

# SKIP NOVAK

EVEN AFTER THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF SEA MILES,  
YOU CAN STILL GET CAUGHT OUT BY THE BASICS

**W**hen first taking *Vinson of Antarctica* out of the Hamble River I had to think quickly on my feet which way those black triangles face on west and east cardinal marks... It had been not years, but decades, since I had been out in the Solent.

I got a further shock on our maiden voyage up the channel, through the Dover Straits and into the North Sea. Traffic Separation Schemes, buoys lit and unlit, wind farms and oil rigs to dodge, with endless heads ups and chatter on the VHF channels. The Admiralty paper chart of the southern North Sea was indecipherable due to the amount of information on that scale of 1:750,000.

I know for sailors used to this, on-watch attention span means everything. But by comparison I must admit that it's a pleasure leaving Port Stanley in the Falklands. When you're abeam of Pembroke Lighthouse there is a bank to dodge and that's it. Time to relax, feet up on the pilot house console with a *Tin Tin* adventure to hand and a cuppa.

I know what you're thinking: surely this guy must know about this stuff? I do, but much has been lost to memory due to lack of use while in Southern Ocean environs. Rest assured I got back in the frame quickly.

Yes, I have both RYA Yachtmaster Offshore and Ocean tickets. Which brings me to a story I was reminded of when we crossed the Solent on *Vinson* on our way to Cowes. It must have been in the late 1970s, possibly the early '80s when I took the one day assessment for the Yachtmaster Offshore, long before it was a de facto requirement for a yacht skipper. This one day assessment is still in force.

I borrowed a 40-footer in Port Hamble from my friend Archie and seconded another friend and sailor, Geoff, to be my crew. The examiner arrived on time at 0900 and while stepping into the cockpit badly twisted her ankle. Geoff called for ice and massaged her ankle, all the while me thinking, quite inappropriately, this could all work in my favour. I was brought up sharp though when, motoring out of the river, Archie poked his head up in the companionway and asked who would

like a gin and tonic? We made light of it while frantically signalling to Archie to stand down. Archie, with a face like a red traffic signal, had been serious.

The first and probably the most important task was the blind navigation exercise in fog, which began off the Hamble River entrance, where from down below I had to dead reckon with the occasional cue ("I hear a bell off to starboard") from the examiner on deck, navigate across to Cowes Green, surprising myself with my success when allowed on deck. With that in the bag, and Geoff mentioning without prompting that I'd been around the world a few times already, we sailed for the Beaulieu River on a tidal calculation and picked up a piling, all part of the syllabus. While tied up, it was time to go through the

Morse Code, signal flags (now both obsolete), buoys, lights and shapes, and Colregs, which I certainly had to swot up for. Getting the first few questions in each category right, we dispensed with the rest, as she said, "seems like you know

them!" And then we had a nice lunch – and that was it.

Was this rigorous enough then, as it is now? Certainly it is a case of the examiner having full confidence you know what you're on about. Nothing more needs to be done. But, like any surveyor, if they find rot in the bilges or a corroded frame in one place they'll dig deeper and no doubt find more. It is the same for the RYA examiners and rightly so; confuse the lights on a fishing vessel with the lights on a fishing vessel that's trawling and you might be headed for Davy Jones.

The RYA has now become the blue chip standard for training and small boat licensing, represented in 58 countries by 25,000 instructors. The strengths are that in all stages of the progression up to Yachtmaster Offshore there are practical aspects on the water that you must do to prove you can handle small craft. Compare this with the US Coastguard system where, I believe, with the appropriate sea time – in no matter what capacity – if you sit the written exams successfully you can get a license to navigate a 100 tonne vessel. American exceptionalism? Surely, along with red right returning. ■

**'Surely this guy must know about this stuff?'**

