

OUT ON A LIMB... ON THE TALL SHIP *TENACIOUS*  
David Olson

The trip began with a wee misstep. But it wasn't while boarding the ship.

I carefully made my way up the steeply inclined gangway to the *Tenacious*, using my crutches and right leg prosthesis. The first person I encountered on board was Russell, a red-faced, middle-aged Brit. He was perspiring profusely in the dreadful 95-degree heat of Charleston SC in June; a large bead of sweat dangled ornamentally from the bottom of his nose. I could see that he had "a leg up on me", so to speak – he boasted not one but TWO artificial legs, visible below the hems of his shorts.



Oh man, but I was totally psyched -- this was to be my first chance to talk genuine "sailor-talk". Since signing up six months earlier to crew on the *Tenacious*, I had been poring over the arcane and extensive lingo of nautical terms associated with sailing – particularly those used in tall-ship sailing. I had seen "Master and Commander" three times, and had slogged through the first four Patrick O'Brian novels. I was READY.

After exchanging pleasantries with Russell and informing him that I was joining the ship, it was time to show him that I really knew my stuff. With painstakingly measured nonchalance, I said, "I see you have two lifts going up there to the fo'c'sle – it's good to have a backup, eh?" The key nautical word here of course was "fo'c'sle", which I wanted to casually slip in to our conversation, as if it was a word I have occasion to use oh, four or fives times each day. And of course I was oh-so-careful to pronounce as "foak-s'l", and not as "fox-sill" or, even worse, "forecastle". Nothing could be a clearer giveaway of a faux-sailor, a mere pretender on deck, than making a boneheaded error like THAT.

Russell's face immediately morphed into an immense grin, quite like that of the Cheshire cat in the old Disney cartoon. "That's actually not the fo'c'sle. That's the bridge. The fo'c'sle is up that way, at the fore of the ship -- that's why they call it the 'fo'c'sle'. It's short for 'forecastle'. The bridge is aft."

In the course of the next ten days, I would learn to distinguish the fo'c'sle from the bridge, with unerring certitude... and would come to learn a great deal more as well. The names of the ship's dizzying array of sails would become second nature to me – courses and topsails ("topsills") and topgallants (pronounced "t'gallants") and royals and staysails ("staysills") and spankers and jibs. I'd come to understand the differences between sheets and clewlines and buntlines and furling lines. I'd learn what distinguishes

different types of sailing vessels from one another, be they sloops, bermuda-rigged schooners, gaff-rigged yawls, ketches, barques, or brigs. I'd also learn how to identify ships at night based on their displayed pattern of lights, and from those lights be able to immediately determine their direction of travel in order to assess if they represented a potential collision hazard.

I would also learn about some of the interesting and funny cultural differences between Americans and Brits, as we shared our different terms for foods, sang our peculiar indigenous folk songs, told jokes, and simply spoke our own quaint vernacular. I would forge some intense personal relationships with fellow crew members which are destined to last for years.

Most importantly, though, I was to learn something about the nature of our normal physical limitations in this world, and what it means to be able to venture outside those limits -- if only for awhile and under controlled conditions. For those of us in the crew with so-called physical "disabilities" like Russell and myself, this learning obviously held special meaning. But for disabled and able-bodied crewmembers alike, the ship provided a series of physical challenges which pushed us beyond our normal limits... whatever those limits happened to be. And with our triumph over these limitations came immense personal exhilaration, and a clear sense of life-affirming accomplishment.

And all this on the beautiful, sparkling blue sea.

## THE ASTA RACES

The *Tenacious*, a 213-foot three-masted barque, was one of several tall ships taking part in the American Sail Trailing Association (ASTA) Tall Ship Challenge 2004, a series of races held along the east coast of North America stretching from Miami to Halifax. In my case, I would be on the race leg from Charleston to Delaware Bay, and ultimately to Philadelphia. Competitors included ships from Mexico, Romania, Brazil, Belgium, and Poland.

The *Tenacious* hailed from the United Kingdom. Built in the year 2000, its all-wooden hull construction represented a unique modern engineering project. But the ship's true uniqueness was in its mission and very reason for being.

