



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



*The Sinking of the Yacht Alliance, and the Rescue of her Crew by  
Yacht Ceilidh, Assisted by Yacht Banter.*

Submitted February 12, 2025

## Executive Summary

During the 2024 [Newport to Bermuda Race](#), yacht *Alliance* was racing about at 37° 42' N, 68° 34' W in a southerly meander of the Gulf Stream, on the second night, 23 July. At about 0248 *Alliance* “heard a loud, mechanical clunk” and the driver reported no rudder control. They quickly found the rudder loose at the top of the rudderpost and a large breach in the hull at the lower rudder bearing area. Despite all the extra pump capacity of the boat, *Alliance* realized the water was rising, and there was no good way to stop the ingress. Due to crisp VHF communications by *Alliance*, and the nearby boats *Ceilidh* and *Banter*, among others, *Ceilidh* and *Banter* were nearby by 0330. With rescue near, the nine crew on *Alliance* abandoned ship into their raft. *Ceilidh* continued racing, and they and *Banter* agreed to check on each other regularly via VHF. *Ceilidh* arrived at the dock about 52 hours later, disembarking the nine rescued souls and their own crew of seven. This was a significant, safe rescue, with no injuries to any crew.

Among the lessons learned and recommendations are: the value of Safety at Sea training, and practice on one’s own boat; the need for Organizing Authorities to stay abreast of the latest in offshore communications; and the need for skippers to have station bills and training in both abandon ship and recovery of people off another boat.

## Introduction

There were three boats abandoned during the Newport to Bermuda Race of 2024. US Sailing, the Bermuda Race Organizing Committee (“BROC”), and The Cruising Club of America (“CCA”) joined to study the abandon ship incidents. Separately the same organizations created a working party to investigate some structural events (the hull, steering, and rig) during the passages. Also the BROC and the CCA created a working party to determine some issues in communications between boats and the BROC.

For this report, the organizations asked that a panel of experienced sailors review the abandoning of *Alliance*, by interviewing and gathering pertinent material from *Alliance*’s crew and the rescuing vessel *Ceilidh* and the buddy-boat *Banter*. Separately, other panels were assigned to review two other abandonments: *Gunga Din* rescued by *Desna* and *Solution* rescued by the US Coast Guard.

The reviews of the three boats abandoned during the race and the return differ slightly from the standard World Sailing incident reporting. The charge for these three Working Groups of experienced sailors was to find lessons learned during “abandon ship” situations. But we did not evaluate the cause of the water in the boat. We were able to execute the

studies in this way, in part, as there was no loss of life or serious injury in any of the incidents. In concert with World Sailing's intent, the studies are not to determine any fault regarding the cause(s) for, or response to, the incident.

Clearly it is impossible to test abandon ship in real-life conditions, so these lessons learned are important to Safety at Sea training. Looking at the contributing situation (water in the boat in these three), actions taken and decisions made, yields very valuable material for training and for study by individual sailors.

## **Procedure**

This working group conducted interviews with the owners of *Alliance*, two of her crew, the owner and navigator of *Ceilidh*, and the owners of *Banter*. Additionally there are at least two articles authored by the *Alliance's* onboard journalist, video from *Alliance* during the incident and from *Ceilidh* during the rescue, and video reports of the two owners. All those are listed in the references below. Additionally, the owners have shared with us presentations and they have given, which also added to the findings.

A listing of the biographies of the review panelists is in the Appendices.

## **Findings**

### **The Sinking Vessel**

Eric Irwin and Mary Martin were the co-owners of *Alliance*, a J/122. They purchased her in 2020, specifically to sail in the 2022 Bermuda Race. Skipper Eric had raced for over 20 years, learning in the Offshore Program at Navy. He competed in five Bermuda Races and the 2015 Transatlantic Race. He brought along the structure and training ethos from his years in the Submarine Service. Navigator Mary raced extensively over 25 years, including two Bermuda Races. She is a Massachusetts Maritime graduate and had a career as a Navy Civilian Engineer.

