



**INCIDENT REPORT CONDUCTED UNDER THE AEGIS OF US  
SAILING, THE BERMUDA RACE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE AND  
THE CRUISING CLUB OF AMERICA**



*Photo: Daniel Forster*

**Abandonment of S/Y Gunga Din and Rescue by S/Y Desna  
June 25, 2024 (During 2024 Newport Bermuda Race)**

Contributors: Sheila McCurdy, Ernest Godshalk, Ann Noble-Kiley, Richard York, William Strassberg, M.D.

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## Executive Summary

US Sailing Association, the Bermuda Race Organizing Committee (BROC) and The Cruising Club of America (CCA) empaneled a review group to gather information on the abandonment and sinking of the sailing vessel *Gunga Din* and subsequent rescue by the crew of *Desna* on the 2024 Newport Bermuda Race to determine lessons learned that would be of help to others.

The *Gunga Din* crew discovered flooding in the early hours of June 25, 2024 on the Newport Bermuda Race. Wind and sea conditions were moderating to 3 to 4 foot seas after almost 500 miles of upwind sailing mainly in steep, short seas. The crew activated manual and electric bilge pumps and brought a high capacity pump on line. They found the source of the flooding was an inaccessible hull breach under the mast step. *Gunga Din* issued a pan-pan VHF radio call which the sailing vessel *Desna* heard from 14 or more miles away and closed the distance to be of assistance. Both boats also were communicating by satellite phone with the BROC, Bermuda Radio, and RCC Bermuda. *Gunga Din's* batteries were being depleted by the pumps after the engine failed due to clogged fuel filters. By midmorning and over eight hours after discovering the flooding, the crew decided to abandon ship and launched the life raft for transferring the crew to *Desna*. The crew of *Desna* was doing their best to figure out how to prepare to bring seven people aboard their 37-footer without a clear plan between the two crews. With some difficulty all the *Gunga Din* crew were brought aboard without injury and in good health. *Desna* continued to Bermuda less than 100 miles away with a total 14 people, many remaining on deck for the duration. The tracker on *Gunga Din* stopped working two days later.

The inquiry panel recommends US Sailing's Safety at Sea training include best practices for abandonment from a boat in danger and rescue by another small vessel. The training should cover the essential communications and responsibilities of all participating parties.

In most cases the rescuing vessel should have command of the procedures once the boat in danger has declared the crew is abandoning. The panel further recommends the persons-in-charge of vessels headed offshore have fuel tanks cleaned periodically for debris accumulation, and have the shipboard VHF radio coax cable tested to determine signal degradation.

## **Introduction**

Several incidents on the 2024 Newport Bermuda Race and return passages attracted the attention of US Sailing, the Bermuda Race Organizing Committee, and The Cruising Club of America. Several involved structural issues of the hull, steering, and rig, and others had communication difficulties. Most boats self-rescued, but three crews abandoned their vessels which eventually sank.

For this report, the organizations asked that the *Gunga Din* abandonment and rescue be reviewed by a panel of experienced offshore sailors who would interview and gather pertinent material from both *Gunga Din's* crew and the rescuing vessel *Desna*. Other panels were assigned to review the vessel's structural and communication concerns. The panels referred to the US Sailing and World Sailing guidelines for incident reports to determine lessons learned for the benefit of other offshore sailors—not to determine fault or the cause(s) for the incident.

## **Procedure**

Several of the *Gunga Din* crew were interviewed by Ernest Godshalk, Ann Noble-Kiley and Sheila McCurdy. *Gunga Din's* owner Robert Fye, a retired Naval officer, and his co-skipper Paul Cunningham, Royal Yachting Association Master Instructor, had both written their recollections of the incident shortly after it happened. Robert Fye and his son Dr. Alexander

Fye were interviewed on November 7, 2024. There were also photographs of the vessel's interior and videos of the rescue. Ann Noble-Kiley and Richard York interviewed Ron Bouley, a crew member.

*Desna's* Skipper, Adam van Voorhis, an airline pilot, and navigator Brian Brousseau, a marine electronics professional, were interviewed November 8, 2024 by William Strassberg, Ernest Godshalk and Sheila McCurdy.

