surface. The Navy would try to destroy them by gunfire or blow them up. On calm days, their black casings and iron horns could be seen, but in rough weather or at night, they were a menace.

There were no survivors of Charm and only one identified body was picked up nearly a month later off North West Islay. This was the Flying Officer, who is buried in Kilarrow Churchyard, Bowmore, Islay. On a tour of churchyards on Tiree and Islay and no doubt other West Coast villages, you will find gravestones inscribed "An Unknown Sailor of the Second World War" so who knows if the others are there.

A passage around the exposed North Coast of Ireland is not for the faint hearted as there are many

hazards and strong tidal streams, particularly as Charms' engine had been dismantled during the war owing to emergency regulations. She was a well found yacht however, built in the classic style of oak and pitch pine with very strong timbers and iron on the ribs. She carried a tall bermudan ketch rig with a two ton iron keel plus inside ballast. She had been very well maintained by her then owner Mr H C Gordon McCormick who had bought her in Essex in 1939. His entertaining account of her voyage to her new home in Ballysodare Bay, Sligo was published in the September 1940 Yachting Monthly.

Ninian had sailed in all types of boats for many years and before joining the RAF had been a deck officer on the Clan Line steamships, so would have been well up on navigation skills. His wife had sailed off Anglesey and the WAAF officer had sailed a lot out of Torquay with her uncle. They took a full set of charts, sailing directions and tide tables, leaving Rosses Point early on Saturday 8th September in light airs which increased throughout the day. By nightfall it had become a southerly gale and they were quite possibly pushed further north involving a change of destination to Oban or the Clyde which is where Charm might very probably eventually have been kept. As Mr McCormick later told Ninian's brother "Had Charm foundered off North Ireland, the tides set East and West, not directly towards the Hebrides so that wreckage could hardly drift to Tiree. I feel sure that Charm could weather out a bad gale, and so I think it must have been a mine"

Tiree has an edge of the world feel about it guarded by its' Western Sentinel, the iconic Skerrvore Lighthouse. The beautiful long sandy beaches which have become meccas for windsurfers and the friendliness of its' resilient inhabitants are its' attraction. The prevailing Atlantic winds and set of tides around the sounds have made Hynish Bay the resting place for all sorts of wreckage and driftwood. A catamaran, abandoned by its' crew in mid Atlantic turned up there a few years ago, so it seems that Charm met her mine somewhere between Islay and Tiree and probably at night as one story suggests that the body recovered was clad in pyjamas and was badly burnt.

Mr Gordon McCormick was a retired solicitor who lived near Ballysodare Bay, south of Sligo city. He sailed Charm home from the Heybridge Basin in June 1939 with some companions. Their passage took them up the east coast in fairly fickle winds so that they had to work the tides as the engine gave trouble and was soon out of action. He noted that in the early stages it was continuous tacking without making much ground until the tide turned and whenever the sun struggled through the eastern haze it lit up a patch of sea, making the dirty water look yellow and sandy.. By the time they reached the Humber after a wet and uncomfortable passage across the Wash it was blowing a moderate gale and they were pleased to put into Bridlington. He was very complimentary about their reception at the Royal Yorkshire Yacht Club saying that while we Irish pride ourselves on our hospitality, their welcome "Bangs Banagher" was excellent and we were hardly alongside before being invited to make use of the club, spending several days "memorable for being of the happiest kind".

Having called at Blyth and enjoyed more hospitality at the Royal Northumberland Y C which was then on a concrete barge with a real fire blazing in the grate, they tracked on towards the Forth of Clyde calling at Berwick. The Forth and Clyde canal is 35 miles long with 39 locks and 38 bridges and by the time they reached the Clyde at Glasgow at ten pm on a Saturday night they were pretty tired and were not sorry that the Scots did not work on Sunday so they could lie in undisturbed. Short on provisions, they took a bus into town only to find all the shops closed except those in the Jewish quarter. Leaving on the Monday after paying the canal dues of £1- 5s- 7d, they made their way down the Clyde with the tide and had a glorious beat to windward, thrashing out to Hunters' Quay.

From Cambletown they sailed to Portrush and from there had a hard sail through Inishtrahull Sound under all sail, the gunwhale under, and were given cheery waves by the many small fishing boats they raced past. Reefing the main and taking in the jib got them wet to the waist as northerly swell rolled in across the tidal steam and with the wind increasing they lowered the mizen in Tory sound. Off Bloody Foreland the staysail carried away and had to be lowered as they staggered on under reefed main seeking shelter in Aran sound which proved to be too exposed so they made for Burtonport.

It had been a good test and gave them great confidence in the new boat.

