

# VOYAGE OF THE AEGRE

A YOUNG COUPLE SURVIVES A SEEMINGLY HOPELESS SITUATION  
WHEN THEIR 21FT CLINKER YACHT IS ROLLED MID-PACIFIC.

**B**ack in July 1973, Nicholas Grainger and his wife, Julie, sailed from north-west Scotland bound for the oceans of the world. Their boat was a 21ft clinker-built traditional Shetland Islander, originally open, but now decked for their voyage. As she should be, she was innocent of any sort of auxiliary power. Nick was 23. Julie was 19.

Nick's book, just now published, is called *The Voyage of The Aegre*. It's a story of courage and adventure we don't often see equalled. Every page takes us deeply into the nitty gritty of the whole venture, including the self-doubt and interpersonal challenges. As I devoured the work I remembered my own youth and the hope, strength and sheer energy that kept me going in hard times. Yet all my experience pales when compared with this extract: 150 miles out from Tahiti, she is capsized, swept clean and could easily have been left derelict. With no radio and no liferaft, survival depends on resource, initiative and the refusal to give in.



“It was Thursday 5 September 1974. I was woken by a sudden roaring. The next moment I was turning head over heels. My eyes were clenched shut. I managed to open them, but it made no difference to the blackness. I'd been asleep in the oil-lamp-lit cabin. Where was I now? I was lying in water, but breathing air. What the hell was going on? Were we sinking? Where was Julie? “Julie! Julie!” I shouted, but there was no reply.

Threshing around with my hands and arms, I felt for the cabin sides around me, but everything was in the wrong place. Then I felt the deck beams beneath me. My mind raced. We must be upside down.

It was eerily quiet. Were we below the surface, sinking into oblivion?

I had to get out, but how? Where was the hatch? Could I get to it? My way seemed blocked by the lockers and shelving. My hands found a passage aft beneath them. Now I could feel the closed hatch underwater beneath me. What would happen if I opened it? But I had to open it – it was the only way out. Would it jam?

I wrenched it back and plunged down into the ocean beneath. With my hands I felt the boat above me and pulled myself to one side, then up. Would I make it to the surface?



The Aegre departing Tahiti for Rarotonga

Almost instantly I did and was gulping air. It was still dark, but in front of me I could make out the shape of *The Aegre*, floating upside down. I couldn't see Julie anywhere. In dread, I screamed into the wind and darkness, “Julie! Julie!”

“I'm here,” came back faintly over the wind from the other side of the boat. Pulling myself around to the other side, I found her clinging on, gasping for breath as wave after wave swept over her. Relief that she was alive flooded through me. Together, we were strong.

“We have to get out of the water!” I yelled, pulling myself up onto the upturned hull. The edges of the clinker-laid planks gave narrow hand and footholds. Soon I was clear of the water and sitting astride the shallow keel.

Julie, in her thick oilskins and boots, couldn't get a grip. I leaned over, grabbed her hand and pulled her up. As I did so, *The Aegre* tipped violently towards her and turned over again, throwing us both back underwater. I came back to the surface, my eyes full of water, to dimly see that the boat was now the right way up but almost flush with the sea.

But Julie had gone. Our hands had been dragged apart as we had hit the water. Where was she? Under the boat snarled in the mast and rigging, fighting for her life?

“Julie!” I screamed, pushing myself back under the boat to feel around wildly for her. There were just rope and wires. I burst back to the surface for a breath and heard a faint cry from the other side of the boat. I pulled myself back around to find her, shocked, gasping, and spluttering. In the dim light of the night I could see *The Aegre* had just a little freeboard, perhaps 2in, but she wasn't lifting to the seas, and colossal breaking waves were sweeping right over her, pouring through the hatch into the cabin. She was only floating because of the polystyrene foam buoyancy



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THE VOYAGE  
OF  
THE AEGRE

FROM SCOTLAND TO THE SOUTH SEAS  
IN A SHETLAND BOAT



The Voyage  
of The Aegre  
by Nicholas  
Grainger,  
Amazon, £20.99



we'd built into either end. I pulled myself aboard, into the flooded cockpit, and helped Julie to roll back on board too. She crawled along the deck to the base of the broken mast and clasped her arms around it to avoid being swept back overboard as waves swept across the deck and in and out of the cabin. Everything from below swirled in and out in the gloom, polythene food containers, books, pieces of wood, papers, everything.

