



“NO PAY, NO PROSPECTS, NOT MUCH PLEASURE”

The following is an abridged version of a conversation I had with Bob Comlay and Roger Robinson who, while in their late teens, had both sailed with Tilman. We met at the Lymington Town Sailing Club of which Tilman had been a long-standing member, and from where he set sail on many of his voyages to higher climes.

Roger Robinson had sailed in 1966 aboard “Mischief”, the first of three Bristol Channel pilot cutters Tilman was to own over the years. Roger was to later own a pilot cutter of his own named “Olga”, which he sold to Swansea Maritime Museum after seven years of restoration work. Now a Devonshire architect of some repute, Roger always had a strong passion for ocean sailing, and at the time of writing is deeply embroiled in researching a book about the celebrated sailing partnership of Eric and Susan Hiscock. Roger’s extensive knowledge of sailing and boats have proved immensely helpful to this author who can at best be described as a complete maladroit in matters nautical.

Bob Comlay had made two voyages to Greenland in 1970 and 1971 in the pilot cutter “Sea Breeze”, and his memories of those experiences with Tilman are still vivid today helped in no small part by a collection of remarkably good photographs. Bob pursued a successful career with IBM, though by the time I met him he expressed a certain regret at not having continued with a life of adventure abroad. Certainly, he was one of the few crew members for whom Tilman had enough respect to invite him back for subsequent voyages. But the obligations and pressures of going to university at that time in his life took priority, and soon thereafter the constraints of work and family caught up as they do for most of us. Yet, at that first meeting, I detected in Bob a quiet resolve to make up for lost time and chalk up some new adventures as time moves on.

ROBINSON: "This is terribly stimulating actually thinking back about it all. Do you think back of those trips from time to time?"

COMLAY: "Yes, fairly often. The first trip affected me profoundly. I was seventeen when I first met him and I was only just eighteen when we first sailed together, and it was it was a completely alien experience to me. I had always loved boats, and there was a boat that was almost beyond belief. She [Sea Breeze] was a lovely boat to sail in with a crew which included two people that I came to really admire: the skipper Bill Tilman, and Colin Putt..."

ROBINSON: "Oh really, Colin Putt was on the same trip?"

COMLAY: "Yes, he was on that first trip. There was the skipper, Colin Putt, and three youngsters, and it was just a wonderful experience. I had not anticipated the sheer beauty of Greenland, having expected it to be a barren and desolate place. In reality, the light and the colors were so lovely, with ice (which you tend to think of as white) appearing in every color under the sun. It was so peaceful. Delays and bad weather on the return trip meant that I I was already a week late for my first term at university, a fact that brought the trip to an abrupt end for me"

ROBINSON: "You already had a place?"

COMLAY: "I already had a place. I had been working in a factory making very little in terms of wages, so it was a welcome relief to go sailing. The second trip was somewhat different; I learned half way through that voyage that in my rush to join the ship I'd I had paid too little attention to the end of year examinations, and a four month voyage north left me no opportunity to re-take a failed maths paper. The return from Greenland that year was a depressing event for me, made more real by a relatively swift passage through the English Channel suddenly surrounded by a mass of shipping. Evidence of the rat race of England which, after another summer in Greenland, didn't seem a good place to be. How about you?"

ROBINSON: "Well, I'd sailed before meeting Bill Tilman and had even sailed in a Bristol Channel pilot cutter, called the 'Marguerite T'. I was at college in

Southampton, doing a boatyard management course. I wanted to be a boat builder basically because that was the only way I could see of being close to boats all the time and doing some sailing. I had read one of his books called 'Mischief in Patagonia', and then went to one of his lectures here in the town sailing club one evening. I couldn't believe having read the book that I was actually listening to Tilman. At the end of the lecture I spoke with him, and let him know that if he needed crew for his next trip, I would be interested. He was a bit wary of this because I don't think anybody had volunteered in that sort of manner, particularly if they had been with him before! He was rather bowled over and I think a bit taken back, and his reaction after looking me up and down was that 'I was a bit light for the gear'. Nonetheless, he was kind enough to say that if I still felt I wanted to go in a day or two to come and see the boat, "and that should put you off!"

So I went down to Lymington on a Saturday to see the boat in its mud berth. Being an enthusiastic apprentice boat builder, I wasn't put off by the fact that she was damp and smelly, and very much out of commission tilted at an angle in the mud berth. Anyway, I got them [the college] to give me time off from the sandwich course that I was doing in boatbuilding and go off with Tilman for a year as part of my training. They actually thought it a good idea. How did you hear about him?"

COMLAY: "Well, I actually have my late mother to thank for that. It was Christmas 1999 and with a guaranteed place at university starting in September I had some time on my hands which needed filling. A couple of years before, I had sailed on the sail training schooner "Sir Winston Churchill" a trip which reinforced a love of the sea picked up from a variety of sailing experiences, mostly in smaller boats. During that Christmas holiday, I'd been reading a copy of the Sail Training Association Journal in which Tilman had inserted one of his typical crew advertisements- - the kind of "Crew wanted for long voyage in small boat" sort of thing, which looked quite out of place in that particular publication. Presumably sensing an opportunity to rid herself of the lodger, my mother suggested that I write to him, which I did. That was the start of correspondence I was to have with him for six or seven years. In the beginning, his letters were addressed "Dear Comley...", then improved to "Dear Comlay...", but after I'd sailed with him the letters were addressed "Dear Bob...". I'd finally made the grade!

I first met him in the February of 1970 down here [in Lymington], came straight onto the boat, and immediately introduced myself to the wrong person! At the same time, Brian Potter (one of the crew from the previous year's trip) was also on board, a bank manager who was much taller and more imposing than the skipper who, as you know, was fairly small and unobtrusive. When I introduced myself to Brian as "Major Tilman, I presume" the correction came from Brian and was speedily corrected.

They both commented on the fact that there was a problem with the pump, so I got down in the bilges and started clearing out the filter in the strum box of the pump. This evidently pleased him because he thought he had an engineering type on his hands. He actually described me in one of his books as being "slightly built and not likely to break a rope by heaving on it"! Coming from him that was quite interesting because he was probably smaller in stature than me which at my age then was saying something.

