

## Minorca to France in Flicka Caraway

*This is an account of the last crossing I did from Fornells Bay on the North coast of Minorca to France in October 2008. I only just got around to finishing it in October 2010. This was the third time I had done this passage single handed. Sailing single handed is something I love but can't fully explain why. Of course, it would have been sensible to take a crew with me to share the watches and avoid the dangers of excessive fatigue. But I have to confess I prefer not to be responsible for somebody else's welfare when things get nasty and I enjoy the solitude and freedom I get from being alone 100 miles from land.*

*Angus Beare, October 2010*

It was autumn again and I was getting restless. Caraway was swinging about on a mooring in the Bay of Fornells on the north coast of Minorca. It was late October and the sailing season was drawing to a close. It was time to sail Caraway home to France again for the winter. I knew that I shouldn't linger now and needed to get on with it before the weather took a turn for the worse. The 200 mile passage would mean a 40 hour trip with little or no sleep; something which requires careful preparation. Crossing alone to France from the Balearics aboard a twenty foot boat in late October is not without risk but with a Pacific Seacraft Flicka and close attention to the essentials it should be trouble free.

*Testing the asymmetric spinnaker in Fornells and on a mooring off the village of Ses Salines*

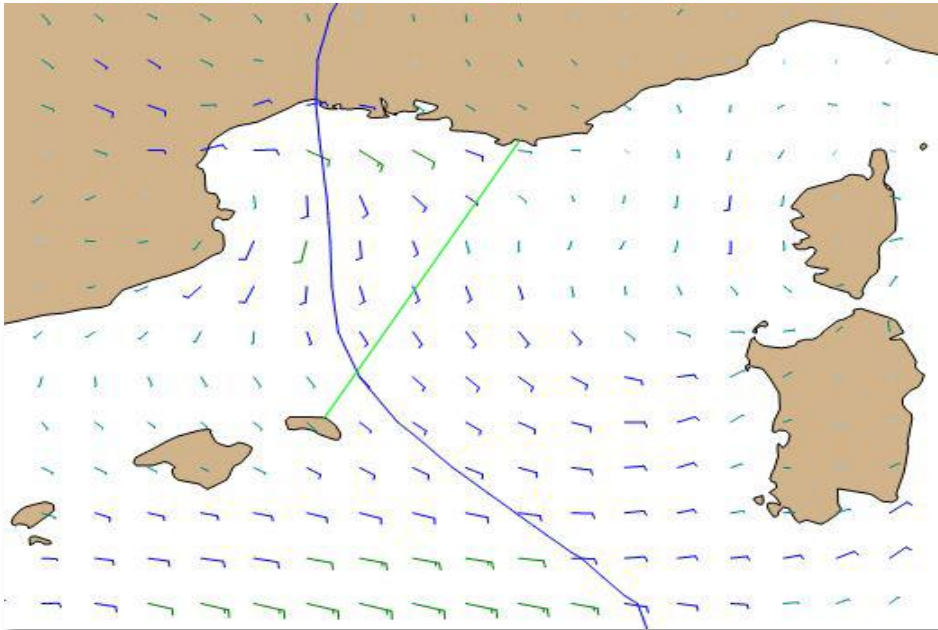


The weather, which can be extremely violent in the areas into which I was heading, was by far my biggest concern. The prevailing winds are from the North West with both the *Mistral* and *Tramontane* prevalent in the area. The Golfe du Lyons has the welcoming statistic of having the highest frequency of gales in all areas of the western Mediterranean. In fact, in winter 13% of all winds that blow there are of gale force.

