

JRA Hall of Fame

by Graham Cox

Blondie Hasler

(1914 - 1987)

Although several people, including Joshua Slocum, had previously made long voyages in junk-rigged vessels, it was not until Blondie Hasler applied his brilliantly-innovative mind to the subject in 1960, that junk rig became widely adapted for use on Western yachts. His subsequent voyages, design work and publications are largely responsible for this development.

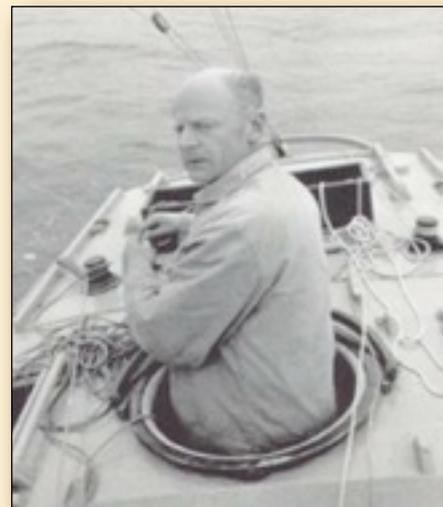
Lt. Col H G "Blondie" Hasler was commissioned into the Royal Marines in 1932 and became a much-decorated officer during the Second World War, being awarded the DSO and an OBE, as well as the Croix de Guerre, for heroism in Norway. He proposed and led a daring raid, known as Operation Frankton, in folding kayaks against the Germans in Occupied France. He also designed the kayaks. A film of this raid, called the *Cockleshell Heroes*, was released in 1955, although Blondie was never comfortable with the film's depiction of those events or his part in it. He was also involved in the foundation of the Special Boat Services (SBS), a water-borne unit of the UK Special Forces. He made his first adventurous voyage the year he joined the marines, sailing a 14ft. dinghy singlehanded, from Plymouth to Portsmouth and back.

During the war, Blondie noted that he could get more out of his men when they were warm, comfortable and well-rested. He afterwards took up ocean racing, successfully campaigning a 30-Square Metre sloop, *Tre Sang* (later sold to none

other than Bill King). Between November 1945 and August 1946, *Tre Sang* covered more than 2600 miles in the open sea, winning the RORC Class III Championships and the Ortac Cup. She was fast but exceedingly wet and tiring (they had tents over the bunks to keep their bedding dry), and he soon came to the conclusion that the same principles he'd observed in wartime would be equally beneficial in ocean-going boats.

In order to test his ideas, in 1953 Blondie commissioned the building of a modified, carvel-planked, Scandinavian Folkboat. With typical humour, he named the vessel *Jester*, because it was, he said, 'such a bloody joke'. Michael Richey, the boat's subsequent owner, more rightly described *Jester* as a work of genius and the English yacht designer, Angus Primrose, believed that *Jester* represented the only radical advance in yacht design in the 20th century. The boat had no cockpit and the halyard, sheet and all other control lines were led back to a circular control-hatch in the cabin top. All sail handling was done from there. She was steered, when necessary, with a whipstaff at the control-hatch, which was connected by lines to a stub tiller, protruding through a rubber grommet in the transom. She also had an unstayed spruce mast, which caused much shaking of heads from conservative sailors.

The crew could stay inside at all times, warm, dry and rested. When adjusting the rig, one stepped up onto the observation seat, bracing one's hips in the circular hatchway. The hatch was protected by a rotating, circular pramhood: another of Blondie's



brilliant ideas. In heavy weather, no matter what the wind direction, this rotating pramhood could be set to leeward, giving good ventilation in the cabin, while allowing him to peer out occasionally to keep watch. This concept: sailing the vessel from a centralized, protected control centre, was radical at the time, but some variation has since become standard on many voyaging yachts, including Vendée Globe racers, though it must be said that junk-rigged vessels are uniquely suited to this practice, because it is one of the few rigs where you seldom, if ever, need to go on deck at sea.

Crucial to the whole process was a remotely-controlled, wind-vane self-steering gear, also designed by Blondie. The original one worked from a trim tab on the rudder, but Blondie went on to design the world's first servo-pendulum gear. This innovative concept is now used by almost every commercial wind-vane manufacturer in the world.

Jester was initially fitted with a Lapwing rig, I thought it was a Ljungstrom: are they one and the same thing? but was refitted with a junk rig in time for the first Singlehanded Transatlantic Race (OSTAR) in 1960. This was the first time that junk rig had been fitted to a modern Western yacht, using yacht materials such as polyester



Blondie peering from the pramhood

and spruce, with simplified running rigging designed for one person to handle from an enclosed steering station.

The OSTAR was initiated by Blondie, with the aim of stimulating the development of yachts suitable for long, shorthanded voyages. The involvement of the Observer newspaper and the Royal Western Yacht Club, both critical to the OSTAR, can also be credited to Blondie. This race established singlehanded ocean racing as we know it today. Without the OSTAR, the pioneering circumnavigations of Francis Chichester, Alec Rose, Robin Knox-Johnston, Bernard Moitessier, Nigel Tetley and Chay Blyth, as well as the BOC and Vendée Globe races, may not have taken place.

