

# JRA Hall of Fame

by Graham Cox

Commander William  
Donald Aelian "Bill" King,  
DSO and Bar, DSC.

1910 – 2012

Bill King was a modest, self-effacing man. He claimed to be constitutionally unsuited to a career in the Royal Navy, a poor navigator, physically weak and prone to an excess of anxiety and fear. However, in a Foreword to Bill King's book, *The Wheeling Stars*, Mike Richey



Commander Bill King

wrote, *Bill King, I have always thought, belongs among the immortals. His voyage around the world alone, dogged as it was by setbacks of one kind and another, set no records (except, I suppose, doubling the Horn under junk rig); but it had an epic quality to it, perhaps because it was in part a catharsis for the long gruelling years he spent in the submarine service during the war.*

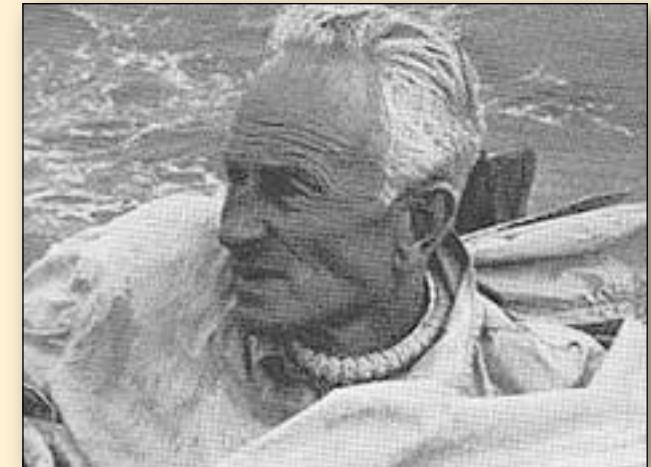
Bill King was born in 1910 in Hampshire, a direct descendant of the Frankish King, Charlemagne. Like Blondie Hasler, he lost his father in the First World War, after which he went to live with his maternal grandmother in

Oban, Scotland. He started sailing at the age of 7 aboard her 50 ton gaff cutter, *Imatra*. In 1924, aged 14, he was enrolled in the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth.

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Bill was commanding his first submarine,

*Snapper*, aboard which he undertook dangerous spying operations off the coast of occupied Norway. He later served in the Mediterranean and the Far East. He was the only Royal Navy officer to command a submarine throughout the Second World War, for which he received the DSO twice and the DSC, being cited for heroism both at sea off the coast of occupied Norway and in the Far East. His survival was in part due to his canny seamanship. He used to note the direction of the wind when surfacing to engage enemy ships, then take his submarine upwind from them after he dived. He knew that the ships would turn off their engines to listen for him, and would, therefore, drift away from his position.

During the war he met his future wife, Anita Leslie, an Anglo-Irish national with distinguished social and political connections (she was a cousin of Winston Churchill), who won the *Croix de Guerre* driving ambulances in France. Anita went on to become a highly-respected writer, producing a critically-acclaimed biography of Francis Chichester as well as helping Bill write four books: *Adventure in Depth*, *The Stick*



*and the Stars*, *Capsize* and *The Wheeling Stars*. She also wrote a book about their Caribbean adventure on board the first *Galway Blazer*, entitled *Love in a Nutshell*.

After the war Bill became one of the pioneers of ocean racing. He initially navigated *Myth of Malham* for John Illingworth, at a time when only the best could get a berth with the acknowledged top ocean-racing skipper. In 1947, his navigation skills played a critical role in winning Line Honours for their class, and the Fastnet Challenge Cup. The following year they doubled the Atlantic aboard *Myth of Malham* to take part in the Bermuda race. Bill also crossed the Atlantic with Humphrey Barton and sailed with several other well-known sailors, such as Bobby Somerset and Peter Haward. Typically, he credits most of his success to their influence.