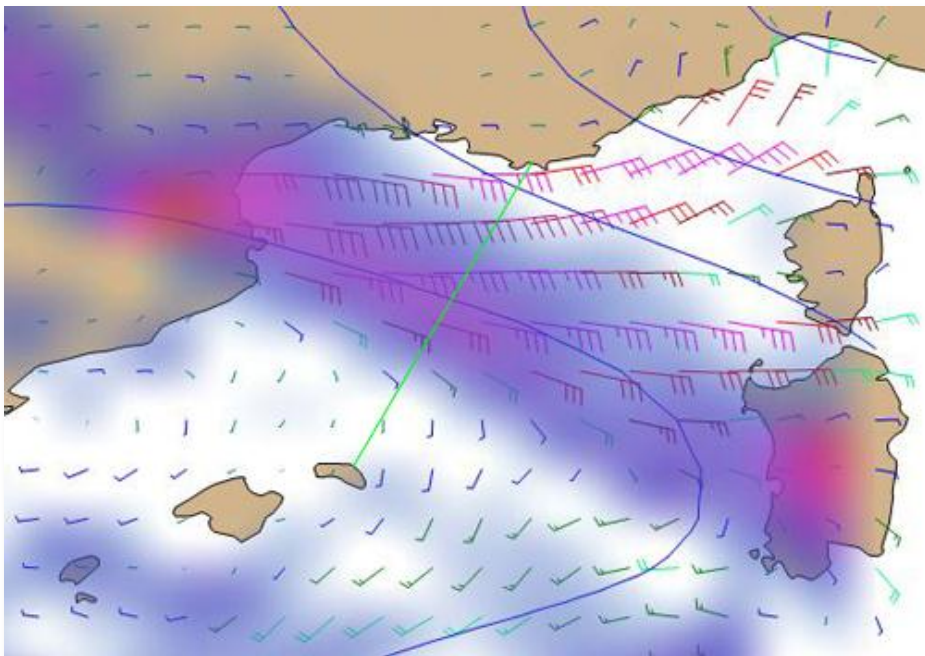
If I was to be caught out in a strong northerly it would be impossible to make progress to windward in Caraway and be both extremely uncomfortable and dangerous. Therefore, I would have to study the conditions carefully and wait for a favourable window. Ideally I would need two full days of moderate wind abeam or abaft the beam. I would only go if these conditions were forecast with a high degree of reliability and there was definitely no heavy

weather on the near horizon. If the forecast was wrong and I was caught in a gale I would have two choices. To heave-to and ride it out or to run for cover. Depending on the circumstances I could either run back to Minorca or bear away to Spain or Corsica. Whichever scenario unfolded, it would *not* be nice.

Here are some examples of October weather in the region into which I was heading. These are recent examples to give you an idea and not ones taken prior to the crossing. These were taken from GRIB files using free GRIB data and the free GRIB viewer tool.



*The green line shows roughly the course to be taken from Fornells on the north coast of Minorca to the islands off Hyeres on the south coast of France. St Tropez is further east where there is an easterly facing bay. The Gulf du Lyons is the large bay in the top left. The above weather is the kind of scenario I was looking for to cross.*



*The second scenario, just 24 hours later is an unusual strong easterly system with winds reaching up to 40 knots and heavy rain. It is much more common to have winds of this strength blow from the north to*

*north west from the Gulf du Lyon and down the east coast of Spain. The other islands to the left of Minorca are Mallorca, Ibiza and Formentera. To the right are Corsica and Sardinia. A fun sail could be had in a larger yacht sailing from Ajaccio on west Corsica to Port Vendres in south west France. Seas could be a bit frightening though!*

Besides the weather the other serious concerns I had were shipping, injury or sickness and falling over the side. With regards to shipping I would have to keep a near constant watch which meant no sleep or short cat naps. I had raised my radar reflectors, checked my navigation lights and tested my VHF and EPIRB. I also had a box of flares on board as well as life jackets and harnesses.