The J/122 was built in France, and was 40 feet long, 12 feet in beam, drew 7.2 feet, and displaced 14,900 lbs. The rudder was a spade design. After purchase, the owners refit the boat extensively, including replacing the rudder bearings, and having a marine surveyor inspect the rudder and keel.

Irwin and Martin had a conscious design for their racing program, including an emphasis on safety, such as having eight of the nine crew trained at the International Offshore level,

training on the boat, standing plans for emergencies, off season reviews and meetings. Most of the crew had sailed over 1000 miles together before the race start. At sea, there was good crew management, e.g., all crew were kept informed of the plans and weather expected, and the crew was safety-conscious, e.g., PFDs were worn on deck with tethers ready (use required at night). They also consciously selected and trained crews to improve skills, to have fun and win.

## **The Rescuing Vessel**

James Coggeshall is the owner and skipper of *Ceilidh*, a J/121. This was the first Bermuda Race for this boat. There were four experienced crew aboard: Richard ("Rick") Graef, Watch Captains Austin Graef and Richard ("R. J." Graef), and navigator Andrew Haliburton. James had sailed in prior Bermuda Races, but had not captained his own boat on this race before 2024. The crew of *Ceilidh* was safety-conscious, e.g., explicitly requiring a standard of wearing lifejackets when not below, and being tethered at night and in unfavorable conditions.

## **The Buddy Boat**

Notably, Eric and Mary had raced with the crew of *Banter* in earlier years. *Banter* is an Archambault 40RC owned by Matt and Tori Gimple, Skipped by Matt and Lindsay Gimple. *Banter* had a crew of eight, and it was on its first Bermuda Race. The crew was described as well prepared and experienced. *Banter* became the buddy boat for this rescue, checking on *Ceilidh* every few hours by VHF.

## **The Event**

On the second night of the race, *Alliance*, along with many other race boats, had entered a Gulf Stream southerly meander, and was picking up several additional knots of speed over ground as a result. They reported these conditions:

- Four persons on deck tethered with life jackets with five below sleeping, including skipper Eric and navigator Mary
- Nearly full moon and 5 hours into the Gulf Stream meander
- 18-20 kts of wind out of the SW with TWA about 80-90 degrees
- One reef with medium/heavy jib
- 6-foot seas, with short, confused periods, as is common in the Gulf Stream
- Making 8 kts through the water and 12 kts over ground
- Approximate position 37° 42' N, 68° 34' W

The helmsman at the time, Lydia Mullan, reports that steering was not an exceptional challenge, and, in fact, she was steering beyond the normal turnover time.

At 0248 the crew heard a “loud, mechanical clunk”, and the helmsman told the on-deck watch captain that she had no steering.

At 2050 Eric and Sam, the off-watch captain, both of whom were down below, investigated and found the upper bearing ripped out of the supporting structure and sliding down the shaft, and the rudder stock to pitch forward with enough force to cause excessive damage to the hull around the lower bearing. The rudder stock was captive in the boat bouncing around and continuing to increase the damage. The on-deck watch captain confirmed the damage. The crew below also reported a burning smell, cause never determined.

Photograph of rudder showing the flooding water and damage. Estimated to be taken about 10 to 15 minutes after the collision.



Mary, the navigator, issued a Mayday, after a brief consultation with Eric. Mary began broadcasting on VHF, as she knew other boats were nearby, and in VHF range. She also started the EPIRB. Notably the EPIRB was a new McMurdo SmartFind G8 EPIRB, which transmits an emergency signal on AIS at the same time (a requirement for SOLAS ships for new installs since 7/1/2022).

The crew on deck stopped the boat.

Meanwhile, Eric and Sam started their 1000 gallons per hour (gph) pump in the after sections, then their 3000 gph pump, the first coming online within five minutes of the initial damage. It was also easy for them to evaluate that there was no way to other the hull, or otherwise stem the leak to save the boat.