However, I must confess I fell in love with the boat when I first saw her even in winter laid-up condition."

ROBINSON: "Of his three boats, she was easily the most beautiful...by far the most traditional."

COMLAY: "Yes, she was the most traditionally rigged apart from a hideous hydraulic winch on the foredeck."

ROBINSON: "Did it work?"

COMLAY: "We actually did use it for getting the anchor cable up on odd occasions. It was actually easier to use the engine to get the anchor up than it was to actually break out the anchor using the winch handles. But it was a hideous eyesore."

GLEN: "Roger, what was your overall impression when you first met Tilman at that lecture?"

ROBINSON: "Well, hearing him lecture he was obviously a very reticent and quietly spoken chap...there is no doubt about that. I was nineteen (well I was eighteen then I suppose) and was in awe of him, and I had to sort of summon

up the courage to go up and talk to him. But he was perfectly prepared to listen to somebody and talk to you just as an ordinary bloke. I mean there was nothing very outstanding about him at all, and I think that's characteristic."

GLEN: "Someone said that they were really surprised by how diminutive he was."

COMLAY: "Yes, I expected somebody more imposing not just visually but also as a spoken person. After replying to the advert I went to the local library and borrowed all the Tilman books I could find, and it was only then that I realized how extensive his travels had been. I had known nothing of the man beforehand, but by the time I met him I had at least some small insight into his history. When I met him I was quite taken aback because I was expecting somebody far more imposing, and with far greater presence than he had..."

GLEN: "That was part of his personality though, wasn't it?"

COMLAY: "Yes, it was. He was very self-effacing. There was a hilarious illustration of this in Iceland the following year. We were up against the dock wall repairing the boat, and a Yorkshireman, a tourist, came along the quayside, and said, 'Pilot cutter eh? Where are you going?' Our reply of 'Greenland' was met with the comment 'Ah, following in Tilman's footsteps, eh!?' The skipper just looked at him and simply said, 'Indeed', and we just carried on with our work on deck. He didn't admit to being Tilman and we just let the joke continue. He was a very modest person."

ROBINSON: "He would love the humor of that wouldn't he?"

COMLAY: "He loved it!"

GLEN: "It seems that a lot of people misinterpreted what was obviously a really dry sense of humor for a lack of caring or insensitivity?"

ROBINSON: "Yes, a rudeness even. It was a reticence which was misinterpreted as rudeness from time to time. There are famous stories aren't there of his lack of conversation...and I think that he didn't speak unless he thought there

was something to say. He wouldn't just speak for the hell of it about anything in my experience. It was a very long time ago for me I have to say, and I don't remember any very long conversations with him in the months and months that I spent with him, and certainly when I was working on the boat here in Lyminster we would talk together about perhaps the next jobs that needed to be done on the boat but I don't remember any tremendously inspiring conversations or anything like that."

COMLAY: "Conversations used to break out if you had a good day, or if you'd achieved something of note, for example if you'd managed to reach a cape that you were looking for, or you'd found a decent anchorage after a long hard day. Then, very occasionally, we'd break the Saturday night ritual of having a drink, and maybe mid-week after a good day we'd break out a drink, and then he'd light the pipe, and eventually a story would start to come out of him. Occasionally, you'd get some wonderful stories but you had to have the right sense of achievement for him to come out of his shell and share."

GLEN: "He was like that about money matters too wasn't he...he was very careful with spending...is frugal a way to describe his attitude to money?"

ROBINSON: "Certainly, he was frugal in the way he lived."

COMLAY: "I don't think it was actually an attitude to money; it was more an attitude towards necessity. If something was in any way deemed a luxury, then it was dispensed with. Taking food as an example, supplies were limited to the bare necessity to support five fit men for four months with the minimum of unnecessary variety. This led to the staple protein supply of 200 tins of corn beef, 60 tins of pilchards, 60 tins of sardines and a dozen whole cheddar cheeses."

GLEN: "Well it was the same thing with mountaineering. He and Eric Shipton would be sent off on a Himalayan expedition by the Royal Geographical Society, and they'd be offered an amount of money as a budget, and they'd say, 'Oh God, that's way too much. Just give us three hundred pounds and we'll see you in 3 months time.' It was always amazing to see what they could achieve in the mountains on so little."

COMLAY: "Yet I never felt in any way deprived on either of the 4 month long trips. In fact, I came back feeling fitter and happier than any other time. I mean I hate to think now of going for a whole week without having a drink to be honest, but I remember fondly those Saturday evenings on the boat after a dinner of curry and a duff, and we'd break out either the Rum or the Gin or the Whiskey, and have a drink—a single drink, that was it. What more did you need? Considering food as fuel rather than luxury, the fare provided on the boat was actually good."

ROBINSON: "Yes, we had rice, and corn beef, and tinned peas, and double baked bread. Did you have double baked bread?"

COMLAY: "We had double baked bread for the first month or so, and then after the first month it had turned green with mould. Once on the coast of Greenland, we'd replenish stocks with the local black rye bread."

ROBINSON: "Oh right, of course, that must have been nice. He gave me some rye bread when I met him in Lymington. It was left over from one of his trips!"

COMLAY: "I had the good fortune to be at the University of Wales in Bangor and Tilman lived in Barmouth, some sixty miles to the south, a wet, lengthy hitchhike from Bangor. I visited on a few occasions and we'd settle down to lunch of homemade bread, cheese and beer. His homemade bread and homemade beer were simple, well made food of which he took justifiable pride.. After lunch, we would take the two dogs for a walk up the hill, the hill being Cadr Idris, which was almost in his back garden which was delightful. And he used to talk a lot on those trips. In the winter, when he wasn't actually sailing, he lived there with his sister with whom he was extremely close. But he was a different personality at home to the one we knew on the boat."

GLEN: "Well, he didn't have that sense of responsibility I guess that he had for his crew."

COMLAY: "No, and he was looked after and kept a little more civilized by his sister and nieces."

ROBINSON: "And he wasn't having to think about the handling of the boat and the navigation, and the responsibility for everybody else."

GLEN: "So despite some of the stories one hears, do you think he really had a strong sense of responsibility for his crews?"