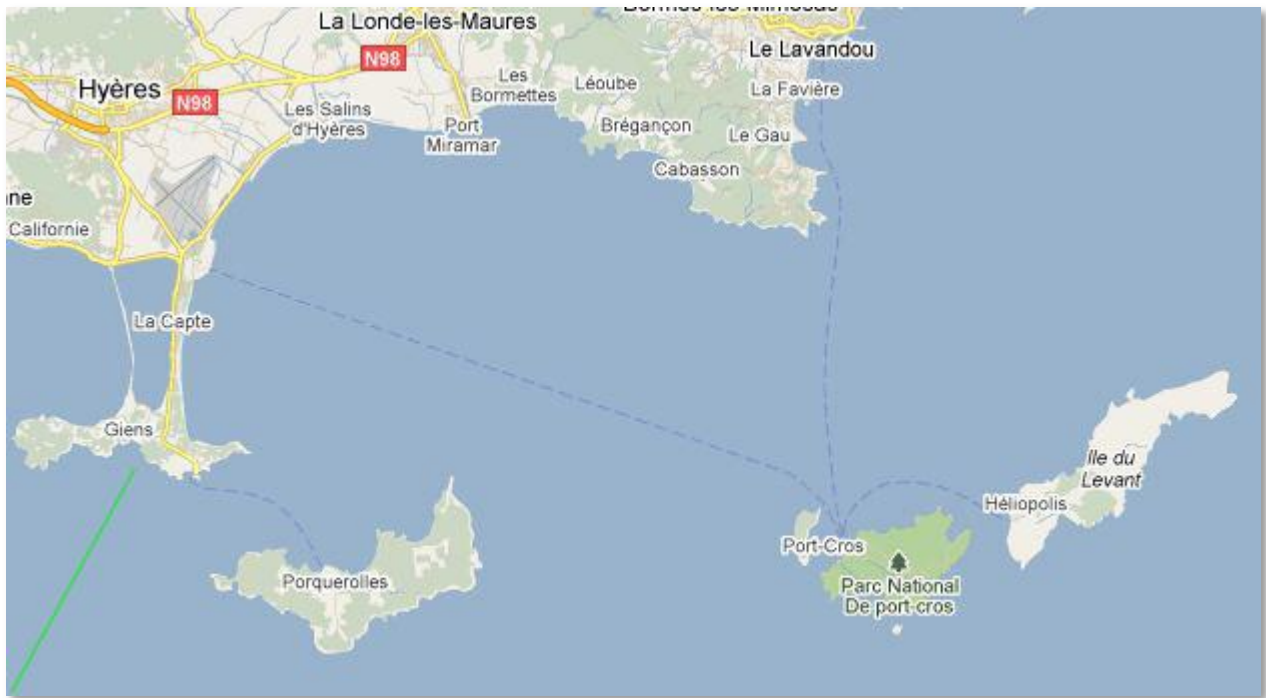
Caraway is also fitted with a C.A.R.D. (Collision Avoidance Radar Detector). The C.A.R.D. is a device which detects signals from radars and makes a loud beep when one comes into range. It only shows the direction of the approaching vessel in relation to the boat and gives no other information. Its primary purpose is to alert the sailor to the proximity of a large vessel. Of course, this won't tell you if there's another small sailboat heading towards you with no radar! But, thankfully, in my experience there aren't too many other *fruitcakes* in small boats out there at this time of year.

I had become more confident with ships in recent years as I'd had a fair bit of experience watching them for hours on various long passages in areas of heavy shipping activity. This particular crossing had never been very busy as there were no shipping lanes to cross so I only expected a handful on the whole journey. Plus, it was often much easier to tell what they were doing at night when you could see their port and starboard navigation lights. Nonetheless I was wary of complacency because at the speed they travel these ships can appear out of nowhere and be upon you in minutes.

As far as injury was concerned I would have to be very careful not to hurt myself. I have a comprehensive first aid kit on board but a broken limb or other serious injury could be very difficult to deal with. I would have to be careful moving about the boat and keep in mind to take my time and be sure of a good footing. I had put jack-lines on both sides of the deck and would wear a harness constantly. I had promised Nina I would clip myself on whenever I left the safety of the cockpit. This I did religiously because the idea of being in the water while my boat sailed off into the distance under autopilot filled me with a cold sense of horror.

Caraway has roller furling head sails for both genoa and staysail so I would only have to leave the cockpit to reef the main. And because the Flicka mainsail is so small at only 110 sq. feet it's very easy to reef. I was not concerned about fighting a thrashing sail on a heaving deck in 35 knots since I had done it over and over and the process was easy and took seconds. I also had three reefs in the main and a para-anchor with over 200 feet of warp if things got really nasty.

A good place to aim for when on route to St Tropez and crossing from Minorca is the island of Porquerolles which is approximately 200 miles as the gull flies from the bay of Fornells. Porquerolles is one of my favourite places in France and a short stop in it's pretty little port on the way home always rounds off the season nicely. Porquerolles is a place of artists and sailors with an amazing quality of light, exuberant colours, dusty streets and gnarled wind-bent pine forests. If you are lucky you may see an old French type battling the stony lanes on a weathered bicycle with a beret on his head and strings of onions hanging from his neck...