I stood in the cockpit as if I were standing in the ocean, terrified the boat might break up under the stress of the buoyancy lifting either end and the lead weight in the middle. I thought of our inflatable Avon dinghy, our last resort if the boat should break up.

Full of water, *The Aegre* had no stability and tipped to port. Would she roll again? If she did, that might be the end of us. Julie sat on the deck, trying to balance the boat as waves swept over us.

"I'm going to blow up the Avon," I yelled, unlash the green bag we kept it in, but the pump – the pump? I couldn't see it. Desperately I set about blowing it up by mouth. Julie blew up the seat bolster. With just enough pressure, Julie took the line to the dinghy. "Don't tie it on, we might sink!" I shouted.

It was getting lighter, and now I dimly saw the Avon floating high and dry and just downwind of us, above the maelstrom of the sea. A last resort. But I knew *The Aegre* herself offered us the best chance, not the Avon. I just had to get the water out.

Standing in the cockpit, up to my thighs in the sea, I frantically bailed with a basin that came to hand. Could I just get a fraction ahead of the waves sweeping over us?

I began bailing like a madman in the semi-darkness. Everything in the cabin was washing in and out through the hatchway. I grabbed things that might be useful to our survival, passing them to Julie at the base of the mast to put into the Avon for safe keeping: a jerry can of water, our waterproof canister of emergency things, a sharp knife

wrapped in a sheet, the wooden box containing the sextant, a string bag of onions that floated out, whatever, before they were washed away and lost downwind.

I kept bailing but was getting nowhere. Breaking wave tops kept sweeping over the boat. Water was pouring into the cockpit and flowing straight into the cabin — the washboards separating the cockpit from the cabin were gone. How could I stop it?

### WALL OF WATER

I lashed the boom and gaff trysail to protect the cockpit and hatchway and tried again, frantically throwing water out with the big basin, struggling to get ahead of the incoming water. Just as I thought I was getting ahead, Julie screamed, "Look out!" Her shout was instantly followed by a crashing wall of green and white seawater which exploded over me.

It looked hopeless. Worse, I was now feeling the cold, having gone to sleep naked. There was no sign of my clothes.

Julie screamed another warning and I clung to the boat,

but was knocked over again by a wall of water. I thought we were going over but the boat surfaced in the wake of the wave, still the right way up, but Julie had gone, the deck bare where she'd been sitting. Swept overboard,

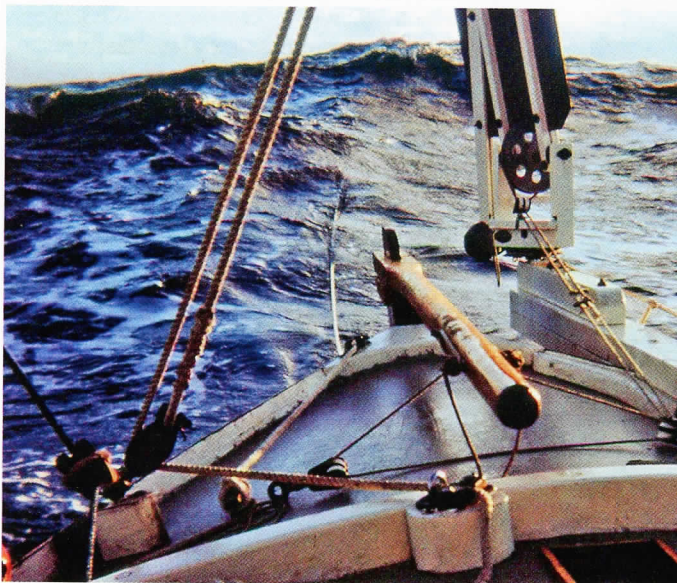
her life harness attached to the base of the mast saved her, and I grabbed it to pull her back aboard, but the Avon was gone, torn from Julie's hands.

In horror, I saw the Avon's shape on the crest of a wave, already a boat's length downwind. I paused. Should I dive after it? Could I catch it? Would I ever get back to *The Aegre* if I tried? Better together than apart, and better on *The Aegre* even if it was swamped than on a barren inflatable.

I saw the fear in Julie's eyes now that our last resort was almost gone. But no, I wasn't going after it. And then the chance had passed. The dinghy's outline quickly fading into the greyness of the wave crests downwind.