Biographies of the review panelists and selected supporting material are in the appendices.

## **Findings**

*Gunga Din* was a Sweden Yachts 41 built in 1988, that Robert Fye bought in 2021. The boat had been comprehensively upgraded over the years and had had two surveys in the past three years—once after running aground and the second before sale to Bob Fye. Fye put together a crew of seven who all had Safety atSea training, and six of whom practiced together aboard the boat. Fye is a retired Naval officer who taught navigation, seamanship and damage control for officer candidates. He had considerable coastal sailing and racing, but this was his first Newport Bermuda Race. Paul Cunningham, a highly experienced ocean sailor and navigator, was recruited as the co-skipper. Cunningham was the only crew to have previous experience on the race, which he had done eight times. For many years he has been an instructor and trainer of recreational sailors for the RYA Yacht Master program and for US Sailing Safety at Sea seminars. Alexander Fye is a doctor who received his medical training during his time in the US Air Force. Other crew members also had served in the military. They took damage control preparation seriously. Among other gear, they had a reciprocating saw, an angle cutter, and a high capacity dewatering pump aboard.

The 2024 Newport Bermuda Race was sailed mostly on the wind or close reaching in winds from 15-20 knots. A prominent meander in the Gulf Stream gave the fleet a boost but also



caused the seas to be short and steep resulting in hours of strenuous steering and pounding.

The day before the flooding was discovered on *Gunga Din*, the crew noticed the mast pumping and tightened the baby stay and the running backstays. A few hours later the rigging needed further tightening. At approximately 0220 on June 25th, 2024, Cunningham heard water sloshing under his bunk. The two manual bilge pumps and electric bilge pump did not keep up with the ingress, and the crew rigged the high-capacity pump while they methodically checked through-hulls but were unable to find a source of the flooding. The large pump had some issues with the flat outlet hose kinking and its electric switch breaking, requiring Alexander Fye to jury rig remedies, including bypassing the broken switch and slipping a “stent”— about eight feet of one-inch hose—into the flat hose to prevent kinking. The pumps also drew down the battery which was complicated by the engine quitting due to a fouled fuel filter, although the Racor primary filter was cleaned more than once. The engine was out of commission.

At this point Paul Cunningham issued an all-ships urgent DSC VHF broadcast followed up with a pan-pan voice call to which they heard no reply. He followed up with satellite phone calls to the Bermuda Race Fleet Communications Office, Bermuda Radio, and the Rescue Coordination Center Bermuda which informed him that the yacht *Desna* had received their pan-pan call when it was 14-16 miles away and was proceeding toward their position. *Desna’s* crew used the play-back function on their VHF radio to be sure they had heard the transmission and *Gunga Din’s* position correctly. Bermuda only has facilities physically to assist vessels within twelve miles of the islands. *Gunga Din* was nearly 100 miles from Bermuda.

Back aboard *Gunga Din*, once the sun came up the solar panels helped the battery charging. With the water level down, the crew eventually cut away the dining table with a

battery-operated reciprocating saw to access a floor board near the mast step. Under the floorboard, they found water coming in through “slits in the hull” and “cracks extending to all directions.” according to Alexander Fye. The space was inaccessible for any meaningful shoring to slow the ingress. They also found the flow of water increased when the boat had forward motion.

Cunningham, aboard *Gunga Din* was able to establish handheld VHF communications with *Desna* about four miles away, and *Desna* could see the distress icon on AIS as a target for their approach. Once *Desna* was on site about 1100, Bob Fye consulted with his crew on *Gunga Din* and decided to abandon ship. The sea state was moderate, about three to four-foot swells, but still too much to risk bringing a rescue vessel alongside. *Gunga Din* launched their life raft with half the crew in it, and *Desna* circled and got a line to the raft. The raft was pulled to *Desna* while a second line was payed out by the remaining crew on *Gunga Din*. The raft was pulled back to *Gunga Din*, and the remaining crew came aboard *Desna* on a second transfer. All the rescued crew were checked for any health issues or injuries. There were none. *Gunga Din* reported being welcomed and well cared for by the *Desna* crew. *Desna*, now with a complement of 14, resumed racing and finished the following day. Bob Fye reported that the headstay on *Gunga Din* was visibly sagging as they abandoned. *Gunga Din* was left with the solar panels still powering the pumps. The last tracker position was sent at 1630 EDT on June 27.

