

Dramatic Rescue in DHF

March 30, 2009 – Outside the Gate



Heat Wave at the start of the Doublehanded Farallones.

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When longtime Sausalito resident and friend of *Latitude* Dave Wilhite was diagnosed with leukemia in 2004, he moved to Bellingham, WA, to be close to his parents while he waited to die. Thankfully chemo did its job and Wilhite, 51, is in full remission. "Three months ago, my doctor told me I'd die from getting hit by a bus before I died from leukemia," he told us last night. "I can't wait to tell him I almost died in a yacht race."

Wilhite says he'd been planning to do BAMA's Doublehanded Farallones Race since January. Since he doesn't own a boat on the Bay, he asked his old friend Peter Truce of San Rafael if he could borrow his 1994 J/80 *Heat Wave*. Truce readily agreed and Wilhite began preparing for the race. "This is a tough race," he said of the nearly 60-mile course around the Farallones and back, "and I never took it lightly." Indeed, he was meticulous in his preparation of *Heat Wave* and himself, putting together safety gear, working on the boat and recruiting an excellent crewmember.

Wilhite met Dave Servais, 24, while racing on Puget Sound. After Servais moved to San Diego to pursue his goal of being a professional sailor — he's a professional rigger and has taught at J/World — the two kept in touch. When it came time to choose crew for the race, Wilhite immediately contacted Servais, who immediately said yes. "We've only known each other a couple of years," he notes, "but we have really great communication and sail well together."

As noted in the lead story, for most racers, the DHF was a total bust. But a handful held on, including Wilhite and Servais. "I'd spent too much time and money on this race just to bail out," Wilhite said. So the pair stuck it out with a group of five or six other boats until the wind filled in. On the way back from the rocks, Wilhite reports wind in the low-20s with gusts to 30. A little higher than forecast but not dangerous.

"By a little after 8 p.m., we were beam reaching under jib and a reefed main," Wilhite recalls. He noted the waves were 12-14 feet with a fairly long period between, a fact the Coast Guard confirmed, though they put the wind speed closer to 40 knots. "Dave (Servais) was setting us up on a wave, reaching across it, when we heard *awhuump*," said Wilhite. "The helm turned to slush, the boat slowed and the wave we were shooting broke over us. Then we heard a cracking sound like a tree falling over — that was the sound of the keel ripping off."

The boat immediately turned turtle, submerging the pair, who were tethered to the boat and wearing PFDs. Wilhite had a short tether while Servais was attached with a long tether. Once the boat settled and they popped up, Wilhite realized his tether was keeping him too close to the water so he pulled out the knife he had stowed in his pocket and cut himself free. "It was weird not to be attached to the boat," he said. "Dave was holding onto the rudder and there was nothing else to grab, so I held onto the lifelines underwater. My hands are really cramped and cut up today."

It was then that they noticed why they had flipped — nothing at all was left of the keel. "It ripped off at the root," Wilhite said. "The only thing sticking out of the bottom of the boat was the bilge pump." He says he has no idea why the keel fell off — "It's not something you're prepared for" — saying there was no evidence they'd hit anything. Some wonder if it's possible they hit a large sea mammal that was moving in the same direction, but the question quickly becomes irrelevant when you're holding on for your life in the North Pacific.

Just moments after getting their bearings, the duo realized a Moore 24 — they have no idea which one — was screaming by about 100 yards away. They yelled but went unheard. "My first thought was, 'Oh my God, we're going to die.'" Instead of panicking, the two experienced sailors discussed their options. They had a knife and a compact but powerful waterproof LED flashlight that Wilhite had stowed in his pocket. But without a way to communicate, things would turn ugly fast.

Wilhite knew there was a waterproof handheld VHF in a sheet bag in the submerged cockpit. "I was presented with a choice," Wilhite said. "I remembered a line from *Shawshank Redemption*: 'Get busy living or get busy dying.'" So he took a deep breath, let go of the lifeline and *swam back under the boat!*

Let's pause for a moment to let that sink in. In 12- to 14-ft seas with 40-knot winds, this man with a pair of *cojones* the size of Texas and Alaska combined, let go of a perfectly good boat to swim back under it. If you're looking for a modern-day hero, look no farther than Dave Wilhite.

Miraculously, the VHF didn't fall out of the sheet bag when the boat flipped. Once Wilhite resurfaced, Servais, who'd managed to pull himself mostly out of the water, took over communications with the Coast Guard, calling a *mayday* around 8:23 p.m. Servais told the Coast Guard their approximate location — eight miles from the Gate — and that they were near a couple of Moore 24s. The pilot boat *California* was near the scene and began searching. Two USCG rescue boats and a helo were dispatched as well.

The crew of *California* were first to spot *Heat Wave*, guiding the rescue boats to them. "I was watching the helo work a grid with a spotlight coming right at us," Wilhite recalls. "I turned around and the pilot boat was right there. I wasn't going to wait, so I swam over to them." It took a couple throws of the LifeSling but Wilhite was ultimately pulled aboard *California* "like a wet seal." One of the Coast Guard rescue boats plucked Servais from the water a minute later. The time was 9:15 p.m.

"When I taught sailing on the Bay years ago," Wilhite recalls, "I told my students they had 45 minutes to live if they fell overboard. I was in the water for more than an hour." He credits wearing high-tech gear and calming himself down for saving his life. "After I realized I wasn't going to get on top of the boat, I just hung out and conserved energy."

Wilhite also commends the Coast Guard and crew of *California* for their amazing rescue efforts — finding a capsized, keel-less, dark blue, 26-ft hull in big seas eight miles offshore on an ebb tide in the pitch dark. Both Wilhite and Servais suffered hypothermia — Wilhite's being more serious — but were treated and released from the hospital the same night. Both are back at their respective homes, no doubt telling their story to many relieved friends and family. There is no word on *Heat Wave's* whereabouts, though Wilhite reports it was insured.

"This was the second toughest contest of my life," Wilhite says. "What's ironic is that I wanted to do this race to prove to myself that I was alive. It would have been sad if I'd died, but I've lived a damn good life. It wouldn't have been a stupid way to go." For those of us listening to the radio on Saturday night, and for those who know Dave Wilhite and Dave Servais, we can say that we're beyond thrilled that it turned out the way it did.

- *latitude / ld*

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