*The green line shows Caraway's approximate course and arrival in the lee of Presque-Isles de Giens. There were 25 knot winds with gusts up to 30 knots blowing through the gap between Porquerolles and Giens when we arrived.*

I planned to make way from Fornells at around 4am on October 26th. If everything went to plan I would arrive in Porquerolles in the evening of the following day, ideally, before dark. I had been watching the weather intensely for the past week and decided against an earlier window which looked unreliable. But now tomorrow looked like a good bet. Light south easterlies were forecast for the next 24 hours with the wind veering to the south towards the end of the second day. A possible beam reach or run might be on the cards but I knew from experience that this would be unlikely.

My friend Tim had kindly arranged to let me put Caraway on the sailing club pontoon at Ses Salines while I waited for a weather window. Ses Salines is a small village at the bottom of the bay of Fornells. This allowed me to clean and stow the dinghy in advance, making departure quicker and easier.



It was 5am by the time I boarded Caraway with enough spaghetti bolognese to feed the Italian Olympic sailing team. I'd somehow neglected to set my alarm correctly and awoke an hour late. This was a mixed blessing because it would give me less chance of arriving in daylight but the extra hour of sleep meant I awoke feeling a bit more refreshed. Usually, when I have to get up early and cross a sea I sleep fitfully but on this occasion I was not anxious about the crossing and was looking forward to it. I had slept well, it was time to go and I was ready. I kissed and hugged Nina goodbye gathered my stuff and made my way down to the pontoon. It was a very dark morning and reassuringly still. But there was a light breeze from the east which was encouraging.



I cast off and we motored over rippling water and out of the bay towards the open sea. With the precious bolognese wedged down in the fridge and the kettle on I put *Neville* (the temperamental Simrad tiller pilot) on course and set to work stowing mooring ropes and fenders before raising the mainsail. We motored for ten minutes or so while I drank my tea and set up the GPS. The red night lights of the B&G instruments gave a comforting contrast to the slick water and dark rocks of the looming headlands at the entrance to Fornells bay.



Before long there was wind and I pulled the engine stop lever. A gentle 10-12 knots blew on the beam from the east as we moved out of the lee of the headland of Fornells. I quickly unleashed the big genoa and sheeted in gently. Then I eased the main sheet. Caraway picked up speed and settled into a comfortable groove shouldering away a cross swell from the west while skirting nimbly over a larger swell from the east. I looked up at the stars as the sky cleared away from the land. I could easily see The Plough and various other constellations I recognised but was unable to name.

The forecast was for a warm and sunny day. I hoped this wind would stay with me and perhaps freshen a little. We could go faster but right then I was amazed to see we were doing 6.1 knots over the ground with only 11 knots of true wind just forward of the beam (see image above). There was clearly a northbound current helping us along which I estimated to be around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a knot. We had a full tank of diesel and an extra 5 gallons which I hoped we would not need. The water tank was full and we had an extra 15 litres for emergencies. The bilges were stocked with tins of food and packets of soup but I had enough readymade food to last me the crossing with cheese and tuna for sandwiches, orange juice, chocolate, cake and crisps for treats if I needed them. With the fishing gear I hoped to catch the odd passing Dorado or tuna but I knew I couldn't count on this.

As usual because I had not been at sea properly for weeks I felt a little queasy. I have never been really seasick on my own boat but I often feel rough for the first few hours when there's a swell. So, I did little but loaf in the cockpit and watch the water flow by, keeping a constant look out for shipping. I had a cup of lemon and ginger tea which I've found helps to ease the nausea. And I set up the fishing rod with a fat colourful tuna jig trolling along about 60 yards behind just under the surface of the water. I know from experience that the best times to be fishing are dawn and dusk.

There are regular fast moving ferries that pass the north coast of Minorca on route between Mahon and Barcelona. I was relieved to see nothing for hours and could relax and just tweak the sheets from time to time. I think the ferries usually travel overnight and arrive in Mahon about 9am. Perhaps on this occasion I was well clear of their routes before they passed.