*Desna* is a Tartan 37 which had also competed in the Newport Bermuda Race in 2022. The owner Adam van Voorhis considers himself a coastal cruiser with only seven years of offshore experience, but during his career as an airline pilot, he participated in accident investigation and earlier in his life had been an EMT, paramedic, and firefighter, all of which gave him a careful approach to boat and crew preparation. He had created a “quick reference handbook” about standard operating procedures and useful information for the

crew's use. The second in command was Brian Brouseau, an electrical engineer with a marine electronics business, who had made sure *Desna* had a new radio and coax cable to the masthead antenna. Most of his sailing had been near shore.

*Desna* was sailing in three to four-foot seas in a fresh breeze on a warm and sunny day when they received both the DSC all-ships alert and the voice pan-pan from *Gunga Din* about 6:25 local time. They said the voice was in such a calm tone that they initially doubted it was genuine. They had to use the replay function on the radio to pick up the position and other details. They contacted the Fleet Communications Office by satellite phone, learned of the flooding issue, and started sailing toward *Gunga Din's* position about 25 minutes after the first radio call. When they were about four miles away they saw *Gunga Din* on AIS and spoke by handheld radio. *Desna* learned that the crew was cutting away furniture to find the source of the water ingress.

As they approached, *Desna's* crew was surprised to see *Gunga Din* floating at her waterline. They agreed that coming alongside would likely cause damage to both boats. They circled but were not sure what their role would be and asked what was needed of them. *Gunga Din* asked what they could offer. The situation was new to everyone involved. *Desna* was surprised to see the life raft being launched. Paul Cunningham then told them that *Gunga Din's* crew would enter the raft in two groups and that the raft would drift to leeward on a painter from *Gunga Din*, and *Desna* would get a line to the raft and pull the raft in. The canopy of the raft was cut away to assist those in the raft to grab the line thrown from *Desna* on a second pass. There was some discussion about what the *Gunga Din* crew should bring with them. *Desna* had plenty of food and water, but in hindsight foul weather gear would have been useful for those living on the deck of the overloaded Tartan 37.

*Desna's* crew felt they were improvising "on the fly" and would have preferred to have had a plan worked out with *Gunga Din* that they could have executed smoothly. They thought that

one transfer with the entire complement of seven would have been easier and better with fewer lines to contend with. They found out later that a section of the raft painter had fouled the prop shaft, but had not caused the engine to stall. They were sure the successful rescue would have been substantially harder at night or in worse conditions. They asked the review panel to recommend clear abandon ship and rescue vessel protocols to improve communication and actions by both parties.

Bob Fye reported a curious incident. Forty-five days after abandoning *Gunga Din*, he answered a telephone call from the U.S. Coast Guard, who reported the Rescue Coordination Center had received an EPIRB signal from *Gunga Din*. The EPIRB had not been activated during the rescue and was left aboard in the ditch bag when they abandoned the vessel.

## **Conclusions**

1. The same incident can appear very different from different perspectives. *Desna* arriving on the scene did not know about the nine plus hours the *Gunga Din* crew had put in trying to find a solution to the flooding from an inaccessible source. *Gunga Din's* crew recognized that although they had pumped much of the water out of the boat temporarily, the hull damage threatened to become catastrophic, and forward motion accelerated the flooding while the solar panels would not be able to charge the batteries and keep the pumps running at night. To them the decision to abandon ship was obvious and prudent while *Desna* was standing by.
2. Two well-prepared and well-trained crews coordinated a solution to an unfamiliar situation and achieved a successful transfer of a crew without injury or great hardship in relatively moderate conditions for open ocean.