The *Tenacious* is one of two tall ships owned by the Jubilee Sailing Trust, whose aim is to "promote the integration of able-bodied and physically disabled people through tall ship sailing adventure holidays and associated activities". The ship was designed with an array of features to make it accessible to people with disabilities. Elevators (i.e., "lifts") allowed those in wheelchairs to travel to all the decks (including the aforementioned fo'c'sle). Signs in Braille and raised pathways on the decks allowed blind travelers to traverse the ship with confidence. The large wheel of the helm had a power-assist so that those with significant arm weakness could still steer the ship.

The ship was a veritable feast of accessibility. There were grab bars virtually everywhere. The decks and passageways had non-slip surfaces. The showers and bathrooms (“heads”) were carefully crafted and designed and easy for someone with a mobility impairment to use, even in unsteady seas.

It took me two days on board to realize just how perfectly-engineered this environment was. Initially, I persisted in using my crutches and prosthesis, despite having access to a wheelchair. In the hostile and imperfect “real world”, I elect to use my crutches most of the time as a practical matter because I face fewer barriers in that mode. However, I quickly came to realize the myriad advantages of using the wheelchair on the ship, which freed my hands for hauling sheets and setting sails, swabbing the decks, helming the ship, or holding a bottle of Bass Ale when the occasion demanded.



The *Tenacious* has a standard professional crew of 10, and carries up to 40 paid voyage crew on each trip (we had 34). As many as half of those temporary crew may be people with disabilities. In our case, the crew included seven “wheelies” (i.e., those in wheelchairs), and two others with significant impairments. Our various diseases included post-polios, spinal-cord injury sufferers, a double-amputee whose legs had been lost in a fire, a diabetic, one with MS, and a sufferer from Parkinson’s disease. As such, we “disableds” spanned a spectrum of physical abilities, from those with limited independence to one particularly athletic wheelchair-using Scotsman who was a former para-Olympian.

This spectrum of abilities, of course, also existed within the able-bodieds on board. Some had extensive sailing knowledge and skills, and others, like my old friend Tom whom I had dragooned into taking the trip with me, were virtual sailing neophytes. While Tom was an active hiker and skier, the notion of climbing way up the mast’s rigging to unfurl and furl the sails on the yardarms was initially not within his comfort zone. Within a few days, though, he would be scuttling up the ratlines (the horizontal wooden “steps” of the rigging) with an impressive degree of confidence – as long as he took care not to look down while doing so.

Given this “mixed bag” of physical abilities of the *Tenacious*’ temporary crew, it was truly an astounding achievement that she had won the first leg of the 2004 ASTA race series, from Miami to Jacksonville. Our clever captain, John Fisher, had chosen to steer a course much further east than the other ships, into the edges of the Gulf Stream. This extra boost had allowed the *Tenacious* to attain a speed upwards of 11 knots, and she raced in first across the finish line in Jacksonville (to the probable chagrin of her competitors’ youthful, fit and hearty crews).

So while we had a ready excuse at hand in the event of a poor performance in our Charleston to Delaware Bay race, we realized that the ship could in fact be competitive despite our apparent “handicap”. All we needed to do for the next ten days was commit our complete bodies (however complete they happened to be), but most especially our *souls*, to the ship and its insatiable needs.

## THE WORLD OF THE SHIP

For those ten days on board, the ship presented a completely self-contained and delineated world unto itself for us. Physically, our complete universe began and ended at the railings and bulwarks. We would traverse virtually every inch of the ship at some point during each day, but never once set a single foot beyond it -- except for one quick dip in the ocean, on the last day.

It’s hard to communicate just how profoundly isolated we were, during those ten days. On board, we had no cell phones. No laptop computers. No PDAs. No newspapers, nor TVs or radios. We were not weighed down by concerns in Baghdad, nor of the travails of our favorite sports teams. Our sole focus was on serving the ship... as directed by the captain and his mates. And this we did with a combined sense of pride, resignation, weariness, and joy.

Even odder than our physical confinement on the ship was the fact that the traditional nature of time itself, the one we were so familiar with back on shore, took a different form on board the ship. There were essentially three overlapping time frames at work which directed our personal schedules – which is to say, our lives – on the ship.

