



For the King's Cup

By Kenneth E. Upton

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“Hello Pick.” It was a hot sultry day early in July of 1928 when I strolled into the Radiomarine Corporation’s office at 326 Broadway after a three-month layoff, and addressed that greeting to my old Chief, E.N. Pickerill, one of the real old-timers of radio and then acting Assistant Radio Superintendent. Pick swung his chair leisurely around, mopped his brow with a handkerchief and said, “lo Up, whatcha doin’ where you been and whadda yah want? You fellows all come back, don’t cha?”

We exchanged commonplaces for a while and I finally broached the object of my visits. A passenger ship position on a short run. This brought forth something in the nature of a miniature explosion. “Passenger wagon!” yelled Pick. “Passenger wagon. Say – is that all you birds can think of? I have about nine hundred ops on the Beach right now and every darn one of ‘em wants a passenger ship. Where do you think I’m gonna get ‘em? Make ‘em myself?”

Pausing a second to get his second wind, he launched into a comprehensive and all-embracing descriptions of radio operators on the Beach, their capabilities afloat, also their aims, desires, ambitions and shortcomings (they usually had plenty) at sea or ashore, and wound up with a few well-chosen words of no uncertain meaning concerning myself and my request. In spite of Pick’s periodic outbursts, he is one of the best liked men in the Brass Pounding profession, and he really don’t mean everything he says.

Gathering up a pile of papers, he shuffled through them and said, “Here’s a couple of wonderful ships Up, and you being an old friend can have your choice. They are both freighters and going around the world, and they will only be gone about five months, and I hope you take one so I won’t see your ugly mug for at least that long. Anyway, look at all the money you can save.” This last with a sarcastic grin. Pick knows his Operators.

I declined as regretfully as possible, not wishing to be Shanghaied out on another long voyage. “Well that’s all there is,” remarked Pick, “unless you want to take a shot at some real seagoing on a yacht.” This sounded interesting and a query for details brought a pleased expression to Pick’s face. “I don’t know whether you could qualify for this job or not,” he mused. “I gotta have a real hairy chested sailor, one that can play bridge, chess, and maybe

pingpong.” Here I broke in with a demand for a description of this paragon of all ships and to save the kidding till later.

Now when Pick draws a word picture, he generally does an excellent job of it. He told in golden words of the wonderful opportunities that awaited the fortunate operator chosen for this particular position, of the balmy breezes that would be encountered on the trip and the reception that awaited him in the port of arrival.

The ship, I learned, was the yacht *Elena* and was to be one of the contestants in the ocean race to Santander, Spain for the King’s Cup. “It’s the chance of a lifetime,” said Pick as he made out my assignment. “You ought to pay me for giving you a pleasure cruise like this,” was his parting comment as I started for City Island where the yacht was being put in readiness for the grueling 3300-mile race to Spain.

My first view of the *Elena* was from the shore, and a beautiful picture she made too, lying out in the basin. Her gleaming white hull resting as lightly on the water as a swan, slender masts rising from her decks supported and braced by a delicate tracery of rigging stood out in the late afternoon sun against a background of dark clouds and water with all the clearness of a well-cut cameo.

Stepping aboard from her starboard launch, a smart speed boat, one seemed almost compelled to gaze aloft. The eye followed her gracefully tapering sticks towering almost one hundred and fifty feet above the deck, marveled at the many stays holding them in position, then surveyed with approval her teak wood decks, rails and low houses sheltering the companionways leading to the quarters below.

In spite of her beautiful lines she appeared a fragile craft, hardly one to brave the storms of the North Atlantic. After years spent on large passenger vessels and having seen great green seas sweep aboard carrying lifeboats over the side, bend and twist the rails and smash in heavy glass portholes, a vessel only 136 feet overall and but 96 feet on the waterline would hardly seem to have a chance of weathering a real blow. However, looks are often deceiving, and a more seaworthy craft than the *Elena* would be hard to find among sailing ships.

After presenting my credentials to the Captain I was introduced to the radio room. This proved to be a tiny box-like place directly over the engine room, some five and one-half feet by six feet square with an overhead of approximately seven feet, quite empty as yet save for the bunk. This was mounted about halfway up on the bulkhead and could be raised or lowered from

a horizontal to a vertical position as desired. A most convenient feature, especially when the vessel was heeled over from fifteen to twenty-five degrees, as was often the case.

This, while my first visit, took place on July third. The following day being a holiday, the apparatus was still conspicuous by its absence. Thursday morning, two days before the start of the race, the construction gang put in their appearance and started placing the transmitter. Their activities added greatly to the general confusion aboard. The *Elena* had been laid up for twelve years prior to her purchase by Mr. W.B. Bell, and he only decided to enter her in this Ocean Derby three weeks before starting day.