In that first OSTAR, *Jester* came second to Francis Chichester's *Gypsy Moth III* in a time of 48 days compared with Chichester's 40. Francis chose to sail the direct

course, but Blondie took the northern route, a typically bold move that was based on solid research. Despite increased risk of contact with ice, Blondie knew that he had a greater chance of fair winds, and that it had been the favoured summer route in the age of sail. Francis, in his much larger, faster yacht, arrived wet, cold and exhausted. Blondie, in startling contrast, was clean, dry, refreshed and relaxed when he stepped ashore.

Francis Chichester may have officially won the race but Blondie Hasler was widely perceived as the true winner, succeeding much more in achieving the stated goals of the event: to develop yachts and gear capable of making long voyages in comfort and safety. After the race, *Jester* completed the much easier west to east Atlantic crossing without incident, returning to England in 37 days. Blondie and *Jester* completed the 1964 OSTAR in only 37 days, to place 5th, before another

unremarkable cruise back to English shores. These widely reported passages, and *Jester's* subsequent history (including a summer on Loch Ness looking for the monster), made the vessel an internationally-famous yacht and created widespread interest in adapting junk rig for Western yachts.

In association with Jock McLeod, Blondie Hasler continued to develop and disseminate junk rig designs and information, eventually producing the seminal text on the subject, *Practical Junk Rig* in 1988. Despite recent advances in junk rig technology, including fanned sail shapes and cambered panels, this work remains an essential reference for anyone who wishes to design, build and sail junk-rigged vessels. (This was Blondie's second book. In 1950 he produced *Harbours and Anchorages of the North Brittany Coast*, to great acclaim.) He also designed and built the world's first self-tailing winch, but the idea was picked up by a winch manufacturer before he could establish a patent. In 1970, he was awarded the Royal Cruising Club (RCC) Medal for Services to Cruising.

After selling *Jester* to Michael Richey (who continued to race her in subsequent OSTARs), Blondie designed and built *Summer*, a long,



narrow, plywood ocean-racer that he dubbed the five hundred pound (Sterling) yacht. After competing in the first Round Britain Race in 1966 (another event inaugurated by Blondie) under Bermudian rig, *Sumner* was converted to junk rig, for ease of handling, a point well made by her subsequent owner, the paraplegic French yachtsman, Bernard Brecy, who cruised widely aboard her.

Blondie's last yacht, *Pilmer* (which is still sailed by his family), was a 20 foot, junk-rigged fibreglass sloop, that he developed in

conjunction with Kingfisher Yachts. The Kingfisher 20 was the first junk-rigged fibreglass production yacht in England (or the world), and was a pioneering design that led to many other junk-rigged production yachts. It is still popular today, and a surprisingly capable yacht that has made some exceptional passages. See the website www.kyoa.org.uk for more information on this wonderful little boat.

Blondie married Bridget Fisher in 1965, with whom he had two children, Dinah and Tom. In 1975

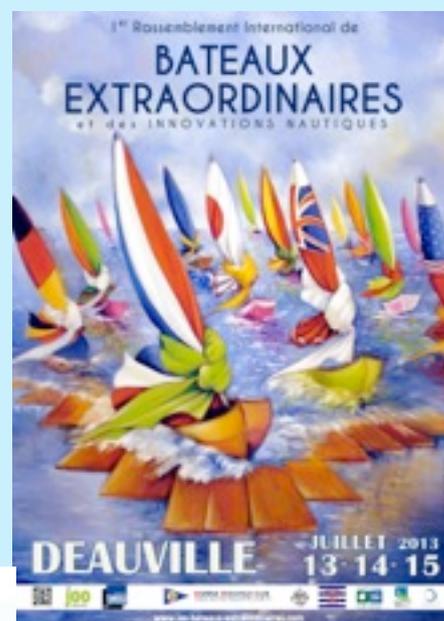
they moved to a farm in Scotland where he became closely involved with the local community. He died in 1987, aged 70.

Ewen Southby-Tailyour has written an excellent biography of Blondie Hasler (Leo Cooper, 1998) to which this portrait is indebted.



Are you going to be in France in July?

Why not sail to Deauville and take part in the First Exhibition of Extraordinary Boats? Members have been invited to take part in this three day celebration of unusual boats and nautical innovations. They are promising an extravaganza of Futuristic Designs, New Technology and Ecological Modes of Propulsion. 10,000 visitors are expected to attend and there will be shore based exhibits as well as a flotilla of vessels on display. Why not join forces with other members and do a cruise to Deauville for their holiday weekend? July 13, 14 & 15th are the dates. You will need to pre-register so you can be allocated a berth. See our website for details on how to do this. It would be great to promote the JRA by wearing the Association burgee at your masthead!



Just some of the interesting vessels to be seen at Deauville