There was the traditional 24-hour schedule, which dictated when the morning wakeup call would come over the ship’s loudspeaker each day (wherein the imposing first mate Simon, in a gratingly loud and forceful Scottish accent, would say, “GOOD MORRRRRNING! It’s seven-thirrrrrty, and it’s anotheerrrr sunny and beautiful day outside. So now it’s time to GET UP!”). The three daily meals were also held at the same time each day (0800, 1230, and 1800 hours). After breakfast, at 9:00 AM every day, was the ironically-named “Happy Hour”, which involved having everyone pitch in to clean the ship, for precisely one hour. Half the crew would be assigned duties below deck in the accommodations area, vacuuming the berths, cleaning the heads, or washing the mess area... while the other half would work above deck, mopping and hosing





down the decks. (The universal consensus was that the above-deck duty was the best.) Informative talks by the captain or other permanent crew members, given most days, were always held at 10:30 AM.

Superimposed on these regular daily events, though, was another odd, non-synchronous 16-hour day, which dictated our individual “watch schedule”. Each of us were assigned to one of four watch teams, and our team had to be formally on duty for a four-hour period every 16 hours. Since this schedule was not based on a standard 24-hour day, this meant our duty period constantly shifted and rotated, day by day... one day it might run from 8 PM to midnight, then from 12:30 PM to 4 PM the next day followed by a midnight to 4 AM watch. This was a good thing, because it allowed us to experience the ship and the sea under all sorts of conditions, day and night. However, we constantly had to be mindful of when our next watch assignment was, in order to plan other “optional” activities like taking showers, catching up on sleep, enjoying the gorgeousness of the ocean around us, or socializing. In some ways the 20-hour day was more controlling of us than the 24-hour day timeclock was.

Most controlling of all, however, were the random but urgent calls from the professional crew to haul the sails or brace the yards. This strenuous work – the very heart of what it means to sail a ship – always took precedence over everything else. The other schedules could be rejiggered, lunch could be postponed 45 minutes (even if it drove our Scottish cook, Wendy, to let loose with a stream of colorful protestations when that happened)... but when the wind conditions shifted, our ship absolutely needed us to reconfigure her sails. In uncertain weather conditions,



particularly, this work took on special importance. Our main job – really our ONLY job when you come down to it – was to obey orders from the captain and his mates to haul on ropes. It mattered little if we understood why we were doing it, or why we were pulling these particular ropes and not others (there were well over a hundred to choose from), as long as we each pulled our weight based on our individual physical abilities –

disabled and able-bodied alike. Those in wheelchairs who had good upper-body arm strength were formidable and valued members of the rope hauling teams. We'd park ourselves somewhere in the line, set the chairs' brakes, and haul away in concordance with the others ("2-6 HEAVE... 2-6 HEAVE").

As an activity, it was gratifying to see the direct effects of our combined labor in the configuration of the sails. The massive square sails weigh upwards of half a ton, so moving them about is no small task. Seeing them majestically billowing and efficiently harnessing the forces of wind, in their newly-achieved orientation, was enough to fill us with a rich sense of satisfaction. The *Tenacious* weighs more than two jumbo jets combined, so seeing her cutting through the water at 6 or 8 knots under just the force of the wind was wonderful to see.

We did not face much in the way of rough weather during our ten days on board. While slightly disappointing, it did mean that we fortunately didn't face some of the greatest rigors of being on board a sailing vessel like the *Tenacious*. For one thing, most of us did not suffer any significant seasickness (though a few were quite severely affected, for a day or two at the outset). Tom and I had come prepared with a variety of remedies, including over-the-counter drugs, prescription patches of Scopolamine, and wrist bands which purportedly provided effects similar to those of acupuncture – but these proved unnecessary.

(Pondering the oddity of the phenomenon of seasickness, I said to Tom, "Being on a ship is a little like being rocked in a cradle. I wonder why babies like it, when as adults a lot of people can't tolerate it." Tom said, "Well, babies are always throwing up a lot... maybe we're making them sick to their stomachs, and don't know it.")

We did, though, have one night onboard which verged on being genuinely stormy – and was definitely dark. It was a night that I'll remember as long as I live, for the vivid experience it provided me.