It was widely conceded by the wisecracks that his hopes and efforts to condition her were foredoomed to failure, the odds and difficulties insurmountable. Nevertheless, Mr. Bell carried on. He employed an army of workmen who labored day and night. New masts and rigging were put up. Refrigerating machinery was installed, ice boxes built, and gasoline-driven generators for light and power were placed in a specially created and fully equipped engine room. Many other modern devices and innovations were included in the line of labor-saving machinery on deck and below.

The seasoned gang of radio men took little if any notice of the others and proceeded with their job in a thoroughly businesslike manner. Coming aboard Friday night, I found they had completed their work and my little room quite filled with gear. A 750 Watt CW – ICW transmitter occupied nearly a quarter of the entire room, while alongside and under the berth stood the generator for supplying plate and filament current to the tubes. Six inches ahead of the transmitter a shelf (or rather, desk) had been fastened to the wall and this extended to the limit of the room some two feet. Eight inches above this desk, also fastened to the wall was a commercial receiver containing a detector and two stages of A.F. amplification, and atop the receiver were the external loading inductances. Above the inductances a shortwave receiver was to be found. To tune this latter set it was necessary to stand erect and reach above the level of the shoulder.

The “B” batteries for both receivers were on a shelf even with the top of the receiver and piled up to a height equal to the top of the shortwave set. A charging panel for the “A” batteries occupied the remaining wall space to the right of the “B” batteries. A typewriter was set into a specially cut slot in the desk and the “A” batteries secured on the floor underneath. Between the desk and the bunk in the after bulkhead a very narrow door) minus the door, there wasn’t room for it) gave access to an equally narrow passageway which in turn led to the Officers’ messroom. My luggage and a large toolbox were finally wedged in too, after some persuasion.

The antenna, of the inverted “L” type, stretched between the masts, about twenty-five feet long, and the lead-in followed the rigging to within eight feet of the deck, being guyed off every few feet with Pyrex insulators. Here it entered a large brass tube through the deck and into the owner’s quarters, finally entering the radio room through a hole in the bulkhead. Not a highly efficient affair surely, but the best that could be erected under the circumstances.

The night before the race over half of the crew deserted, almost causing a withdrawal. The sailors’ boarding houses throughout the city were combed for recruits. These men came aboard some two hours before we were towed to the starting line, much to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Saturday morning dawned clear and bright, with a light breeze which gave promise of a fast start. Before noon, though, the wind died out and it was late afternoon before it breezed up again sufficient to move the five contestants across the line.

These five were *Atlantic*, the favorite and holder of the record across the ocean made in 1905, the *Guinevere*, another large three-masted schooner, the *Azara* from the Great Lakes, the *Zodiac* manned by Gloucester fishermen, and our own *Elena*. All were equipped with the most modern RCA tube transmitters excepting *Azara*, who had no means of communicating with the outside world.

I found an ocean yacht race is not exactly a pleasure cruise, nor the ideal summer vacation, as Mr. Pickerill so jovially remarked. Thirty-six men occupied the forecabin, which contained but eighteen bunks. The sailors were divided in two watches, and while one watch worked on the deck the others occupied the berths. The Captain, three deck officers, two engineers, and a steward’s department of seven men in addition to myself constituted the remainder of the crew. In the after quarters the owner, his wife and daughter, and their secretary accompanied by two wirehaired Scotch Terrier puppies named Nip and Tuck were housed. These dogs were given these names as the race was expected to just nip and tuck between *Atlantic* and *Elena*. Nip survived nicely but Tuck, probably because of *Atlantic*’s failure to win, curled up and died in Santander a few days after the race was over.

When the starting gun was fired an extremely light wind barely moved us across the line. Once over, all light weather sails were hoisted, and we began to pull steadily ahead of the others. My work and, likewise, troubles, began the following day. Work in the shape of weather reports, press news and general information. Troubles in keeping the antenna lead clear of the myriad

ropes, wires, and sheets, not to mention a few halyards, through which it wended its way deckward.

Sunday morning the *Atlantic* hauled up behind us in a fair reaching breeze. All that day and the next we were in sight of each other, sometimes one getting ahead, sometimes the other. Finally, *Atlantic* getting weary of this hauled up, passed us, and disappeared ahead, which was the last we saw of her during the race. The various owners gave their radiomen strict orders to keep positions a secret, the idea being that should one be getting fair winds and the other not, the one less favored by the elements would get on the same track and possibly make out better in the same wind. This of course led to many tricks and dodges in trying to ascertain the other's whereabouts without disclosing your own. Several days elapsed, though, before this started.