COMLAY: "My view was it was either a caring for the crew, or it was his caring for the boat. But certainly if the crew was at any time wary, you'd find that the skipper would be either on deck doing some repairs or he'd be down below reading a book with his pipe while they were on watch. I think the ultimate trust came on the first trip when we had a couple of days in which he had been awake I think for 48 hours non-stop, and we got our heads together and decided when we were at anchorage that we'd just weren't going to wake him for his anchor watch, and we were just going to let him sleep through. He was so annoyed in the morning by not being called for his watch! He just did not approve of that.

He certainly felt a sense of responsibility for me after I was thrown out of the university for the second year running. He did feel that he had been to some extent a bad influence on me, and had some sense of responsibility for that. He was very relieved when I finally settled down and got myself a steady job although he would be horrified if he knew I was still there 25 years later!"

GLEN: "Roger, following on from that, when you sailed down to Montevideo with Tilman and lost David Shaw overboard, you must have all been very shocked when that happened. What was Tilman's general reaction? How did you perceive his handling of that issue?"

ROBINSON: "He was terribly shocked and terribly sad as we all were. I remember him saying, 'do we really want to carry on?' We hove to at the end of the day after looking for David Shaw, and as night fell we decided to sleep on it. He said we'd all make a decision in the morning as to whether we carry on, or whether we would turnaround and go back. I think he was shaken by it without a doubt."

GLEN: "How many days did you spend looking for David Shaw?"

ROBINSON: "Oh, it was only the one day because he was lost over the side very early in the morning, and we were reaching at the time so we worked out the reciprocal course, and spent the day going backwards and forwards, back up that reciprocal course, but by nightfall there was clearly no point in looking any longer. We were all up the mast, and up the ratlines looking and taking turns to steer, but we spent all day looking for him in quite choppy conditions.

I think he was a bit surprised when we all decided unanimously that we certainly wanted to carry on but here was nothing else to do. In fact, the practicality of going back at that stage would have meant heading west across to the United States to pick up the westerlies because we were at the time supposedly in the northeast trades (although we were reaching and not actually running). But I can't remember how many days out we were at that stage but we still had a month at sea before reaching Montevideo."

GLEN: "Wasn't David Shaw taken along for his navigational skills?"

ROBINSON: "Well, he was taken along I think because he had experience of being at sea as a merchant naval officer. I think that Bill Tilman hoped he might be able to take command of Mischief once we got to Deception Island and Smith Island so he could go ashore and do some climbing with the two other climbers. I think that is why David Shaw was recruited.

My own view is actually that David Shaw hadn't done very much sailing in this sort of boat, and okay he was clearly a good professional navigator but whether or not he would've had the experience to take command of Mischief by the time we got down to Smith Island I think is perhaps debatable. But certainly I think that was Tilman's aim."

GLEN: "What do you think about the way they disappeared in 1977? What are the chances of their having been hit by a large ship? Even with someone standing up on the bridge of a large cargo vessel, it's possible that at night the small tug they were in might not have been seen or even felt if they hit it. Talk a little about that."

ROBINSON: "That's got to be a possibility, and I think the strongest possibility. I don't know very much about the condition of the boat that they were in but from the photographs I've seen she clearly wasn't designed and built for the

purpose for which she was being used at the time. Whether she was modified sufficiently to be taken on that sort of a passage I don't know. I do know that you can get some fairly strong winds not very far south of Rio where they were last heard of. Certainly in the Mischief we had very strong winds off the mouth of the River Plate locally known as 'sudestadas', southeasterly gales with ferocious gusts, but they were heading much further south than straight for the Falklands. Certainly, south of the River Plate, the weather gets progressively worse—potentially progressively worse—the further south you go. So clearly there are the possibilities of being caught with too much sail up, and the boat actually being swamped. But she could also have easily been run down without a doubt. From my own experience, when I was working my passage back from Argentina later the following year, I was up on the bridge waiting for my turn to steer longer than it took for the ship to complete one horizon of movement so to speak without anybody being on watch at all. We were on auto pilot and it is quite clear that she [the tug] could have easily been run down within days of leaving Rio."

COMLAY: "Do you think that they would have left her helm unmanned because, with the number of crew they had, I thought there would always have been someone on deck?"

ROBINSON: "Yes, but they might not have been able to avoid a collision just because there was somebody on deck."

COMLAY: "My lasting memory of having seeing En Avant before she sailed was that this is not really the kind of boat that I would want to spend a long time on. I know that Sandy Lee was concerned that the way Simon [Richardson] had attached the keel and modified the hull didn't appear to be terribly robust in his view. I just felt that she wasn't really designed for sail; she was clearly heavy and in the event of a large sea and broaching, she would have been swamped. Nevertheless, the indications from the letters sent home from Rio were that they had a good passage thus far, and she'd been reasonably well fancied."

ROBINSON: "Did she have any bad weather between Lynington and Rio?"

COMLAY: "I don't know ... Simon Richardson certainly wrote back that they had a good trip but I think he was talking about the personalities. The skipper himself in his letters clearly understates everything (being the master of understatement) so it's pretty hard to tell. Probably not. I mean in the North Atlantic and the Southern Ocean you're more likely to get serious conditions."

ROBINSON: "Yes, it's perfectly feasible to go from Lymington to Rio without experiencing any weather over Force 7 or so, 6 or 7."

COMLAY: "What were the worst seas that you encountered with *Mischief*?"

ROBINSON: "Well as you know I only went as far as Montevideo, and the worst seas we did have were near gale force winds off Cape Frio—actually only a bit further north from Rio—and certainly the seas were big there because they were ocean swells, and I always remember counting to ten fairly slowly to see how long it took for one wave crest for one crest to the next, which is a fairly lengthy sea. But we had a fairly stiff wind when we left Lymington in the first place, and most of us were fairly sea sick—I was very sea sick in fact. I don't recall how windy it was. I don't think it was terribly bad but we were hard on the wind. So I suppose the biggest seas that we had when I was aboard in low latitudes was that gale off Cape Frio. We had gale force gusts off the mouth of the River Plate but I don't recall that the seas were that big. But I'm sure that they could have had much worse seas as soon as they got into proper weather from the South some of which I had experienced in the Falklands."