I had been using the staysail while sailing in the bay and the halyard for this shares a winch on the mast with the genoa halyard. I had not tightened up the genoa halyard before I unfurled it. So, I headed into the wind until the sail luffed and went forward to deal with it. After it was snug I noticed boat speed fall off a little and no end of tweaking would bring it back. So, I concluded that in these light airs the halyard needed to be much softer than I expected and so I loosened it again and we moved back into the groove. Clearly, for Caraway on a light air beam reach the genoa halyard needs to be soft with a few creases in the sail luff.



Gradually it was starting to get light and I wondered if I'd hit a fish. I checked the lure for debris and set in back out. Nothing seemed to be happening there. Caraway was sailing along very happily now with *Neville* steering to the GPS. I checked the compass from time to time to be sure we were on course as I knew from experience not to trust Neville. Occasionally, astern the lure scudded over the surface of the water and then sank. I have noticed that Shearwaters take a keen interest in surface lures and have learnt to reel in quickly to avoid any disasters. Shearwaters are one of my favourite birds and there are many around the Balearics. Their flight is a joy to watch when they soar and shear close to the boat as they often do at this time of year when they know that only true sailors are about. Unfortunately I've never managed to get a good photo of one. I just don't have the long telephoto you need to capture them effectively.

Before long the sun lifted to the east and I could feel some warmth from its low rays. My fleece was slightly damp from dew so I brewed some fresh coffee to warm me up and sat with my feet up feeling entirely at one with the world. Two dolphins passed to starboard but they didn't linger. Off they went after a quick inspection to make sure I was sailing properly and that I had cleaned the hull to their satisfaction. The sun rose gradually and the sky turned pink and purple and the Caraway was bathed in glorious copper light. I took some photos including some daft self-portraits to pass the time.



I was amazed that we were still sailing even though we must surely be beyond the local wind systems of Minorca. I really hoped the wind would hold. It was just so much more pleasurable to be nudging along blissfully like this rather than chugging along under motor.

*Instruments showing our top speed of 6.3 knots over the ground on both B&G and Garmin GPS. The paddle wheel log (top left) shows 6.07. I feel there is some current heading north from Minorca. Caraway had a freshly scrubbed bottom but I was still amazed at her pace.*



Before long it was nicely warm and I was down to T shirt. I put some sun cream on my face and arms and brought up some cushions from below. I was just getting comfortable when there was a frantic fizzing sound. I grabbed the rod. Something very powerful had struck the lure. It had to be a big tuna. I gingerly tightened the drag taking care not to get my fingers anywhere near the spool. The rod was bent double and the fish carried on charging relentlessly. I tightened the drag again in an effort to slow the fish. Suddenly the rod tip gave out with a crack and at the same time the line parted with a ping. I just didn't have the right gear for these beasts. Disappointed I reeled in what was left of the line and looked at the rod tip. It was broken but still attached to the rest of the rod. I spent the next hour lashing it together and reset it this time with a much smaller lure. Hopefully the next fish would be smaller, although this is not necessarily the case.



Midday was approaching and I was getting peckish. I looked all around for any sign of ships and there was nothing. So I went below and put some bolognese in a pan and lit the hob. One thing I really love about the Flicka is that when you are at sea and down below you can still get a real sense of the sea. In bigger boats you are often way down below the cockpit and you cannot see out. You may as well be in a lurching dungeon. In a Flicka you can lean over and look out of the cockpit. Or you can pop up for a quick look without burning the toast. Caraway was gently heeled to the west and the water was gliding by outside and from time to time I could catch white underside glimpses of a Shearwater banking like a Spitfire.

I repaired to the cockpit with a big bowl of spag bol topped with melting cheese. I was just getting comfortable and tucking in when whiz-fizz-zzzz off went the racket on the fishing reel again. I dashed below and wedge my lunch in the sink and grabbed the rod. After a frantic fight I could see the shape of a small tuna nearing the boat. For its size I was amazed at its power and stamina. It wouldn't give up and dived again and again. It tested my rod repair to the max. I finally got it alongside and grabbed the heavy duty trace; it appeared finished and lay still. But just as I lifted it towards the boat it gave an almighty flip of its tail and leapt free of the hook and was gone in a flash of blue and silver! What a disappointment; he was the perfect size for a dinner with some left over for the next day. Fresh tuna is my favourite fish and only the fact that this beautiful fish could live another day could comfort me from missing out on such a rare treat. I returned to my pasta which I had to re-heat in the pan.