In the meantime, we ran into several days of stiff winds, and in a squall which came up suddenly considerable damage was sustained to our light sails. The ballooner staysail let go with a loud crack late one night, followed shortly after by the ballooner jib splitting. The crew labored all night and day sewing them up. Spare canvass gave out and the Steward was called upon for his white trousers as substitute. They worked fine and in all six or seven pairs went into the sails in the form of patches.

It seemed that almost every time I wished to work the transmitter the lead-in would be fouled by the rigging somewhere aloft. I would have to rush on deck and crane my neck skyward seeking the offending ground. Once located, a man would go aloft in a "bosun's chair" to clear the halyard or sheet as the case may be. One sail in particular gave me endless trouble, and though in time I will probably forget the names of the others, this one will linger long in my memory. This was the queen staysail – stretched fore and aft between the topmast, the queen taysail sheet made fast on deck passed within six inches of the lead some seventy-five feet above the deck. If the sheet wasn't taut at all times it would rest against the lead, causing a dead short. Pitching of the vessel would also cause it to touch.

In all, I had almost as much trouble as the cook. He, however, could explain everything when complaints arose on the part of the crew by the simple statement, "Don't you know you're in a race? What do you expect anyway?" That usually settled all arguments, as there didn't seem to be a comeback. The fact that we were in a race made it all the more important to keep both receiver and transmitter working at all times.

Every noon I would listen for ship reports, as nearly all American freighters exchange their positions and weather conditions at that time on a wavelength of 700 meters. These reports,

some days totaling as many as twenty-five, were of great assistance to us. After plotting them on charts we could tell at a glance just what the direction and force of the wind and general conditions were over a considerable portion of the ocean at a specified time. Combined with weather reports and bulletins from ashore, a fair forecast could be made for the following day. Several times during the trip our course was altered to take advantage of these homemade forecasts – always with the desired results in the way of more favorable winds.

We made good time to a point near midocean but had lost track of the other yachts. The *Atlantic* being the only one we really feared, I made every effort to locate her. I knew she was sending a news dispatch almost daily but listen as I would I could never intercept it.

Directly to the north of us ships were reporting dense fog in a belt approximately a hundred miles long. Calling the *Atlantic*, I asked him very casually if he were having fog too. He said “No”. Therefore, *Atlantic* was probably south of us. A freighter to the east of the fog bank reported strong northeast—or for us, headwinds. Enquiring of the *Atlantic* as to how they liked headwinds elicited the response that he didn’t know as they were not having any. Foiled again! The operator knew by this time that I was after information, so said he didn’t even know if there was any wind nor what the barometer reading was. In fact, he knew nothing about nothing and was quite sorry, but what kind of wind were we having? We shut down with honors about even.

Later that same day I heard him talking to a freighter and using ICW. Now, I was aware this could hardly be read over a greater distance than fifty miles, especially through the noontime interference. I couldn’t copy his signals at all, yet the freighter experienced no difficulty. I managed to get the freighter’s position, and she was found to be nearly two hundred miles astern of us. Allowing for a possible error of twenty-five miles in my deduction, we conceded the *Atlantic* to be at least 125 miles behind, a guess which later proved quite accurate. We had passed her during the several days of heavy winds.

And thus the race proceeded. I even had some passenger vessels whom I knew to be equipped with radio direction finders (RDFs) to try and take a bearing on her. This always failed for when the RDF ships were standing by, the *Atlantic* operator would choose this time for a siesta or else work on the higher waves.

The *Atlantic* was not without tricks too. One night in answer to his call he requested the time. I naturally gave him the correct standard time of Greenwich. He then asked for our local time, but his object was plain. We found later that he worked this on the *Guinevere* quite

successfully. Of course, our local time would have disclosed the longitude to within a few degrees.

About this time, I learned that the *Zodiac* was about four-hundred miles behind and therefore not to be considered very seriously. The *Guinevere* was also behind, or so we thought, while the *Azara*, not having radio, was, of course, unheard from. Near the end of the race excitement aboard was always at a fever heat. My appearance on deck was greeted with dozens of questions concerning the *Atlantic*. “Where is she?” “How far behind is *Atlantic*?” “Is that right? *Atlantic* is 200 miles ahead of us?” A mere suggestion was sufficient to set all hands talking and a score of rumors would go the rounds. A goodly portion of my time was spent in assuring these gullible ones that the *Atlantic* had not yet arrived, nor was she almost in, nor had she caught fire or been rammed by a steamer.