COMLAY: "Yes, on the Greenland trips certainly, because they were four month summer trips coming back in September, you use to end up with gales, and in 1970 we had four whole gales in eleven days. I was going through my diary the other day looking at both years running (1970 and 1971), and within about a week of being out on both voyages we lost the gaff. This was not through negligence; but due to a weakness in design. She had a very light gaff, very heavy flax canvas sails and a very heavy boom. In heavy weather, reefed right down, the gaff took quite a pounding with the ship rolling. Losing the gaff then meant sailing for almost a week using the old topsail rigged as a trysail while we made repairs to the rig.

After those stormy crossings on both trips, the skipper's navigation never

failed to astonish us: both years running we made a landfall with the Bishop Rock lighthouse right on the bow almost to the hour when he predicted it would be."

GLEN: "This was quite a controversial point, wasn't it? A lot of people thought he was a real hit-and-miss navigator. Apparently that just wasn't true at all. Didn't he have an uncanny sense—a good sense—for navigation?"

COMLAY: "His ocean navigation was outstanding. We sailed with a deck watch which had been badly serviced, and it packed up within months. A sextant similarly well serviced that by the end of the trip you could see three suns and three horizons, so you had to take your pick! We had an old transistor radio on which we could get a Greenwich time signal, if we were lucky, every four or five days,. Yet his transoceanic navigation landfall to landfall was fantastic. Where it fell down was when we made a landfall, he was not good at allowing for the set of the tides to the extent that, after a remarkable crossing in 1970, coming back after four full gales, we still made the Bishop Rock right on schedule, but from the Bishop Rock on the following day we headed up into Mount's Bay past Land's End, and then found that we were in fact heading up the Bristol Channel having mistaken St. Mary's and the Sillies for the Land's End. That was a simple mistake based on the set of the tides, not helped by the fact that we were distracted by volumes of shipping that we hadn't encountered for months. I wouldn't say that he made mistakes like that often, but when he did, he'd invariably own up to them and make a joke of it at his own expense.

I've heard people say that it was a common thing that people were either good ocean navigators or good coastal navigators but it's a very rare thing that you actually find the two skills combined in one person."

ROBINSON: "Yes, certainly pilotage or coastal navigation and pilotage are a very different kettle of fish. He was obviously very competent at taking good and accurate sun sights, and star sights. Without a doubt he was good at that. He certainly had a lot more practice than most people too because he did ocean passages year after year, and to survive those he must have got pretty good at it. I don't have any particular memories of any coastal navigation at all apart from going up the River Plate where we virtually followed the buoys.

It was all very shallow; but certainly offshore he knew where he was most of the time, and he had a good, perfectly adequate technique taking sights."

GLEN: "Roger, tell us about the whole scenario of leaving the boat in Montevideo, and the other crew involved, and how you felt about the whole thing. You had correspondence with Tilman in the years after that, didn't you?"

ROBINSON: "I did indeed, yes. Well, we had been at sea for 62 days after Las Palmas, and by the time we actually came to anchor in Puerto Buceo which is the yacht harbour of Montevideo, and within about twelve hours, Mike Edwards and John Ireland both decided to leave which left Bill Tilman, Tom the Irish cook, and myself on board. I was disappointed or slightly disillusioned by my perception at that time of Tilman's leadership. I was sad that these other people felt that they could even consider leaving the boat really, and that he didn't seem to have done anything terribly much to persuade them to stay or inspire them to stay. So I remember being disappointed. There had been talk of who was going to stay and who was going to leave on the boat perhaps two or three weeks leading up to when we arrived there."

GLEN: "Was that after David Shaw's disappearance?"

ROBINSON: "No, curiously enough I don't think the fact that he disappeared had any bearing whatsoever on whether or not anybody decided to stay or leave. Everybody was a very sad...a very sad thing had happened. But it was one of those things that do happen if you go to sea. Curiously enough, just the other day I was reading about somebody who also sailed with Bobby Somerset with whom Bill Tilman had sailed on 'Iolare' before he bought 'Mischief'. Bobby Somerset is quoted (and I always wondered where this quotation came from) in this article by one of his crew as talking to everybody when they went off soundings off Gibraltar going across the Atlantic. He said, 'look the thing to remember is to consider that the sea is molten lead and that you don't fall into it because if you do it's very dangerous stuff to fall into being molten lead.'

I think that was a very good approach, and I think that if you go sailing on a boat that's the kind of approach you have to take. So okay occasionally someone makes a mistake or gets washed overboard and that is that. These days, everybody wears harnesses at the drop of a hat, but we are talking

about the 1960's and 70's and I don't think people had the same relationship with technical equipment that they have now. They didn't feel it necessary to rely on such things.

So anyway, I don't think the fact that David Shaw was lost over the side had any bearing whatsoever on whether or not anybody considered leaving or staying. Actually, I think it was more a matter of whether or not they felt they were enjoying the trip enough to want to continue."

GLEN: "And they hadn't paid to go, nor were they being paid, and so Tilman's attitude was to do whatever you liked because he didn't have a hold on you."

ROBINSON: "Yes, I think Tilman's attitude was that he felt people did have a moral obligation to stick with the ship actually regardless. I think that was his view."

COMLAY: "He expected people to be loyal but if they chose otherwise, that was very much their decision. But he did expect people to take the rough with the smooth."

GLEN: "No pain no prospects not much pleasure!"

ROBINSON: "Yes, right, enjoy it with your eyes open. He didn't try and hood-wink anybody into pretending it was going to be a yachting trip.

Anyway, so that was that. He did ask if I was going to stay or go off with the others, and my discussion with him revolved around what he was going to do next because I had joined to go south. I wanted to go in the footsteps of Scott and people like that. I had read the books, and I was an incurable romantic (I still am, I suppose) and loved the idea of going south. That was what I wanted to do—to go to the Antarctic particularly. That's what I joined for.