#### MIDDLE WATCH - MIDNIGHT TO 4 AM

On our second day out, our team was assigned watch duty from midnight until 4 AM. I had managed to snatch a couple of hours of sleep after dinner before being awakened at 11:45 PM by someone shining a flashlight in my face. Drowsily I emerged onto the deck from below, to almost total darkness. The winds were gusting much stronger than at any time previously, and the deck was strongly listing to

the left, making walking rather precarious. Someone out of the blackness said, "Don't go over to the port side of the deck. It's roped off. Some waves are breaking onto the deck there."

I rode the lift to the bridge, and began this four hour watch session. Above us, the sky was clear and I caught my first glimpse of the awesome spectacle of the ocean of stars visible at sea, away from all traces of man's interfering artificial illuminations. The Milky Way smeared its wide, glittery path brightly across the sky, and several of the constellations of the Zodiac paraded along its route. We picked out other constellations we had memorized from our youth... Cassiopeia, the Ursas big and small, Draco...

As I stared, in the course of just a few minutes I saw several shooting stars... including one which caused me to audibly gasp. It streaked across a third of the sky, and shone as brightly as the brightest embers of a fireworks display.

But while it was beautifully clear above us, potential trouble loomed along the horizon to the southwest. The winds were gusting, with the sails making loud, wonderful "WHOP" sounds as they luffed and then filled. The ship was rolling and pitching quite strongly. A thunderstorm was gathering, and getting nearer. It was still ten miles away, but it was giving us an amazing light display. Tremendous streaks of lightning spread horizontally, across nearly half of the horizon line. We strained to hear thunder, but the light show was silent... at least for now.

We went to the chartouse to look at the radar display of the approaching storm. It looked appropriately ominous, with bright yellow and orange streaks. The second mate, an expert in navigation, watched its path warily.

I took over helming the ship at this point, steering a course of 105 (east by southeast). In the overwhelming darkness, I could only see the huge sails dimly through the moonlight... but their beauty was breathtaking. (This is a somewhat regrettable commentary on how we see things today, but I was suddenly vividly struck by the notion that I was standing in the middle of a truly amazing, enormous, gorgeous movie set... with giant hidden fans busily blowing the sails, the special effects guys creating the lightning show along the horizon, and guys using large poles to rock the ship side to side, and back and forth. Strangely, this impression actually heightened the sense of beauty and drama for me, as if I could only grasp the reality of what I was experiencing by resorting to my conceptions of its possible artificiality. I guess it was just hard to believe I was actually there, and actually experiencing this.)

During the four hours, there was a continuous though vague sense of danger about us, as unexpected things kept happening. Periodically there would be shouts from somewhere in the darkness, probably from one or another of the professional crew... but what they were shouting about, we did not know. Then, unexpectedly, our captain appeared on deck -- he had been awakened because of the situation. He was not alarmed, not our Captain John -- just ready. Minutes later, we were startled to see him climbing far up the mizzenmast, to remove one of the fore-and-aft sails, the upper spanker. I told one of my

watchmates that I didn't really like having our captain up there, at a time like this. "They don't send generals into the front lines in battles, you know." We did grow to learn that Captain John Fisher loved going aloft, and did so just as often as he could while still managing to maintain his proper dignity as skipper.

There's no Hollywood climax to this little montage I have described. The thunderstorm ultimately skirted us by a good five or six miles, off our bow. Nobody died. But it was simply one of the most intense, interesting, exciting, and magical things I have ever experienced.

At 4 AM, as the watch was over and we were ready to head back to bed for a couple of more hours of precious sleep before the first mate's daily wakeup call, the Bosun said, "Sorry mates... there's a bit more work to do. We need to brace the yards." So our exhausted and weary watch team met the newly-awakened, groggy watch team just coming on duty, and together we hauled some more ropes, on this twisty, slanted, pitching deck, in the middle of the black night and the dark seas, for another half hour or so before finally being dismissed for the evening.

You might have thought I'd have slept then. But, surprisingly, I did not.

## PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

The *Tenacious* could be viewed as a very elaborate playground for adults, with physical challenges ranging from the small to the strenuous.

For most of the crew who were able-bodied, the most difficult challenge involved their



climbing the rigging, and then stepping out along a thin footline running parallel to and below the yards while draping their arms across the wide girth of the yard arms. They were asked to do this in order to either furl (tie up) or unfurl the sails, when they needed to either be stowed or set.



