

Cold, Hard Dudes

Royal Marines, Major Tony Lancashire and Lt. Col. Kevin Oliver are sailing through the Northwest Passage the hard way for the right reasons.

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By Herb McCormick

We'd heard rumors that they were just ahead: a pair of Englishmen sailing an open boat, making their way through the Arctic. But it was still hard to believe. We were in the midst of our own continuing Around the Americas voyage (www.aroundtheamericas.org) through the Northwest Passage on a well-appointed steel 64-footer, *Ocean Watch*, and we were still having a challenging time with things. To put it bluntly, the notion of doing the exact same trip, in the exact same conditions, on a small open boat seemed rather insane.

But in early August, as we made our way down Amundsen Gulf toward Cambridge Bay, for the first time in quite a while the VHF radio suddenly crackled to life. The Brits had spotted us motoring past. We gazed through the binoculars toward a bleak, desolate shore, and though we were only a mile away, it was hard to pick out the source of the transmission. Finally, we got a visual on their spindly rig and tiny boat, moored to a beached ice floe. Moments later, we dropped the dinghy in the water, zipped into the beach, and made the acquaintance of two very rugged and hearty Royal Marines, Major Tony Lancashire and Lt. Col. Kevin Oliver.

I couldn't help myself. "Even for Englishmen, you dudes have to be out of your bloody minds," I said. They just laughed.

We asked the Brits if they'd like to come out to *Ocean Watch* for a hot cup of tea and a snack, an invitation they heartily accepted. As they stepped into our warm, enclosed pilothouse, Tony looked at Kevin and said, "We're doing this the wrong way."

They are, however, doing it for a lot of the right reasons. Veterans of the war in Afghanistan, they were on a sanctioned break from the Marines for what they called "adventure training," a two-month sabbatical in the Northwest Passage during which they were also raising funds for a charity called Toe in the Water, which endeavors to get servicemen who've lost limbs in the line of duty "back into life through sailing." They've had all sorts of adventures—two hours before we saw them, they'd been charged by a bear—and you can read about their exploits and aims on their website (www.arcticmariner.org).

The boat they've chosen for the expedition is a Canadian-built NorseBoat 17.5, which Tony purchased last October at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland. (Go to www.norseboat.com to learn more about NorseBoat.) It's a lovely little centerboarder with very sweet lines, and with the help of NorseBoat's Kevin Jeffrey, they made several key modifications before setting out from the Mackenzie River, where they'd had the boat trucked, including a pair of sliding seats for rowing and reinforced panels of Kevlar in the hull to help ward off the ice.

"We're very happy with it," said Kevin. "It sails very well, it's rugged and robust, and it's taken a lot of punishment in the ice. And there's some nice symmetry, as it was built in Canada and we're up here doing this trip."

After a couple of hours, we ferried the guys back to their boat, bid them farewell, and wished them the very best of luck. Then we motored back to *Ocean Watch*, which was looking better than ever.



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British Royal Marines Tony Lancashire (left) and Kevin Oliver are sailing the Northwest Passage in a 17-foot open boat.