There was another reason why I was very disappointed. It looked as if there were only three of us left on the boat, and Tilman's plan was to try to get the boat to Cape Town, South Africa, where he had good made good friends in the past. He was fairly confident that he would pick up good reliable blokes there to help get the boat back to the U.K. So he asked Tom and I if we were up for taking the boat over to Cape Town, and I explained to him that I had

wanted to try and go south. Tilman said that I must do whatever I wished to do and I said that I would like to see if I could get to the Falkland Islands, and possibly get a job as a deck hand with the British Antarctic Survey. So I did get in touch with people in the Falkland Islands Company, and was in fact offered a job down there. I discussed this with Tilman and he said of course it was up to me.

So that's what I actually did. I went down to the Falklands and worked for the Falkland Island Company."

COMLAY: "I think that he never felt he had a hold over anybody because nobody paid a contribution towards his trips, therefore they were their own men.

I think it's worth exploring the safety aspects of his boats and trips. It was amusing the other day when we were aboard 'Mascotte' going through the lists that Tony Winter, her owner, had of life rafts, flares, radio, and so forth, that are required for safety by the Board of Trade. On Tilman's 'Sea Breeze', we possessed just one of the items on that list, and that was the pump. We had a pump and actually we did have a fire extinguisher. When I was going through my diary the other day, I found where the diesel stove burst into flames one day and we actually had to use a fire extinguisher to put it out."

ROBINSON: "And it worked?"

COMLAY: "Yes, it did work, but we spent about a week clearing up the powder from the cabin afterwards! Seriously, I often look back on that and I think it was just an act of complete naiveté as an eighteen year old to believe that the skipper was right when he said we didn't need life rafts, we didn't need life belts or life jackets, safety lines, or two-way radio. His attitude was if you don't have these things, then you better make damn sure that you don't get into trouble! In many ways, he was right."

ROBINSON: "His attitude was self-reliance, and certainly the last thing he would have ever have wanted to have done I think would be to call out the lifeboat had there been one available. I think that would have gone against the grain."

GLEN: "Did he also sort of think that if you are going to go overboard in cold frigid waters a life jacket is not going to save you anyway?"

COMLAY: "Well, this subject came up on the west coast when he lost his favorite hat over the side. We were sailing along well, it was a nice day with good visibility, and we thought we'd simply go about and pick up the skipper's hat. Forty five minutes later we'd given up on the attempt to get close enough to pick it up (and this was in good weather conditions). It was a very sobering experience because it made you realize that in 45 minutes in water at that temperature you would not be conscious. In fact it was later in that evening that the skipper was talking about David Shaw. Yeah. It was just a passing comment but you know it was something that certainly preyed on his mind."

ROBINSON: "On 'Mischief', when David Shaw was lost, we were in the habit of lashing the tiller so the boat would sail herself while you went and had a pee. Did you do the same?"

COMLAY: "Yes, we did. The trick was to lash the helm and trim the rig and not touch the helm again for the entire two-hour watch. If the conditions were right with the cutter you could do that, and obviously get up and take a walk around the deck or a leak. If the boat did meet any kind of a swell then with just a steel wire guard rail for protection, you could easily see how someone could go over the side, and you could see also how she could sail herself for two hours and nobody down below would notice."

GLEN: Presumably, that's what happened to David Shaw. Roger, do you have any theories about what made him go over?"

ROBINSON: "No theories whatsoever. No ideas at all, really."

COMLAY: "Well, it was just after the turn of the watch wasn't it?"

ROBINSON: "I think that it was within the first half hour, yes."

COMLAY: "I think from reading the book and going back over the log, the time when the Walker cable went the log rating was just after the turn of the watch,

and quite likely he had been raised from his bunk and went up on deck. The first thing that you tend to do when you are up on deck is go have a pee—we've all done it I think. It's easily done."

ROBINSON: "Which meant of course it was that much longer before the alarm was given when somebody came up to relieve him. I think in fact it was the skipper—Tilman himself, was it not?"

COMLAY: "It was the six till eight watch which means there would have been a few people awake, and the cook would have been up probably.

Anyway I look back now and wonder if you really need all of those safety aids. Safety aids do tend to give you a false sense of security. I think it was nice not to have the guard rail on "Mascotte"...she looks beautiful without one, and a guard rail would get in the way of the gear. But on a long Atlantic crossing that's kind of irrelevant. What was missing from that day we had sailing with "Mascotte" was the four months in the middle from setting up to coming back, and for long Atlantic crossings there is very little that you need to do on deck unless the weather conditions change. You can literally spend the entire two hours on watch with the helm lashed just watching the sails, gently trimming the tiller unless the conditions change. So what you would tend to do is to get up and walk around, and look at the gear, and check blocks, and check for chafing, and you might even do little jobs around the boat, and come back from time to time to check the heading. But you wouldn't stay in the cockpit for those two hours, and although you would never actually clip yourself onto a safety line when you were walking around like that, a guard rail is useful."

ROBINSON: "No, we wouldn't [clip into a safety line] in those sorts of boats thirty years ago, but people do now. People now go cruising on smaller boats admittedly, and have rules whereby anybody on watch alone at night will not leave the cockpit unless they are clipped onto a safety line. I think a lot more people cruise now than perhaps they did thirty years ago, and I think there is a different attitude now towards the provision of safety equipment for a start, and I think the self-reliance approach has been eclipsed by the use of good technology and skill and so on. It's a different general attitude."

COMLAY: "I think it worth thinking about the boats as well because I've sailed

quite a few boats but 'Sea Breeze' was certainly one of the best sea boats under a sail. She was a very safe boat to sail."

ROBINSON: "Yes, well most cutters are."

COMLAY: "Yes. You never actually felt unsafe on the boat. The only time I felt remotely unsafe was the first of the four gales coming home in 1970 when she was leaking like a sieve because of the battering we had in the ice during the summer. At that time we had one man lashed in the cockpit just watching the sails hoist to, and one man permanently pumping down below."

GLEN: "When you were up in Arctic waters around Greenland, the whole watch thing was different wasn't it?"

COMLAY: "Not really, it was two hours on, six hours off, unless we were in the ice. If we were in the ice, we tended to all be on deck if it was during the day, and if we were in close ice we had a number of ice poles which were actually just long boat hooks so we would be fending the ship off the flows and bergy bits all the time. We were actually fast in the ice once for about seven days just drifting slowly north in the pack, a scary experience to start with because we thought we'd just be crushed, and had to calculate how many tins of bully beef do you carry ashore with you, and can we walk ashore because it's only about twenty miles away!