Strewn out on either side of the mast, the crew aloft wobbled on the footropes, waiting for shouted instructions from the bosun (the ship's expert on sails and rigging) or one of the bosun's mates. The instructions involved their having to tug on the sails in a coordinated fashion... from a height of 60 feet or more, on a swaying ship. Those on the outer edge of the yardarms were treated to the recurring sight of the ocean looming directly below them, as the ship rocked back and forth. Unfurling the sails only took 20 minutes or so, but furling them required them to remain aloft for a hour, or even longer.

Those of us with physical disabilities did not take part in this activity, of course. (Although the crewmember with Parkinson's disease did so... as did a very vigorous and wizened 76 year old English adventurer.) But we were given the opportunity to experience what it is like going aloft, just the same.

For the guys with two paralyzed legs and thus unable to climb at all, the solution to the challenge was to fix a harness to their wheelchairs... and then have the able-bodied crewmembers haul them up using a stout rope. In this way, four of the wheelies got to the "top" – the platform high up the mast, often mistakenly termed the "crow's nest" – to drink in the spectacular view up there.



I looked forward to getting this ride to the top -- though with some bit of apprehension of course. However, unless the entire hauling crew of ten all suffered a simultaneous seizure, the chances of my meeting with any major mishap seemed pretty small.

As I prepared myself, the large shadow of our massive, 6'3" Scottish first mate, Simon – he of the no-nonsense wakeup calls – suddenly loomed over me. He

asked me what I wanted to do, and I said I figured I'd go up the same way the others were doing. He said that would be fine, but he felt that I could, if I wished, climb up myself – with a little assistance.

I didn't quite imagine how this was going to work. The able-bodieds had been told to always obey what was called the "Three-Point Rule" in climbing the rigging to the top. This meant always having three points of contact with the rigging... either two hands and one leg, or one hand and two legs. In my limb-deficient state, my mind struggled with the simple mathematics of the challenge. It seemed that once out on the rigging (however that might be accomplished... sprayed on, perhaps?), I would then be destined to cling to it, motionless, like some sad Odysseus caught in a large spider web, until the end of time.

Simon explained that they would put a harness on me, and then tie a long rope onto it which went all the way up to the platform, through a pulley, and then all the way back down. Two crew members would be holding onto the end of the rope, and keeping it taut, so that if I should somehow slip and fall, they would save me. (One of the two, though, was Russell, he of the two artificial legs... a fact that I might have given more thought to than I did at the time.)



The climb essentially involved my doing a series of pull-ups,

step by step (ratline by ratline, to be precise), to make my way up the long shroud. There were 30 such ratlines, and thus 30 consecutive pull-ups were necessary to get to the top. The second mate, a wry Britisher named Mark, stood directly below me on the shrouds, making sure with each pull-up that I got my one foot safely on the next higher ratline. Then I'd reach up to the next higher ratline and repeat the sequence.

About a third of the way up, Mark said to me, "Now, Dave, please do not fall now. It would mean we'd have a lot of paper work to do."

Having become disabled at the age of four, I hadn't done a whole lot of climbing like this. In fact, about the only thing along these lines that I could recall was climbing my grade school playground's monkey bars during recess. I did remember how nice it was to climb to the very top and sit up there, gazing down at the world... and looked forward to the same thing in the present case.





With each successive pull-up, I was scraping my left knee against the rough wood of the ratline steps, and told Mark about this. His comment was, “I’d really ask you to try not to bleed down onto the deck below. It’s very hard to get the stains out, and they unnecessarily alarm new voyagers when they first come on board.”

When you reach the underside of the platform, the ladder narrows markedly, and actually bends backwards. But Mark carefully instructed me what to do, in order to reach the so-called “lubber’s hole”, the entry access into the platform (Patrick O’Brian tells us that true sailors disdained this aid, and preferred to scuttle precariously around the edge of the platform in order to reach it – but we of the *Tenacious* did not take offense at its helpful existence).