Galway Blazer

After briefly campaigning *Tre Sang*, which he bought from Blondie Hasler, Bill launched a new yacht in 1949, an RNSA 24 that he named *Galway Blazer*, after the Galway Blazer hounds with whom he hunted. In this boat he crossed the North Atlantic to the West Indies and took part in the 1950 Bermuda Race, coming fourth in class, before sailing back to Ireland. He reluctantly sold the boat due to lack of finances and applied himself to farming.

In 1967, following the circumnavigations of Francis Chichester and Alec Rose, and having received a small legacy from his aunt,

Bill decided to attempt a non-stop circumnavigation. He commissioned Angus Primrose, in consultation with his old friend Blondie Hasler, to design him a new, junk-rigged yacht specifically for such a voyage. As it was, he became swept up in the Golden Globe Race, launching *Galway Blazer II* in May 1968 and departing Plymouth on August 24<sup>th</sup>. At 58, he was the oldest contestant in the race.

What followed was, as Mike Richey noted, a struggle of epic proportions. It took Bill 5 years to complete his circumnavigation, battling capsizing, dismasting, a health crisis and major structural damage to his vessel, through all of which he persevered with dogged determination. Although he did not succeed in his goal of circumnavigating non-stop, *Galway Blazer II* became the lightest-displacement boat ever to circumnavigate via the Southern Ocean, and the first unstayed, junk-rigged vessel to double Cape Horn.

During the voyage Bill subsisted on the most unusual diet one could imagine, for which he became mildly notorious, especially among guests who were invited to share a meal aboard when he was in port. It consisted of a mug of almond paste, raisins, sultanas and mung bean sprouts, three times a day, along with

the occasional fried flying fish or oatmeal biscuit. *I discovered*, he later noted dryly, *that this diet would not be universally popular.*

It is also amusing that *Galway Blazer II* looked something like a submarine, given Bill King's loathing of those vessels. Besides the unstayed, junk-schooner rig, it had a flush, turtle deck, no lifelines or external cockpit, and just two small, circular hatches through which to gain entry and control the rig. The cockpit was internal, with a watertight door to the accommodations, such as they were (the boat was basically empty), and an internal tiller. The design drew heavily on Blondie Hasler's experience with *Jester*, and represented, perhaps, the vessel Blondie might have built for himself if he could have afforded it.

*Galway Blazer* was built by Souter's of Cowes, an ultra-light design of 4.5 tons, cold-moulded from four layers of plywood to a total thickness of 3/4in. The boat measured 42 feet overall, with a waterline length of 30 feet, a beam of 10 feet 6 inches and a deep fin keel with a draught of 6 feet. It had high freeboard and a distinctive spoon bow, to provide maximum

buoyancy when running in heavy seas. The masts were of hollow timber, sheathed in GRP, with spars of hickory. She carried a relatively modest sail area of 522 sq ft (48.5sq m). By way of contrast, Jock McLeod's *Ron Glas*, a slightly larger, heavier vessel, has a sail area of 810 sq ft (75sq m).

On their first attempt to circumnavigate, *Galway Blazer* was capsized and dismasted by a breaking wave south of Cape Town, at the tail end of a severe storm. The boat was lying ahull at the time because Bill had become exhausted from steering before the seas during the height of the storm. He erected his inbuilt A-frame jury rig and limped into Cape Town.

He later said that lying ahull in that storm was the worst mistake he ever made at sea, although at the time he



A young Bill King



Galway Blazer

feared that the boat would not run safely under self-steering. He regretted that he hadn't insisted on his original desire for a long, shallow keel, which he felt may have helped. It is interesting to note that Bernard Moitessier was an advocate of running fast under wind vane without warps, but *Joshua*, a heavy-displacement long keeler, suffered several knockdowns and at least one capsize during the Golden Globe Race.

Perhaps Bill King could have deployed a heavy storm warp, like Robin Knox-Johnston, the winner of the Golden

Globe Race, did with great success on *Suhaili*. With a good storm warp, let alone something like the Jordan Series Drogue, *Galway Blazer* may have won the Golden Globe Race. Today's powerful autopilots and more sophisticated windvanes make running fast a common practice, but boats continue to get into trouble when this equipment malfunctions.