3. *Gunga Din's* crew may have been able to proceed to Bermuda if the fuel tanks had been free of debris, and the engine had continued to run. The high capacity pump bought considerable time for the crew to find the source of the flooding problem, but they also had to spend significant time keeping the flat hose from kinking, wiring a bypass to the broken switch to keep the pump running, and trying to clear the clogged fuel filter on the engine. No explanation was identified for the slacking of the standing rigging.
4. There is no answer to why *Gunga Din* did not hear *Desna's* reply to the pan-pan and DSC alert, but the satellite telephone communications with Bermuda Radio, the RCC Bermuda, and the BROC Fleet Communications Office were instrumental in the rescue coordination. Had *Gunga Din* repeated their position coordinates several times, *Desna* could have confirmed their proximity sooner.
5. Both crews credited the Safety at Sea courses, other survival training, and professional training that they had received as being instrumental in addressing the problems and forming effective responses to novel situations. Adam van Voorhis of *Desna* planned to add rescue protocols to his boat's Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) manual.
6. While Safety at Sea training has covered boarding a life raft from a sinking vessel. It has not covered how to transfer to a rescuing vessel, preparation for being on an overcrowded boat, or what to do with the vessel being abandoned. When two vessels need to perform a joint operation, a command structure and good communication are essential especially as conditions deteriorate or time is short.
7. The panel found that the logging of communications by various parties, summaries from different perspectives of the incident after they arrived on land, and notes on the health assessments of the rescued crew all were helpful to this inquiry.

8. The life raft transfer prevented damage to the two boats which would have been likely had they opted to lay alongside in three to four-foot swells, but the question of transferring the crew in one or more hauls needs further assessment. While having a crew enter a life raft from the leeward side of the boat being abandoned has been the norm, the life raft was pulled to the narrow and cluttered transom of the Tartan 37 to bring the crew members aboard. Perhaps boarding from the leeward side of the rescuing vessel should be considered under some conditions. The number of lines trailing from a life raft should be retrieved before getting close to a rescuing boat.
  
9. Doubling the size of the crew aboard a small vessel puts additional strain on the vessel and all involved. These crews managed very well under the circumstances for the final day of the race; although foul weather gear would have kept the rescued crew warmer on deck at night. Desna had ample food and water for the extra crew.

## **Recommendations**

1. This review panel recommends that US Sailing Safety at Sea training and materials include information on establishing general command and operational protocols for the vessels involved in a rescue at sea, which would become detailed when the conditions and circumstances of a rescue are evident. Guidance on the gear and supplies that a rescued crew should bring with them would also be helpful in planning for the days and weeks ahead.
  
2. US Sailing Safety at Sea may want to provide, or have an entity provide, a training reference for connecting boats to rafts or to supplies at sea. While conditions will make each event different, some common principles apply to boat-to-boat assistance at sea.

3. As a general rule, it is recommended that the rescuing vessel take command of the operation of bringing the abandoning crew aboard once communications are established, the situation is understood, and the abandoning crew has declared they are leaving the stricken vessel. A plan should be clearly determined between the persons in charge. This is standard procedure with the US Coast Guard and AMVER vessels. Rescuing boats without professionally trained SAR crew should be allowed to determine the extent of risk they are able to take and the manner in which they bring rescued sailors aboard.
4. The panel recommends that further study be done on the preferred means of transferring crew by life raft and how a crew should leave the abandoned vessel, life raft and locating electronics—like EPIRBs, trackers and AIS—to minimize the hazard to navigation and deter further rescue attempts by subsequent vessels hearing automated alerts.
5. The panel recommends that US Sailing and other offshore sailing organizations, through courses and pre-voyage training, remind those preparing boats for ocean passages to assure a means of a clean fuel supply.
6. The panel recommends that boat owners have the VHF coax cable leading to the masthead antenna be tested periodically to determine adequate transmission capacity.