Simultaneously, Eric told the watch on deck to ready the 10-person life raft on a cockpit seat, and grab the ditch bag. Although abandon ship tasks were not assigned before the race, all the steps were part of their training, and the deck crew could execute this on their own. Edward (“Eddy”) Doherty eventually became the crew monitoring the raft and bags.

Mary had contact with *Ceilidh* and *Banter*. *Ceilidh* was 2-3 miles away, although downwind, and she knew that *Ceilidh* would be coming soon, with *Banter* soon behind. Mary did take a short break from the VHF to call the race communication center in Newport using Iridium and inform them.

*Alliance* turned on all outside lighting to assist others in visual contact. *Ceilidh* reports that it was very useful.

By 0310, it was clear the water was rising faster than the pumps could throw water out. The boat was still afloat, but the ending was clear. Shifting to pre-raft activities, Eric had each crew individually run below and collect personal items in one bag to take onto the raft. As Lydia was the photo-journalist on the boat, she also collected her camera equipment and photographed the boat as far as possible. The crew also doused the sails to prevent drift and entanglements. Eddy was given the hand-held VHF radio, and he continued the communications with *Ceilidh* during the abandoning and while in the raft. Although the boat was still afloat, Eric initiated abandon ship about 0340 when he could clearly see the lights of *Ceilidh* near them. *Banter’s* lights were also visible at that time.

## **The Rescue**

*Ceilidh* was about two and one half to three miles to leeward of *Alliance* when she was holed. *Ceilidh’s* navigator, Andrew Haliburton, happened to be working at the nav station at that time. He observed the emergency AIS icon on his screen, and quickly contacted Mary, then called “all hands.” *Ceilidh* immediately furled all sails, as they thought the fastest approach would be under engine power alone. Importantly, the crew stripped all non-working lines from the deck and sent them below, to avoid a line overboard that might foul their prop. Additionally, they prepared by having the crew with bright lights on deck. All crew were harnessed on (the standard on the boat anyway).



Due to the position of the engine controls, the crew needed to have a man stationed there, coordinating with the helmsman.

There were many boats calling on VHF 16, and *Ceilidh* and *Alliance* sometimes had a hard time communicating with the cross traffic.

*Banter*, who was the next nearest boat after *Ceilidh*, and who knew the crew of *Alliance*, bore down to back up *Ceilidh* in the rescue. *Banter* assisted in keeping the radio channel clear of less-useful traffic from other boats. She also was able to brief Bermuda Radio on the activities to rescue *Alliance's* crew. *Banter* was about three miles to windward at 0334 when she turned downwind toward *Alliance*, rolling jib and dousing main on the way. *Banter* also was in visual range of *Alliance* when the *Alliance* crew took to the raft. At one point, *Alliance*, *Ceilidh*, and *Banter* agreed that some of the *Alliance* crew would ride on *Ceilidh*, and the rest on *Banter*.

Aboard *Alliance*, the crew were prepared to board the raft. They inflated the raft, and positioned it off the open transom of the J/122. In the seas, it took two strong fellows, Sam and Conor, to hold onto the raft while others boarded it. All were tethered to the painter when leaving *Alliance* and entering the raft. Eddy carried the hand-held VHF, and became the new communications crew for the duration of the raft trip. They did take three "bricks" of water and a spare bag of protein bars, as *Ceilidh* had suggested they may not have enough supplies for all the extra crew. All the crew reported the abandon ship maneuver went smoothly and without panic. They attribute this to their training as a crew in preparation for the race, and their experience in a raft at Safety at Sea training. They cut the raft's painter with a knife around 0340.

*Ceilidh* could see the raft, with the lights held by the crew on deck. Notably, they carefully approached the raft to evaluate the most seamanlike way to recover the crew onto *Ceilidh*. When circling, they noted that the raft had a drogue attached, and they called to the raft to recover that to avoid a possible entangle on the prop.