What we did then was we had a double watch so that we kept two people on deck really just to watch the ice bergs because the pack ice that we were caught fast in was drifting north in the current, and a lot of the large ice bergs inshore were actually aground. The overall effect was that if you stood on deck and looked at the ice bergs, they appeared to be steaming at the rate of knots through the pack ice, and you would get vast pressure waves in front of them which obviously we needed to watch out for in case the ice rafted up on the boat.

I think we gave up the double watches after a couple of days because we felt reasonable safe. Another scary part was that there were aircraft actually circling overhead because they were surveying the ice conditions which were particularly difficult that year, and I know that the skipper was concerned that someone was going to spot 'Sea Breeze' with her bright yellow hull

stuck in the ice and mount a salvage attempt which would be the last thing he would wanted—the last thing any of us would have wanted

From the deck, you can only see the ice on the surface, but from the masthead you can see the often large tongues of ice that protrude out of the underside of the ice flows. After hitting one of these tongues of ice, we realized that we really ought to have a man at the masthead, so we took in turns and we developed this somewhat misguided code for shouting out 'Tongue to the left', or 'Tongue to the right' which very quickly got misinterpreted as 'Turn to the left' or 'Turn to the right' with near disastrous results. So we then developed a system of hand signals which improved matters until one occasion when we were sailing between two ice flows (and I do believe the skipper was at the helm at the time) and they both had tongues that they were in fact joined. What we ended up by doing was running aground on the submerged ice! We had to take the sails down and put the engine in reverse, and had the crew run from side to side rocking the boat until we finally got her off. It was a sobering experience."

GLEN: "One thing I noticed about [Tilman's last pilot cutter] 'Baroque' after being on [the much larger] 'Mascotte' was you really felt the motion in the smaller boat with the less tonnage."

COMLAY: "I'd forgotten how small 'Sea Breeze' actually was. She was 43 or 45 feet overall plus twelve feet of bowsprit which is considerable smaller than 'Mascotte' and which I didn't appreciate until going below on the larger boat and realized how much space there was. But 'Sea Breeze' was just a lovely boat and I know that there is a lot told about Tilman and his love for 'Mischief' but you should have seen him on the second trip as we headed out into the Atlantic: he'd spend hours setting up the dead eyes and the lanyards in the shrouds on the lee side, tying knots and trimming. He had some very basic techniques for ship husbandry but they were solid...I feel he was a real seaman. He was not the amateur hack some people claimed he was, and he certainly wasn't the wrecker of pilot cutters that certain people made him out to be."

GLEN: "He didn't have any sailing experience at all when he chose to go into this, did he?"

COMLAY: "No, he taught himself to sail in a dinghy in the Barmouth estuary near his home."

ROBINSON: "And then he did go off with this chap Bobby Somerset. He must have had a huge influence, I think, on Tilman's ideas about the kind of boat that was going to be right for what he wanted to do."

COMLAY: "Somerset recommended the pilot cutter to him, and I think his experience with 'Mischief' just proved it."

ROBINSON: "Yes, 'Mischief' was precisely the right boat for the purpose because of her sea worthiness in particular and the fact that she was built as a working boat, and built very strongly. As a result she wasn't 'yachty' in any way—none of the pilot cutters were 'yachty' because they really were working boats."

GLEN: "She really was suited to Tilman's personality, wasn't she? She was basically functional and unpretentious."

It was interesting because when we were aboard 'Baroque' and went below (and I know she had a different layout to the way it was when Tilman had her) but it was remarkable how little space there was for five or six guys to go away for a year, or four even. Was there a lot of bickering and fighting on those trips among people on board due to the close quarters and so forth?"

COMLAY: "I was very lucky. On my first trip with two guys like Tilman and Colin Putt to look up to, there was an element of competition in the younger ones who were definitely trying to make an impression and be accepted. And it was company that you wanted to be accepted by. The second year, too, we had a very happy crew. I think the difficulty that we had on that second trip was that we had one guy who was unfortunately chronically sea sick, and he had not realized it himself. He had built himself a catamaran with the aim of sailing it to Jan Mayen, and he had shipped along with us to get a bit more sea experience. He only found out that he was *chronically* sea sick once that we'd been out two or three days non stop. He had been seasick from time to time in the past, and had brought with him a large supply of salted peanuts

which was all he could eat in those circumstances. Unfortunately, the combination of salted peanuts and a limited water supply on a boat isn't a good thing, and after a while the others realized that Peter was always taking water, and you just can't do that. It did start to cause a little bit of friction because you had to take your share of water was—two or three cups of tea and perhaps a cup of water—since with small water tanks you can't afford to go over the top. It's those little things that can start the friction.

We had a marvelous library of books on the boat...the most eclectic selection of books imaginable, and if you were off watch we'd either be eating and chatting together in the saloon, or playing chess, or we'd just retire to our bunks and read."

ROBINSON: "Did the skipper still read Blackwood's magazine?"

COMLAY: "He used to write for Blackwood's, didn't he? In fact, the first attempt to make money out of the trip was the article in Blackwood's, and the Royal Cruising Club Journal, and then he used to re-use the same articles slightly embellished, and they'd eventually become one of his books. There's a lovely comment in one of his letters to me when he says, "I can start to see the end of the book now. I've just been down to the library to swot up on the Vikings to get a bit of padding." He used to quote at length from Gwynn Jones, the professor of Viking history.

I think that we were very lucky in terms of personalities, and on the whole another thing about Tilman was that he certainly enjoyed picking up young crew because the young crew tended to be much more impressionable, more malleable, and had much less concern for the safety [issues] of the boat."

ROBINSON: "I think that was one of the problems in 1966. I was the only person under 25, and the others were all mountain climbers. Tom the cook had been to sea on trawlers and was a good, experienced, sea-going chap, and was never sea sick in any way, and was a good steady cook. But I think these people didn't understand (certainly Mike and John and David) what the rigors of the passage might be going to be, and I think they were inclined to be more critical than I was because I was total youngster totally enthralled by the idea of sailing with this chap that I had read about who had already been down to

South America.”