**Questions and comments may be addressed to:**

USSailing, Richard York, chair, Safety at Sea Committee: [york.richardw@gmail.com](mailto:york.richardw@gmail.com)

Bermuda Race Organizing Committee, Andrew Kallfelz, chair: [Chair@bermudarace.com](mailto:Chair@bermudarace.com)

The Cruising Club of America, William Strassberg, MD, chair, Safety & Seamanship Committee: [baybones@gmail.com](mailto:baybones@gmail.com)





## Appendices

### Panel Biographies

**Sheila McCurdy** has sailed over 125,000 offshore miles on all kinds of boats, including 10 transatlantic crossings and 20 Newport Bermuda Races. She has helped countless sailors prepare for safe offshore sailing through US Sailing training and safety at sea programs, and has been a Safety at Sea moderator and instructor for over 20 years. She was a sailing advisor to the U.S. Naval Academy for two decades. Sheila is a past commodore of the Cruising Club of America, and holds a Master of Marine Affairs degree from the University of Rhode Island and a 100-ton Merchant Marine license.

**Ernie Godshalk**, CCA member and Fleet Captain, is past chair of The CCA's Safety & Seamanship Committee, past member of US Sailing's Safety at Sea Committee, and member of New York Yacht Club's Seamanship Committee. He has raced and cruised for 60 years in the US, Canada, Bermuda, Caribbean, transatlantic, Europe, and Asia, in recent decades aboard his 42 foot sailboat.

**Ann Noble-Kiley**, Director of the CCA's Offshore Safety at Sea Training in Bristol, RI. She is a member of the CCA Safety and Seamanship Committee and formerly sailed her Bermuda 40, Passport, along the eastern coast to Atlantic Canada and south to Bermuda and the Windward Islands. She recently spent 10 years sailing in Europe and in latitudes extending beyond the Arctic Circle. She holds a Yachtmaster and 100-ton Captain's license.

**William Strassberg, MD**, is Chair of the CCA Safety and Seamanship Committee. He is a member of the Ocean Cruising Club and has crossed the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, sailed high latitudes over the Arctic Circle, and New Zealand and Cape Stewart to the south. He has published articles on Skippers, Leadership and Vessel Safety, and is editor of the CCA Essential Passage Guide to the Viking Route.

**Dick York** is the current Chair, US Sailing Safety at Sea Committee. Member of the Seamanship and Safety Committee of the CCA. Also member of safety/seamanship committees at New York YC, and Storm Trysail Club. Owner of J/46 ARAGORN, with almost 70,000 sea miles commanding her. Circumnavigation west about 2003-07. Many trips to and from the Leeward Islands. Extensive cruising in New England and the Caribbean. Five Bermuda Races.

## Vessels and Crews Involved

***Gunga Din***, Sweden Yachts 41, at Start of 2024 Newport Bermuda Race



*Photo: Daniel Forster (BROC)*

### ***Gunga Din* Crew**

- Paul Cunningham: Skipper, Navigator, Environmental Steward
- Robert Fye: Skipper, Watch Captain, Safety Officer
- Alexander Fye: Watch Captain, Medical Officer
- David Snyder: Crew
- Geoffrey Gillespie: Crew
- Nick Lewis: Watch Captain
- Ron Bouley: Crew

**Desna**, Tartan 37, at start of 2024 Newport Bermuda Race



*Photo: Daniel Forster (BROC)*

### **Desna Crew**

- Adam VanVoorhis: Skipper
- Arianna VanVoorhis: Crew
- Brian Brousseau: Navigator
- Edward Sitver: Crew
- Isabella Blessington: Crew
- Joshua VanVoorhis: Environmental Steward
- Samantha VanVoorhis: Medical Officer



## Hanson Rescue Medal Presentation to the Crew of Desna, November 22, 2024

Nomination made by Robert Fye, owner of Gunga Din



Standing L to R

- Ron Bouley (S/V Gunga Din)
- Brian Brousseau (S/V Desna)
- Ed Sitver (S/V Desna)
- Adam VanVoorhis (S/V Desna - PIC)
- Isabella Blessington (S/V Desna)
- Samantha VanVoorhis (S/V Desna)
- Josh Van Voorhis (S/V Desna)
- Bill Gladstone (Presenter)
- Seated L to R
- Alexander Fye (S/V Gunga Din)
- Robert Fye (S/V Gunga Din - PIC)
- Geoff Gillespie (S/V Gunga Din)
- Sheila McCurdy (Presenter)