I reached through the lubber’s hole and finally hoisted myself up onto the platform, panting with exhaustion. I felt great relief that the significant exertion I’d been through the last fifteen minutes was over, and was happy for the safety that the platform provided. I stood up, on my one leg and holding on to a secure railing, and beheld the spectacle of the ship’s deck and the dark blue ocean below, glistening in bright sunshine beneath a cloudless blue sky on a perfect day at sea.

Many of my crew mates were shouting up at me from different places down on the deck, giving me a thumbs-up signal, and I waved back. I looked directly across at the platform on the other mast, the

foremast, and saw a grinning Michael in his wheelchair, holding up a clenched fist in a victory salute. The sense of exhilaration, the adrenaline rush, was well beyond anything I experienced on those playground monkey bars.

The next to climb up to my platform was a double-amputee, Phil, who climbed using his two stumps. He had done this once before on a previous voyage, and had learned the need to use heavy padding to prevent injuring himself as had happened the first time. He received the same acclaim from our crewmates as I did, upon reaching the top.

Mark, who had assisted Phil, then looked at me and said, “OK, Dave... it’s time to head back down. Now there are two ways to get there. There’s the ‘traditional’ way”. (Long pause.) “And then there’s the ‘express’.”

The climb down (traditional style) was far easier, of course, with gravity now being on my side. However, I scraped my stomach against one of the wood ratlines, and saw I tore my red Nike tee shirt and that I was bleeding slightly. I told Mark, and he said, “I meant to tell you before that I thought that you made a sensible choice of color for your shirt.”

Once safely back on the deck, I shook Mark’s hand and thanked him for his help. (One of the bosun’s mates later told me that Mark always finds these climbs the highlight of each trip, and loves helping out.) Then Mark headed aloft, to help Phil make his return back to earth.

## MIXED ABILITIES

After ten days of being on this ship, and of watching each of us seek out our own personal challenges and adventures, it became obvious that the oft-used word “disability” is quite a silly, and simply inaccurate, classification term. No one on that ship, and no one in the world either, is “disabled”. Everyone is “abled”, but in different ways and to different extents. And on the *Tenacious* we all explored the limits of our personal set of abilities.

Captain John, whenever he referred to his crews, would call us “people with mixed abilities”, and that seems to be quite an excellent term. In our little ten-day physical and sociological experiment at sea, where the normally separate worlds of able-bodieds and less able-bodieds met, laughed, played and learned from one another -- we were all quite able, indeed.

Alas, we did not repeat *Tenacious*’ earlier successes in our particular race leg, finishing second within our class and fourth overall. On the third day, our captain did repeat his tactic of sailing eastward into the Gulf Stream, which temporarily boosted us up near the leaders, but unkind winds left us bobbing like a cork for the better part of the next day while our competitors pressed and regained their advantage. However, across the full set of 2004 ASTA races, *Tenacious* pulled off the fantastic achievement of finishing first in her sailing class.

For our leg of the race, we learned that our ship, like its crew, had “mixed abilities” to sail depending on the strength and direction of the breeze. For all that, we praised her for doing her very best. And were very happy – tremendously happy – that we had made her acquaintance.



Sidebar: OTHER ADVENTURE EXPERIENCES FOR PEOPLE WITH MIXED ABILITIES

- Epic-Enabled ([www.epic-enabled.com](http://www.epic-enabled.com)). Safari “overland” camping holidays in South Africa, with wildlife adventures and cross-cultural experiences.
- Wilderness Inquiry ([www.wildernessinquiry.org](http://www.wildernessinquiry.org)). Canoe, sea kayak, dogsled, raft, horse pack and hiking trips throughout North America and the world, for people with mixed abilities.
- Accessible Journeys ([www.disabilitytravel.com/independent/accessible-planet.htm](http://www.disabilitytravel.com/independent/accessible-planet.htm)). Travel planning for accessible trips, including their “Around the World Journeys”.
- Winged Fellowship Trust ([www.wft.org.uk/main.cfm](http://www.wft.org.uk/main.cfm)). Like the Jubilee Sailing Trust, a British charitable trust offering disabled-friendly holidays throughout the UK.
- Handicapped Scuba Association ([www.hsascuba.com](http://www.hsascuba.com)). Provides training in scuba diving certification, and organizes dives in the US and Caribbean.

Many others can be located by typing “Adventure Travel” plus “Disabilities” into a search engine like Google.