*Ceilidh* used a "throw bag" to connect with the raft. It took only two tries to make the connection. The throw bag line was connected to the raft painter and the painter recovered to *Ceilidh*. The crew found it effectively impossible to pull the raft to *Ceilidh* by hand, most likely due to the water ballast bags on the raft. *Ceilidh* put the painter on a primary winch and was able to grind the raft to its transom.

Again, with the sea state, it took two strong people to help the *Alliance* crew disembark the raft; they had to hold the raft and grab the *Alliance* crew, one at a time, when the waves

were right. Eric and Mary emphasized how important it is to be clipped on to the painter or to the receiving boat before attempting the crossing. The last crew was aboard by 0406.

Unfortunately, the upper tube on the liferaft was punctured, most likely by the swim ladder on *Ceilidh's* transom. All deemed it inadvisable to have some re-board the raft for a pickup by *Banter*.

Those aboard *Ceilidh* watched *Alliance* slip beneath the surface about 0530.

### **After the Rescue**

The *Alliance* crew described their welcome on *Ceilidh* as being very gracious. The skippers did assure that everyone was physically okay. The *Ceilidh* crew did decide to continue the race.

*Banter* agreed to stay in close communication with *Ceilidh* in case of any special needs, and stayed nearby as their racing speeds were close.

*Ceilidh* finished the race about 48 hours after re-starting, and was able to dock and disembark all sixteen crew about 52 hours after the rescue. Of course the *Alliance* crew could not help in racing *Ceilidh*. They cooperated in sharing galley chores, making sure the *Ceilidh* crew had the bunks to sleep on, and sitting on the rail when appropriate. The physical conditions were described by Jim Coggeshall as "a sauna" below deck. One crew suffered some seasickness. Some *Alliance* crew reported anxiety or mild PTSD from the adventure; this should be expected and addressed quickly.

Satellite phone and email, while not necessary to the actual rescue, provided a lot of communications after the fact, helping sailors' morale and reassuring family and friends.

As it turns out, *Ceilidh* did have a few issues during the remainder of the race. Mid-morning the same day as the rescue, the *Ceilidh* crew noticed their top rudder bearing flange had broken three of four bolts holding it to the surrounding fiberglass. RJ scrounged fittings from around the boat and, with just a portable electric drill, was able to re-affix the flange with eight screws that held enough to get to the dock. Nonetheless, *Ceilidh* did call *Banter* to explain that they may have an errant upper rudder issue, and *Banter* stood by, monitoring the situation, along with one or more other boats calling in that they would monitor too. *Ceilidh* had a ten-person raft with sixteen persons aboard. Additionally, *Ceilidh* lost their J2 halyard lock, making that sail unusable. They had to swap between a too-big jib and a too-small storm jib and reefing to match, several times throughout the duration of the race.



These events, plus some other rigging damage, would have tired and exasperated the crew even without an additional nine aboard.

## **Lessons Learned and Conclusions**

All crews are to be commended for their cool, patient, competent execution of the abandon ship and rescue. And, as these maneuvers are highly dependent on the conditions and situation, the crews should be recognized for applying first-rate seamanship. Much of *Alliance's* success came from their rigorous training, including US Sailing's International Offshore course, and the owners' requirements to practice on the boat and to learn the boat's standard procedures.

A significant factor in this rescue of nine souls was good communications directly between boats. Radio operators on the three boats were described as calm, concise, and clear. As most of the race boats were trying to ride in the same meander and therefore were well clustered, VHF communications and AIS signals were sufficient to communicate during the rescue.

It is important to note that the three skippers and crews were able to organize and decide who and how to pick up the crew in the raft, without outside direction such as from a coast guard. Yes, this is not a race for novices, so the skippers and crews were good sailors, but they did execute well.

Once again, we see the value of: *Look Before Taking Action*. The patient examination of the situation by *Ceilidh* paid off when circled the raft before making initial contact; the drogue was removed before a final approach, eliminating a possible prop wrap.

Regarding damage control, it is worth noting that the emergency pumping capacity on *Alliance*, while not enough to save the boat, did allow time for communication with others and an orderly abandon ship.