The wind continued throughout the afternoon but I could see it was starting to fade. It didn't happen suddenly it just seemed to gradually die. I tried the asymmetric spinnaker which kept us going a bit longer and passed the time. But the wind had lost all its power and I was forced to start the engine. If I had not been concerned about lingering in this area I might have tried to sail longer. But this area of the Western Mediterranean at this time of year is no place to mess about in a small boat.



*Caraway has a black asymmetric spinnaker made by Momentum Sails. It's the type B which means it is the fuller cut of their two standard shapes. You can't go so close in it but it is better off the wind.*

I was sorry that we were now motoring but I consoled myself that we had now sailed over 50 miles which had saved a lot of fuel. I hoped we would make it home without having to top up the tank from the jerry cans. A job which I hate because the filler is on the foredeck and spillage at sea is very difficult to avoid.

The genoa was furled and the main was reefed down to the second reef. I have got into the habit of reefing the main to stop it flapping when motoring. The idea of this is to get as much power and stability from the main sail as possible and protect it from unnecessary wear.

After about an hour or so the wind returned so I shook out the main and we were sailing again. It was a lovely day and the swell had receded and my queasiness had drifted away. I was starting to enjoy the trip a lot.

I studied the horizon in all directions with the binoculars for ships. There was nothing to be seen, save a light aircraft over to the east. I went below and put the kettle on for coffee. As I was having a tidy up I heard a whiz-whiz-whiz and dashed up again to grab the rod. This time I was successful and pulled in a perfect sized Dorado. The Dorado is called *mahi-mahi* in other



parts of the world and is a beautiful fish with striking yellow/green flanks. It is also delicious to eat but quite different to tuna. I quickly dispatched it with a knife and gutted and cleaned it. I then cut it crosswise into lovely steaks and put them in a Tupperware in the fridge. I would have fresh fish for dinner after all.



I looked about and noticed a ship to the west. Fortunately I could see his outline and he was clearly moving roughly parallel to us and heading north, perhaps to Marseille.

A few hours later I salted the steaks and fried them gently in butter. Such fresh fish was rare and to die for. I ate them with some green beans and sun dried tomatoes. The Dorado made a perfect mid Mediterranean meal. There was even enough left for lunch the next day.



Gradually the light began to fade and I could see some squally weather over to the West. I hoped it wasn't as nasty as it looked. We continued to sail but our speed dropped off a bit as the sun faded and it became dark.

Over to the east I could see a glow of light on the horizon. I had no idea what this was but guessed it to be a cruise ship and would have to keep an eye on it.

But more worryingly to the north I could see lightning and what looked like rain.

We carried on and it soon began to rain. Remarkably the wind remained constant at about 12 knots just forward of the beam and we were able to continue sailing. The glow of lights to the east had become stronger and I could soon make out what had to be a ship lit up like a Christmas tree. It was probably a pleasure cruiser. How they could see anything with so much light around them I would never know. I guessed they could see very little because they were clearly heading straight for me. I had two radar reflectors at spreader height but I could still not be sure they could see me. I had to assume they couldn't. I went below and picked up the Maglite torch. I turned it on and pointed it at them. Hopefully they would have seen that. Sure enough, within a few minutes I could make out they had altered course a little and would hopefully pass astern. I could just make out a green nav light. They didn't appear to be going too fast, perhaps 10 knots so it was a while before I could see the full extent of the ship and be reassured that they would pass safely. I was right, she was a big cruiser with dozens of cabins. She was probably crammed with people partying all night oblivious to the plight of a small yacht in their path. She appeared to have just about every light in every cabin and every corridor on, ruining my night vision until she had disappeared properly astern.

Ahead the lightning was intense. I sheltered from the rain under the spray hood and watched nervously for more ships. None came and though I worried about being struck by lightning it was way off in the distance and gradually it had cleared and the rain stopped. The wind had

died and I was forced to start the engine again.