The wind increased during the night and the next day and it was not until 6pm the day following that they were able to leave. Failing to make their tide at Rathlin O' Birne, it was very dark when they looked for the entrance to Teelin harbour on the north shore of Donegal Bay. McCormick says "There were no lights except St Johns' Point, seven miles farther on, the entrance to the land locked bay is so narrow, the cliffs so steep with mountains behind, that I fear poor Tom thought we were coming to the end when I steered straight for the blackness on which the Atlantic swell was breaking. Having got inside, it was only after great difficulty that we found the harbour. To add to our troubles, the salmon boats were moored off with bow ropes to the quay and anchors out astern which had to be moved before we could lie alongside at 1.15 am" . They were awakened at daybreak by the fishermen talking and wondering how they had got in and where they were from. On being asked to get on with their fishing to allow Charms' people to sleep, they pointed to a small boat just visible in the half light and said "Sure, it's no good, them's the bailiffs watching us"

Eventually the salmon fishers set their nets outside the harbour which although legal was not nearly as productive as within the estuary. By now sleep was impossible and thoughts turned to breakfast the only snag being that there was nothing left except tea and tinned grapefruit. The kindly fishermen sent a lad to the only shop, returning with bacon, eggs and bread. Later on a glorious but windless summer day they sailed on to Ballysodare. Donegal Bay was never so smooth and they sang "The Hills of Donegal" as they glided past Innishmurray and across Sligo Bay to Charms' new home at the dock at Tanrago, Mr McCormicks' home.

During the war, Mr McCormick sailed Charm extensively off the Irish West Coast in his capacity as an undercover agent for British Intelligence, keeping watch on several German spies who were suspected of signalling to U - Boats offshore. He must have been an excellent seaman to work a fairly big sailing boat out of those bays and along that very exposed coast, particular without an auxiliary engine and none of the modern navigation aids that we take for granted today.

It is worth quoting the opening lines of his Y M article to appreciate how attached he was to that area.

"The West Coast of Ireland is seldom selected by yachtsmen for their cruises. But what they miss ! Deep clear water, the intense blue of a summer day making more wonderful the white crests of the Atlantic swell as it breaks on the rock-bound coast. The islands - not those already found by tourists but some of those off Donegal or Innishmurray, with its' hereditary King and an excellent brew of poteen - the islands of Clew Bay made famous by the writer of *Spanish Gold*, and the islands of the West Galway Coast. The Bays of Connemara, when the sun is setting, her last slanting rays glorifying the Twelve Bens. Sleiys League rising 2,000ft sheer out of Donegal Bay. There is something too about the Irish folk who live on these shores. Amongst them true hospitality is to be found. They welcome all those who go down to the sea in ships - be they little or great ships. Their battle is a never ending one, their ceaseless struggle against the elements to drag a living from the sea has strengthened their fibres, like the desolate thorn on their wild, windswept shores, they are bent oft-times, but unbroken. Unspoiled, the world seems far away from them, it was once more to revisit the old haunts that Charm was bought."

In the summer of 1945 he moved Charm to an anchorage at Rosses Point, west of Sligo City. It was there that she was seen by Ninian who apparently fell for her on the spot. After some enjoyable trial sailing off the coast, he managed to persuade a rather unwilling Mc Cormick to sell her to him subject to survey which would be carried out in Belfast after they had reached Bangor. Mr McCormick offered to sail with them but this was declined as there was already a crew lined up. The Rosses point pilot took them out past the Metal Man and set them off, coming ashore in the dinghy, which is still in the possession of Mr McCormicks' daughter, and that was the last anyone saw of them. The only piece of Charm that survives is the nameplate with its' bronze letters that was retrieved by the postmaster on Tiree who sent it to Mr McCormick.

Charms' new owner, who had apparently only paid half the purchase price as a deposit until

the survey was completed, left a three year old son and had a brother in Scotland to whom Mr McCormick later wrote "Everyone here who met your brother and his wife are most distressed at the tragedy, they were much liked by everyone who met them, and I have letters from all over the country saying how sorry my friends are to have read about the matter". He went on to ask if the child would be properly cared for.

I was that child and I can safely say that I have been very well cared for indeed and inevitably, sailing is my first love. It is a pity that a career in farming has left me too little time to really partake, but now that things are a little easier, there is more time to enjoy our recently acquired Hallberg-Rassy 36 which we sail out of Brixham. There are lots of hazards around the Devon coasts for me to run into, but hopefully no floating mines.

There are a couple of twists to this story that should be told. There was a farewell dinner held at the Golf Links Hotel, Rosses Point on the night before they sailed. One person was delayed and thirteen sat down. Was this significant ? Then there was the story about my Uncle (Ninians' brother in Scotland) who was born deaf and dumb. His mother taught him to lip read and such people are often credited with having a sixth sense. Although he had no idea that my father was sailing, he woke up his housekeeper in Bearsden to get her to alert the authorities as he had seen his brother in a dream in the water off Tiree seemingly in trouble and calling to him. Although I have heard this story from several sane people, I have never managed to have it confirmed as all the officials had long gone by the time we got to Tiree only a few years ago. I do sometimes set off on a passage on Friday and have owned a green boat - am I tempting providence ?

I have avoided quoting the names of many of the people involved in this saga, but would be pleased to hear from anyone who recognizes any of the principle players. It all happened a long time ago and it is only as a result of a recent meeting with Mr McCormicks' daughter and the marvellous welcome and extra information she gave me that I am able to write this sequel.

I feel a great sympathy for Gordon McCormick who reluctantly parted with his beautiful "Charm", only to have it taken off and wrecked by comparative strangers. I just hope the money matter was sorted out !

Alastair Warrington. November 2009 Edited - September 2015