GLEN: “What stands out for you personality-wise about those trips with Tilman?”

ROBINSON: “[His custom of] drinks on Saturday night as a treat. It wouldn’t be a treat if you had it every day, would it? And only one glass— it wouldn’t be the treat if you had half a dozen would it?”

COMLAY: “You actually you missed that luxury a little more because we had the luxury of plentiful supplies of ice. There were occasions when we would actually break out the punt and row over and get some ice to go with the Scotch on the rocks.”

GLEN: “Was it typically Scotch?”

COMLAY: “Scotch, Rum or Gin. I remember coming back up Lymington River here the end of the 1970 trip, and I think when we set out we had two cases of Rum, two cases of Gin, two cases of Scotch, plus the tobacco for the ships crew, all in bonded storage, and in fact on that first trip we also had something like nine gallons of Australian wine because Colin Putt had come over from Sydney and had shipped over two oil drums in advance. One of these oil drums was welded up and contained all his engineering tools for the voyage, and the other drum was welded up and was put into bonded stores.

We didn’t realize why until Colin appeared, and the first thing he did with the Customs people was to open this oil drum and there were these nine gallon flagons of Australian wine packed with dried fruit—raisins and currants and sultanas—this whole oil drum was packed with this. And there was a small bonded store locker which in fact was under the skipper’s seat, and was where the Whiskey and Rum and the Gin were kept, and that could be sealed up by Customs. But the only place that Customs could seal up the nine gallons of Australian wine was in the head, so as we sailed out of the Lymington River the heads were sealed up with the little Custom’s lead seal which we couldn’t break open until we got several miles off shore.

On the way back I remember the skipper was somewhat concerned that we had more booze left than we were legally entitled to bring back into the country. Having had a pretty hard trip back anyway, and since being stuck

in the ice was to him an achievement, we got treated to 'disposing' of some of the excess booze by opening it mid-week as well as Saturday nights.

When we came up the Lymington River, and Customs came on board, the skipper was actually sitting on the storage locker containing an unopened case of Rum at the time he signed the Custom's declaration! You know, big grin on his face, smoking his pipe, 'nothing to declare!' We split it amongst the crew at the end of the trip."

GLEN: "You were saying earlier that you thought that there was beneath this taciturn and stoic man a very kind and gentle person inside. Is that an accurate observation?"

ROBINSON: "Well he was kindly without a doubt. He did really care about the people that sailed with him, I really think he did, and I think he was disappointed when people didn't live up to the sort of expectations that he took for granted of the way people should behave, which was to be loyal and stoic and honorable, and put up with whatever it was necessary to put up with in order to achieve the trip's goals. Everything lead towards a series of goals, didn't it? And if you joined you, you saw the job through."

GLEN: "There's an amusing story about the bus. When Tilman came down to Lymington, he would meet his crews at the King's Head, and the local bus would drop him right outside the pub. Then they decided to start fare stages and the bus was only allowed to stop at the fare stage. Trouble was, the pub was in between fare stages. The first time he got on the bus under these new rules, he wanted to be let off at the pub as usual, but the driver said he had to wait for the next fare stage. So Tilman stubbornly stayed on the bus riding up and down for a hour or so until eventually they relented and stopped the bus so he could get off right outside the King's Head. Does that sound like him to you?"

ROBINSON: "Yes, behind the mask I think that he had no truck with officialdom."

COMLAY: "Although of course he was an official himself in Burma which is another of the stages of his life he probably would least like to remember.

Going back to the acceptance of hardship, I think it's terribly easy to overblow that and think that this was some jingoistic ideal because it's not. I mean it's a very simple fact that this was a low budget four month trip somewhere that you should find interesting, and if you volunteered, it's because you found the aim interesting. There was no luxury. The fun was in doing it if you like that sort of thing, but if you sign up for it he felt he had a right to expect you to stick it out and not complain when it turned out to be not quite as luxurious as you might have wanted it to be. It was a very simple low budget expedition, and all of his trips were just that—simple, low-budget expeditions.”

GLEN: “And with a simple philosophy: If you sign on and you give your word to go and do something with the lads, you do it.”

COMLAY: “There was a certainly gentlemanly honor there.”

ROBINSON: “Oh, there was undoubtedly was. And I think he just couldn't understand that people could take a different view to that actually.”

COMLAY: “I think there was also a great satisfaction gained from these trips because they were self-sufficient and almost self-funding from his lecture tours and writing his books. Of course, he was fortunate in having the money by birth to be able to start off in the first place.”

ROBINSON: “Yes, but I don't think he thought of doing anything else. You know, what would I do in my old age if I didn't have the boat and I couldn't go mountain climbing? And surely that was one of the reasons why he went on *En Avant*; it must have been because it was better to do that than anything else that he could possibly conceive of doing.”

GLEN: “Because retirement wasn't even an option, was it?”

COMLAY: “Not just retirement but the idea of settled down family life to which so many of us succumbed. But he did occasionally talk about his nieces of whom he was very fond, and he was fond of children, and animals, and he was certainly not the misogynist that people made him out to be.”

GLEN: "Talk about that a little because that's one of the key things that comes up from time to time."

COMLAY: "It's sad in a way. Mary Lee could give you a much better insight into this because Sandy and Mary Lee knew him over many years, and he used to stay with them regularly. Tilman judged people on their merits, and saw no difference between men and women in that respect. If women were in his company who had something interesting to contribute, he would respect them."

ROBINSON: "He took people on face value, didn't he?"

COMLAY: "Perhaps too much sometimes!"

ROBINSON: "Yes. He took people on face value, and he expected to be taken on face value. He was in many ways a very ordinary person but he did extraordinary things."

COMLAY: "He didn't actually consider them to be extraordinary."

ROBINSON: "No, he didn't. But if he was with a group of people, he would be just another in that group. He wasn't awesome in any way (physically he clearly wasn't) but he wasn't awesome in the way he spoke. I suppose it could be said to be a criticism that he wasn't ostensibly a leader in that way, but then perhaps that was a rather English characteristic. He was a very ordinary person to be with, wasn't he?"