Bill King also ruminated about setting a tiny, bullet-proof storm trysail on the mainmast, to allow the boat to heave-to with the bows into the wind. It is interesting that he did not try setting a panel of the mainsail, as Roger Taylor, for instance, does on *Ming Ming*. At the height of the storm, when the ship could not carry canvas, he would still have needed to steer, but could

perhaps have hove-to in the initial stages of the blow and again once the worst was past.

One other thing he was unhappy about, was the boat's windward ability. He noted that he could not sail closer than 60° to the wind. In an attempt to improve this, Blondie installed new, high-peaked sails for *Galway Blazer*'s second attempt in 1969, but these proved a failure, because the yards fouled the topping lifts when heavily reefed. By the time this was discovered, *Galway Blazer* was well on her way and so Bill put into Gibraltar.

During the winter a friend broke the new foremast, so once again Bill King sailed home under jury rig.

With a replacement mast and the old sails bent back on, they set out again in 1970, the third summer in a row that *Galway Blazer* had departed from Plymouth for the Southern Ocean. Now there was no race, just one man and his dream, the way he had initially envisaged it. This time all went well until deep in the Indian Ocean, when severe cold and damp made the skin peel off his fingers. The situation became so bad he could barely handle the sails and was forced to sail north into warmer weather, where his hands improved a little. He decided to stop in Fremantle, a city he had fond memories of from wartime.

He received a very warm welcome there from old and new friends, flew home for the summer, then set out again with high hopes in December 1971. His hands had healed, he had a good supply of creams, gloves and medical advice, and he felt that he knew by now how to get the best out of his ship.

Three days later, on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 400 miles SW of Cape Leeuwin, *Galway Blazer* struck an unknown

object, perhaps a whale or a Great White Shark (all Bill saw, when he ran on deck, was a large swirl astern). The collision stove in one side of the boat from the waterline to the deck. He could see bright blue ocean through the shattered hull. It was, he said, the worst moment of his entire life at sea. He put out a Mayday but it went unheard, as his radio never functioned properly. If he was going to survive, he had to save himself.

By putting the boat on the other tack, he was able to keep the damaged area just above the waterline, although the wind direction meant they were heading for Antarctica. They sailed like this for three days until Bill had the damaged area sufficiently shored up and a collision mat in place on the outside of the hull. His account of how he achieved this is both riveting and a superb instruction manual for



Galway Blazer



Bill King in later years



disaster management. Luckily the wind stayed fresh and kept the damaged area mostly above the water during this time, although he got very little sleep. Eventually he was able to gingerly tack and limp back into Fremantle.

was unable to notify anyone as his radio, once again, failed to transmit.

After the Horn, *Galway Blazer* still had 9000 miles to sail up the Atlantic. The passage proved slow and frustrating, plagued by long periods of light

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After his circumnavigation, he retired to Oranmore Castle, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Norman keep on the shores of Galway Bay, which he and Anita had bought for £200 in 1946 as a roofless wreck and spent years restoring. (Bill later discovered that an ancestor of his had been in the castle when it was stormed by Oliver Cromwell's forces in 1652. He also has more recent links to Galway County: his great-grandfather founded Galway University.) *Galway Blazer* was sold to Peter Crowther, who subsequently had many more adventures aboard her.

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impressed with the rig on a French junk-rigged yacht, *Lucretia*, that sailed into Galway Bay in 1983, with Lucien Burquier and Jean-Michel Raynard aboard. In his words: *The forward ends of the sail battens, instead of lying against the mast, had their ... ends split, doubled and formed into parrels which circled the mast, the sail being also doubled to cover them around the mast.*

He remained physically and mentally active for a very long time, still entertaining guests at home into his late 90s and taking them for a 'run ashore', as he called a jaunt to the pub. He died in 2012, aged 102.