Skippers should pre-plan crew duties in both abandon ship and providing assistance events. This can include pre-assignment of tasks, such as who is responsible for which departure bags, or who is steering, or who is on deck with searchlights during a rescue.

Extra effort pays off. Sharp thinking – like *Alliance* turning on all deck lighting, and *Ceilidh* stripping the decks of unused lines - assured the rescue went well. More of these healthy habits are listed in Appendix 1.

## **Recommendations:**

1. Crisp communication went a long way to making this a successful rescue. As offshore communications are changing rapidly, race Organizing Authorities and US Sailing Safety at Sea should promulgate and share the best tools and practices regularly.
2. The emergency dewatering pump capacity levels should be retained in Safety Equipment Requirements.
3. 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.
4. Training should continue to reinforce the practice of assessment before action.
5. US Sailing Safety at Sea should consider developing “model” watch bills for abandon ship, rescue off a raft, etc. The Naval Academy bills may provide the basis for these models.

## **Reference:**

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jci14lLeACY> shot by Ryan Mann on *Ceilidh* with the approach to the raft, and the living situation aboard a 40-foot boat with 16 aboard.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCEnE42P9RM> an interview with the skippers of *Alliance* and *Ceilidh* soon after they came ashore in Bermuda.
3. <https://www.sailmagazine.com/racing/a-eulogy-for-alliance> Sail Magazine 10/26/24 Article: “A Eulogy for Alliance” authored by Lydia Mullan, crew on *Alliance*.
4. <https://www.sailmagazine.com/cruising/seamanship-lessons-from-the-sinking-of-alliance> Sail Magazine 11/14/24 Article “Seamanship: Lessons From the Sinking of *Alliance*” follow-up by Lydia Mullan.

## Questions and comments may be addressed to:

US Sailing, Richard York, chair, Safety-at-Sea Committee: york.richardw@gmail.com