I was planning to try and stay awake for most of the night and just take short cat naps if possible. I had set the C.A.R.D to hopefully wake me up if a ship came into range and I was well prepared with snacks and tea or coffee if I needed it. I knew I could easily stay awake until the small hours. It was the periods between 4am and day break that would be the most challenging. On this trip I was not troubled by more ships during the night and managed several short naps before the sun finally began to appear and the new day dawned. It was chilly in the pre-dawn hours so I was eager for the sun to thaw me out. Finally it arrived and I was able to enjoy a nice cup of tea and some muesli for breakfast while the sun warmed my bones.

With the sun came the wind. A gentle breeze of 5-8 knots was coming from just forward of the beam. The engine was still puttering away and I had been glad of its warmth during the night and its monotonous droning did bring some comfort from its consistent reliability. It had also fully charged the batteries. I checked the fuel tank gauge. We had about half a tank left and should make it home without topping up although I would probably put some in because as the tank level got lower the likelihood of air being sucked into the system was greater and I didn't want to have to bleed the engine if it could be avoided. After a few hours the wind picked up a little but to my dismay moved further forward. The expected southerlies were looking more like north easterlies. I knew that anything on the nose would be a real problem and prayed that it wouldn't come to that.

### *The remains of my boat rod*



The wind was still too light to sail properly with the genoa and main so I decided to try the asymmetric spinnaker. It took a while to get it up but it worked well and with the wind slightly forward of the beam it drew nicely and soon we were gliding along at a respectable 4.7 knots over the ground. However, the favourable current that I had noticed before on this passage had started to fade and I was wondering when the ½ knot I had experienced on the nose last time would kick in. It didn't immediately but by lunchtime I had noticed that there was definitely a current against us. We had slowed to 4.2 knots over the ground but our speed through the water had risen to 4.9.

Unfortunately the wind had started to move even closer to the north and before long I had to douse the MPS and stow it below. I unfurled the genoa but our speed fell to 3 knots. So I started the engine feeling we had to make as much ground in the right direction as possible in case the wind turned completely onto the nose. But with the genoa out and full main and the wind where it was we could motor comfortably at just under 5 knots at 2000 rpm. This at least would conserve fuel.

By lunchtime I had had another strike on the fishing lure. This time another big fish had again broken my lashing to the rod tip and taken most of the line from the spool. I decided to give up and resolved to buy a better rod and a bigger reel next time.

Nothing much happened for the rest of the day. I finished off the Dorado for lunch and brushed

up on my French verbs while keeping an eye out for ships. I finally went up in the foredeck and topped up the fuel tank without spilling a drop which I was pleased about because from time to time a big swell would roll in from the east.

Eventually I could see the green land of France emerge in the distance. As the sun started to recede the wind started to build and when I still had 15 miles to go it was blowing 15 knots. I could make way in nearly the right direction but I was now thinking I might have to settle for the bay of Toulon and not Porquerolles.

The final hours dragged by and eventually I could see the pines and buildings on the hills of France in the distance. A large French warship appeared to the west and turned alarmingly and appeared to be steaming full pelt straight at me before suddenly veering and heading south. It's quite unnerving having enormously powerful modern military machinery aiming straight at you. I wondered if they had been tracking me on their radar as an exercise or pretending to blow me out of the water with their missiles.

I soon realised that I had been blown off course some way by the wind and we were approaching from further west than I had expected. There was now no way we would make Porquerolles unless I wanted a long and painful windward battle between the Presque-isle de Giens and the western point of Porquerolles. The wind had got up to 25 knots and I was motoring as close to it as possible with third reef in the main and staysail. The last 15 miles were hard and slow and frustrating and a little edgy. I was worried the situation would deteriorate further and become very difficult. But finally, we entered a small bay in the western lee of Presque-isle de Giens; I cut the engine and we sailed in carefully looking for a suitable spot. We were finally well sheltered and I furled the jib, dashed forward and dropped the anchor in 10 feet of water. I then held the boom forward and used the main to drive us back and set the anchor. We pulled up sharp on the warp and I dropped the main and lashed it to the boom.

I had a look around and waved at a neighbouring yachtsman. It was about 8pm and I had made it. I repaired below for a cup of tea and a piping hot bowl of leftover spag bol before I called Nina to let her know I was safe. I then got into my sleeping bag and fell into a deep and satisfying sleep.