While some distance to the north and east of the Azores we heard the *Guinivere* establish communications with the Spanish radio station located on Cape Finesterre. This came as a surprise and caused considerable apprehension both to us and the *Atlantic*. Neither of us could raise this station, hence *Guinevere* must be ahead of both of us. We had been watching each other to the exclusion of *Guinivere* and she had slipped ahead. We combined forces to try and determine her position, but her operator laid low and let us worry.

For several days the *Atlantic*'s man had kept up a barrage of banter calculated to “get my goat”, and so unthinkingly give out information concerning our position or something that would enable them to locate us. Knowing their purpose, I avoided the pitfalls and started a campaign of my own. Mentioning casually certain mishaps that occurred aboard, such as one of the refrigerators breaking down, a sail or so being ripped, they formed, or rather, jumped at conclusions and decided we must be far behind. The idea was fostered in every manner possible. Every day I would inform him that his signals were getting weaker, giving the impression he was drawing ahead quite rapidly. And just to be sure ours would be as weak as I said his was, the power would be systematically decreased while working him.

The first really definite information concerning their progress came the night before our arrival in Santander. Mr. Lambert, *Atlantic*'s owner, wished to exchange positions with us. This was declined with thanks by Mr. Bell as well as the *Guinevere*'s owners. This operator then told *Guinevere* and I to listen on 600 meters as he was going to send a message that might interest us. It did. Their position was given as 180 miles from Santander at 10 PM, placing them some fifty miles behind us. I immediately congratulated him on the *Atlantic*'s wonderful performance, and

even asked if they had perchance cut in their engines at any time, or possibly, picked up a tow by the *Leviathan* or *Majestic*. He assured me quite seriously they had used only their sails, and just to show what a good fellow he was he said he would take a picture of us when we finally arrived, if we ever did.

Next morning the *Atlantic* overhauled the *Guinevere* and the two were making quite a race of it. We at this time being almost in sight of the finish line, I encouraged the *Atlantic* at every opportunity. Once in answer to a question as to whether the *Guinevere* was actually in sight he answered, “Yes, but he won’t be long. We’re passing him like nobody’s business.” There wasn’t a cloud in the *Atlantic*’s sky – not a fly to be seen in the ointment anywhere. Deeming the situation well in hand and the race all over but the shouting, *Atlantic*’s man apparently went off duty for a well-earned rest, or possibly to figure out how to spend his prize money.

At about 2:30 we crossed the finish line. Mr. Bell immediately filed a long message to be transmitted immediately. Before so doing I wished to return the favor to *Atlantic* of the evening before, and so called both he and *Guinevere* telling them to listen on 600 meters as I was going to send a message that might interest them. Only the *Guinevere* copied it. *Atlantic*’s man still was absent from the air.

Our arrival was the signal for a wonderful reception by the populace of Santander. It was entirely impromptu as the *Atlantic* was not expected until the next day and our entry came as a complete surprise. Hundreds of craft tooted their welcome, and rockets were bursting in the air as the King of Spain and his Queen came alongside to offer their hearty congratulations to the winner of his Cup.

Three hours after crossing the line and being towed up the channel to an anchorage off the Yacht Club, I donned the phones to see what comments, if any, *Atlantic* had to offer. And just in time too. *Guinevere*’s operator, having been subjected to some kidding, was retaliating. He asked *Atlantic* if he had heard from *Elena*. *Atlantic* said “No, not since this morning. Why? What happened to her?” *Guinevere* answered, “Nothing happened to her, but you fellows are sure due for a surprise – she crossed the line at 2:30 PM.”

“Baloney,” was the prompt retort. “We are due to win this race, one of you are trying to spoof me.”

“Yeah,” came back *Guinevere*, “well this is one race you’ll never win.” Thereupon he informed *Atlantic* of all that had transpired, even giving him a copy of the message we sent.

After it was over *Atlantic* said, “Oh! What a blow that is, and I just got through figuring out how to spend my prize money.”

And so ended the first ocean yacht race since 1905. Sailing July 7th, we arrived in Santander July 24th, just sixteen days and twenty hours underway. Both *Atlantic* and *Guinevere* arrived the following day after they had been becalmed almost in sight of the goal for many hours.

I saw Pick the other day. He is now in charge of the Aeronautics Department of the RCA. He said as long as I survived the yacht to come around and see him sometime soon, and he would try to fix me up with a nice job on an airplane. Nice fellow, Pick, and a good friend too – but sometimes I wonder -.