Had I made the right choice? I was tormented, briefly thinking not just of the security it offered but the things

**'I saw the fear in Julie's eyes  
now our last resort was gone'**



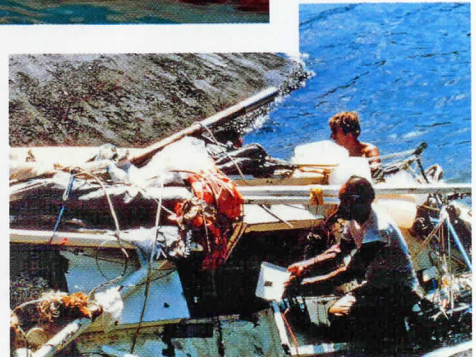
Far left: off across the Atlantic under the square sail. Left: on the beach for a refit at Puna'auia, Tahiti. Below: arrival in Pago Pago, American Samoa







Left: Nick and Julie arrive in Funchal, Madeira.  
Below: the deck view. It was no time to be house-proud



Left: a trial setting of the storm sail rigged upside down as a square sail in Santa Cruz harbour, Tenerife, Canary Islands

we'd put in it, particularly our precious sextant. But it was done. Too late for regrets. Now there were no options. We'd have to stay on *The Aegre*. She had everything we needed to survive. She just happened to be underwater right now.

I attacked the bailing again. Whatever came floating into the basin, I flung over the side with the water. Nothing else mattered. My oilskin top swept out of the cabin on a wave, and I did grab it, throwing it on. Cold and clammy, but it kept the wind off. Maybe it helped my brain to work.

"We can use the water jerry cans as extra buoyancy," I shouted to Julie.

### CREATING BUOYANCY

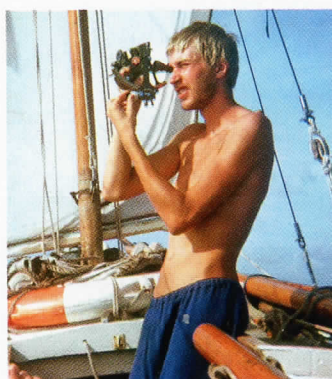
From the hatch, I felt around underwater in the cabin to find the fresh water jerrycans stowed under the sides of the cockpit and pulled two out, wrenched off their caps and poured the water out over the side deck into the sea. Each contained 10lt, five days of water.

I stuffed the jerry cans, now containing nothing but air, back under the sides of the cockpit, displacing water, but the boat's movement seemed unchanged. I grabbed two more. Julie looked on in horror. Still there was no change in the boat's movement. Waves were still sweeping over us. Now I'd dumped 20 days' worth of water. I went back underwater into the cabin to extract two more jerrycans.

Perhaps the boat was holed and would only ever lift a little until I found and patched the holes? Now I'd dumped 30 days' worth of water. The back of the boat seemed to be just starting to lift a little to each wave.

"We won't need all this fresh water if we're dead from exposure," I shouted to Julie as I emptied jerry cans seven and eight. Forty days of water now were gone, 60 days left.

It was now almost light, and I could see what I was doing. I'd started with



the easily accessible jerrycans stowed around and beneath the cockpit. The boat was definitely lifting to the waves now, but still we needed more buoyancy to prevent waves sweeping over and into the boat.

Working desperately in the gloom and chaos and frightened we might roll over again, I unscrewed the floorboards and pulled out more jerrycans, keeping a careful count. Now, with every empty jerry can I stuffed under the decking around the cockpit, we rose a little. Finally, with just seven full ones left (water for 35 days), *The Aegre* was lifting to most of the oncoming waves.

Desperately I tried bailing, only to be swamped again, but now I knew it was possible. And then there was a longer gap between big waves. I threw water out like a maniac; whatever came into the basin went out with the water. Nothing much mattered compared with getting more buoyancy before the next big wave hit. Our lives depended on it.

And I did get ahead of it. With the water down to the cockpit floor, we rose to the next big breaking wave. This time the white water surged around us, not over us.

It was light, perhaps 7am or 8am, when finally I paused, exhausted, and looked up at Julie by the mast. We smiled at each other. Now there was hope. Back to bailing with the basin, and soon the water was down to the floorboards, and using the bilge pump became practical.

I'd saved the boat, for the moment at least, but, we progressively realised, I'd thrown over the side most of our library, all our sailing records, our passports, money, and more, all gone. The mast was broken about 8½ft up from the deck. There were gaping holes in the upper starboard stokes where the chain plates had been torn out of the planking, but there was no other observable hull damage. We seemed lucky things were not worse.