COMLAY: "Yes. He wasn't a leader by bullshit; he was a leader by example, and if you fell in with his example, then yes he could be called a leader, but if you chose not to he wouldn't order people about. It's hard to think of him actually in a military context, and I think some of the things that trouble me about past biographies are their portrayal of him as this jingoistic military hero. There were one or two occasions when stories of the first world war came out—especially when he had a particularly good day followed by a particularly good drink or two, and if he felt comfortable. Then he'd join in the conversation but none of the stories told with any kind of gloating or any kind of glory. It was a realism that this was really a terrible time to live through and it was a job that

needed to be done, and he did it. But in terms of the disciplined approach of the military, I don't think he really fit in. If you look at his exploits in the Second World War, it was very much a matter of his doing what someone wants to do in the context of his current employment and being paid for it."

GLEN: "It's amazing how he managed to actually get into the capacity in the Second World War where he could really be his own boss in a sense. That seems to be very much the way he went in life. The Sherpas had a strong respect for him. They called him Sherpa Bill (it's a great compliment in Sherpa society to be given the title of Sherpa as an outsider). Some of the old Sherpas I talked with in Darjeeling remembered him very well because he was the only westerner that could put on a 60 or 80 pound pack and be out in front of everybody (including the Sherpas) all day long. That won him tremendous respect for his extraordinary toughness."

COMLAY: "That was noticeable in Tilman even at the age of seventy. He would sprint up hills you know. The professionals would go off properly climbing, and the amateurs like me would go off and have a good scramble. Tilman would go off, and invariably the person that actually had the most successful peak of the day was the skipper climbing solo!

I remember during the second trip with him, on the voyage home, he suffered very badly from cramp. He was clearly starting to feel his age. To all intents and purposes, he was immensely fit and would very rarely show any kind of disability. But certainly he was starting to get creaky towards the end."

GLEN: "He didn't wear gloves when sailing, did he?"

COMLAY: "No, he didn't. But there's a sensible reason for that: wearing gloves, certainly woolen gloves, is pretty horrible in wet icy conditions. I fell in with the same habit. He kept his hands warm with his pipe...almost all of the old timers that smoked pipes did so partly for that reason—it was a great way to keep your hands warm."

ROBINSON: "And actually keeping your hands dry on the boat is half the battle, isn't it? And if you wore woolen gloves or something like they'd always be damp and wet from handling ropes or sails or whatever."

COMLAY: " Keeping anything dry on 'Sea Breeze' was an art because the deck leaked like a sieve."

GLEN: "Why did Tilman choose pilot cutters for his voyages?"

COMLAY: "I think it was just that they happened to be the first recommendation that came to him from Bobby Somerset, and it was a recommendation that worked so he looked no further."

ROBINSON: "Did he actually say to you that he had talked to Bobby Somerset about that?"

COMLAY: "No, I don't recall him ever saying that but I read it was Bobby Somerset's recommendation."

ROBINSON: "Well clearly he must have had a great influence on him, and he must have read as well the books at that time showing Bristol Channel Pilot Cutters conversions as being as suitable a vessel for ocean cruising as you could possibly imagine."

COMLAY: "Looking back at 'Jolie Brise', they were some of the earlier ocean racers too."

ROBINSON: : "Well absolutely, 'Saladin' and 'Jolie Brise' and so on. And the fact that Bobby Somerset had owned 'Jolie Brise' (and I'm trying to think of the name of the boat that he [Bobby Somerset] had when he sailed...yes, that's right, the 'Iolaire' which was very much like a slightly refined version of the Bristol Channel pilot cutter. She's still going by the way—the 'Iolaire' that is—and has crossed the Atlantic dozens and dozens of times since then. I could find out where she is now. She'll either be in Ireland or the West Indies. She's owned by a chap called Don Street who has had her for years and years, and certainly if Tilman literally gave Bobby Somerset the specifications of the trip that he wanted to do, I suppose it is possible that he might have been steered towards Colin Archer type vessels. They were the Scandinavian version of pilot cutters but they were actually designed by this Scotsman Colin Archer in Norway, and were extremely seaworthy because they were used as sailing life boats. When they were developed, he was commissioned by the Norwegian fishing industry basically to design a sailing life boat. And so they could have

been slightly neck and neck in consideration as a vessel for Tilman.

It would be very interesting to find out who put Bill Tilman in touch with Erle Bradford who owned 'Mischief' and sold her to Tilman."

COMLAY: "I don't think there was anything analytical or anything scientific in the way that Tilman chose 'Mischief'. I think 'Mischief' presumably just came up when he asked in his circles who would give the best advise on a boat, and the name Bobby Somerset came up.

But having made the connection, there is a parallel between those boats and Tilman—simple, basic, strong."

ROBINSON: Yes. The pilot cutter personifies his character absolutely beautifully."

COMLAY: "To me the whole experience of being on the coast of Greenland which in itself is remarkably beautiful would always be memorable but its complete by being on that boat on the coast of Greenland—it's the utter simplicity."

GLEN: "You mentioned earlier that just the fact that you got stuck in the ice made the whole trip worthwhile to him."

COMLAY: "That was a new experience to him, and if you had a new experience then a new experience was worth you know taking the risk.

GLEN: "Do you think Tilman would ever have been a single-handed sailor?"

COMLAY: "I don't think he would've been a single handed sailor. I don't think really he was a loner. I think he enjoyed people's company. He very rarely opened up in people's company unless those people proved themselves to be worthy of laughing and joking with, and he didn't actually put any effort into building conversation. It was purely accidental when he got the right circle of friends around him, and when that happened he thrived. I don't think he would have been a loner."

ROBINSON: " I don't think that single-handed sailors are necessarily loners if

you see what I mean. There might be a little more to it than that, and I think he always planned to do something more than just sailing the boat from A to B on every occasion. Therefore he always needed other people, and the boats themselves that suited his requirements were not single-handed sorts of boats (although they were just capable of being sailed single-handed)."

COMLAY: "There's a big difference between Francis Chichester and Alex Rose—the single-handlers of that generation—and the modern technological single-handlers. When you look at them, they are just staggering feats of technology and endurance but that's not really sailing."