Bermuda Race Organizing Committee, Andrew Kallfelz, chair: Chair@bermudarace.com

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

## Appendices:

### 1. List of good ideas for these situations, by the skippers and crew.

#### a. From *Alliance*:

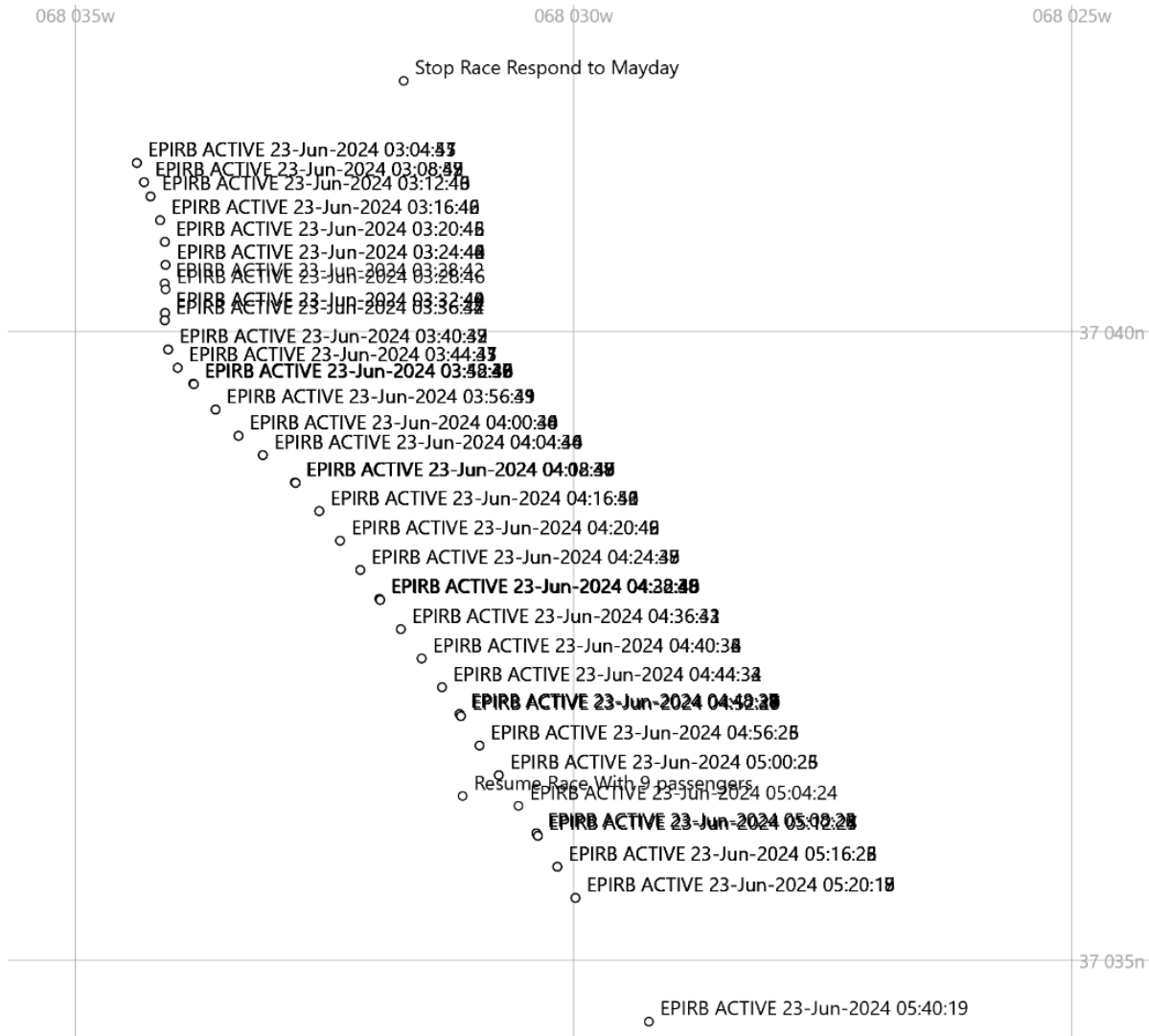
- i. Additional items to Ditch bag - rearming kits for PFDs, cell phones in a dry bag, consider adding emergency tooth brushes.
- ii. Have Race Communications warn other boats of abandoned boat and life raft.

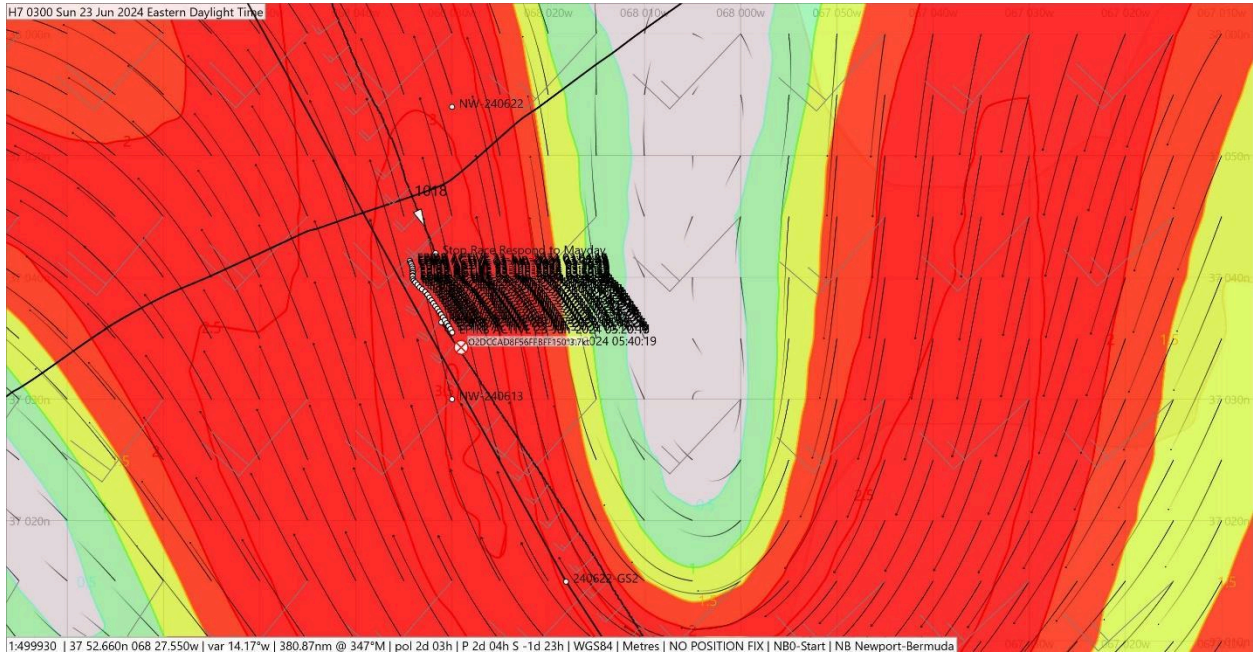
#### b. From *Ceilidh*:

- i. Strip the decks of all unused lines to avoid them going overboard and fouling the prop. Store them below, or otherwise out of the way.
- ii. It was smart to circle the raft as crew saw the drogue; the raft crew recovered it before the actual approach.
- iii. Although we talk of not leaving the boat "until you step up into the raft," in the case of *Alliance*, they made the right call as the rescue boat was nearby and the damaged boat was certainly going to sink. Similarly, *Gunga Din* was deemed beyond hope, the rescue boat was nearby, and it was still daylight.
- iv. It was important to clip on to the raft painter when entering or exiting the raft.
- v. It was important to have studied the rudder system, so as to identify and evaluate problems quickly when they arise.

vi. Monitor VHF 16 constantly, even when on the high seas.

2. Pictures of the track of *Alliance's* AIS/EPIRB, with *Ceilidh's* racing positions. Courtesy of Andrew Haliburton, Navigator on *Ceilidh*. Note, EPIRB/AIS unit was left in the raft after crew boarded *Ceilidh*. First picture is close view. The second is zoomed out a bit, but also shows the Gulf Stream's estimated path.





3. Crew List (from Bermuda Race website)

*Alliance 52770:*

- Eric Irwin Owner Skipper Cat1
- Mary Martin Owner Navigator
- Bill Kneller Crew
- Conor O'Neil Watch Captain
- Edward Doherty Crew
- Julija O'Neil Crew
- Lydia Mullan Crew
- Mary Schmitt Environmental Steward, Crew
- Sam Webster Watch Captain

*Banter USA61682:*

- Lindsay Gimple Skipper Crew
- Matthew Gimple Skipper
- Bryan Fulton Crew
- Elizabeth Gimple Environmental Steward
- Eric Gimple Safety Officer
- Eric Jones Navigator

- Mackenzie Fraser Crew
- Megan Gimple Watch Captain
- Peter Bacon Watch Captain

*Ceilidh* US12108:

- James Coggeshall Skipper Watch Captain
- Andrew Haliburton Navigator
- Austin Graef Crew1
- Jeremy Marsette Medical Officer, Crew
- Richard (“Rick”) Graef Crew
- Richard (“RJ”) Graef Crew
- Ryan Mann Watch Captain, Environmental Steward

#### 4. Brief Committee Biographies, alphabetically arranged

**Ernie Godshalk**, CCA member and Fleet Captain, is past chair of The CCA's Safety and 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.

**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. She is a member of US Sailing's Safety at Sea Committee.

**Ann Noble-Kiley** is 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 Captains 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.

**Richard York** is the current Chair of US Sailing's Safety at Sea Committee. Member of Seamanship and Safety Committee of the CCA, also a member of safety and 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. Eleven trips between the Leeward Islands and New England. Extensive cruising in New England and the Caribbean. Five Bermuda Races from 1974 through 1982. Over 55 years of racing and cruising aboard his and others' sailboats.