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21.06.2015

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When Team Vestas Wind crashed into a reef in the Indian Ocean, it rocked the sailing world. As the rebuilt boat returns to the Volvo Ocean Race, **Yvonne Gordon** talks to its Irish onboard reporter

For most people involved in a serious boat crash in the middle of the night in the Indian Ocean, the first priority is staying alive — finding flares, survival suits, the life raft. For Kerryman Brian Carlin, the most important thing was to save video footage of the incident, so that if the crew didn't make it off the craft, investigators would know what happened.

"The boat was getting trashed, the rudders had snapped off and I was back by my media station. Water was coming in and I needed to get the footage off the hard drive, otherwise it would be destroyed."

When the 30-year-old from Tralee, signed up with offshore racing team, Team Vestas Wind last year, as the boat's onboard reporter for the Volvo Ocean Race, he knew it would be a challenge. If he had known just how big, he might have had second thoughts.

Even without mishaps, the 38,739 nautical mile-race around the planet is the toughest, hence its tag line, Life at the Extreme. It began last October and since then, crews have gone through extreme weather and temperatures at both ends of the discomfort scale. They have slept only in short bursts in shared bunks, eaten freeze-dried food and spent up to a month at a time at sea.

"It's horrendous," Carlin says. "You don't get much sleep. You smell extremely bad and when you deliver your stuff, it's probably not what the editors want anyway."

Each team's reporter takes photographs and video footage, as well as writing daily blog posts. Carlin relished the first few weeks on board with eight other team members. "Taking photographs, was easy," he says. "Trying to connect with the crew to get stories was something you had to work at. The more time you spent with them without a camera, the more you got."

He worked to a strict schedule, sending stories and footage back to race headquarters. His role included dealing with daily media requests and preparing crew meals, which meant rehydrating a food for watch changeovers, of which the earliest was at 4am. He would regularly be woken from sleep during a direction change, when he would have to move himself and all his gear to the other side of the boat, sometimes multiple times during the night.

This type of sailing is uncomfortable and risky. As well as lack of sleep and fresh food, crews face injury, seasickness and storms. Boat damage is common, but what happened on the night of November 29 sent shock waves throughout the sailing world.

The fleet of seven boats, including the



I THOUGHT WE'RE NOT GETTING OUT OF THIS



Brian Carlin/Team Vestas Wind; Ainhoa Sanchez/Volvo Ocean Race

all-female Team SCA and Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing with Irishman Justin Slattery on board (see panel), were on Leg 2 of the race, from Cape Town to Abu Dhabi, when Team Vestas Wind ran aground on the Cargados Carajos shoals, 430km north of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean.

The boat hit the coral reef at speed, breaking its rudders and daggerboards and tearing off part of the stern. "We had a beautiful sunset. At 7.15, I went to use the heads [lavatory]," says Carlin. "The next thing I knew, I was upside down 4m away. I don't know if I blacked out for a second or two. I woke up and said, 'Oh s**t, this isn't good. What did we hit? A whale or a container or something?'"

Carlin made his way back along the boat. "It was violent, all the bashing and stuff. I was trying to get up into the galley area. I thought: 'I need to get this recorded'." The boats have cameras on deck, so he pressed the "crash" button, which saves footage recorded from the previous four minutes.

"There was white water everywhere. The moon was coming in between the clouds, illuminating the reef and all you could see was white water left and

On the record
Carlin recorded the dramatic crash that left the boat's hull smashed, inset above, and the team stranded on a shark-infested reef in the Indian Ocean

right," Carlin says. "The boat was getting smashed by 12ft waves and we had hit the reef doing 23.2 knots.

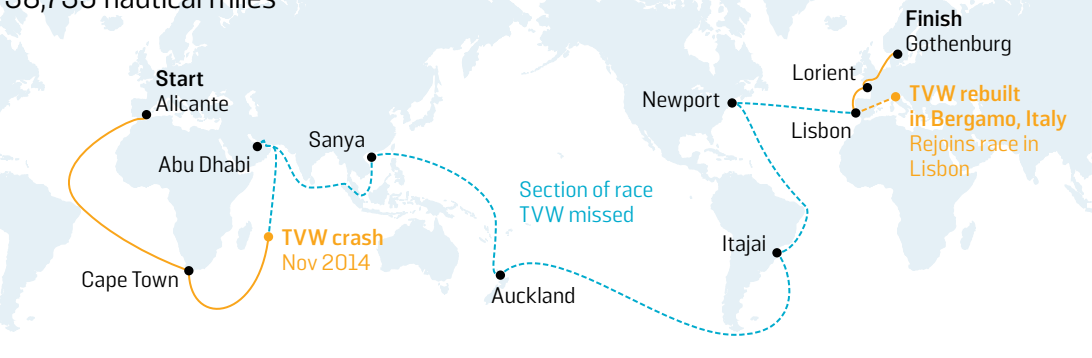
"The water was coming in, so I needed to get footage off the hard drive and copied to a card so I could put it in a waterproof bag, otherwise it would flood the computer department and the data would never be found.

"I thought, if we don't survive this, or if we do survive it, either way I have

footage of what's happened." Carlin says at one stage he thought: "We're not getting out of this. This could really go bad for us." He copied the footage of the impact on the reef onto an SD card, while water was coming in at his feet.

He also continued to film. "My main concern was to shoot it all because that is my role. I did think I was going to die, but I thought while I was able to do stuff, then I'd film," he says. Meanwhile, the

Volvo Ocean Race 38,739 nautical miles



It was so violent, you could barely hold on. The reef had perforated the hull. You could see the rocks on the inside of the boat

boat's navigator Wouter Verbraak and skipper Chris Nicholson were issuing maydays and talking to race control in Alicante, in Spain. On deck, the other crew members were securing the rig and organising survival suits and flares. "We all fell into the emergency procedure," says Carlin. "We just followed training. We were trying to bail out water with the emergency pump, but it was coming in too fast. I was putting fresh water into bottles so we'd have something to drink." Eventually, they contacted the coastguard and a nearby boat, Team Alvimedica, stood by ready to assist. The Vestas crew stayed on their stricken craft for several hours, but it was being

beaten badly by the waves. "It was so violent, you could barely hold on," says Carlin. "The reef had perforated the hull, you could see rocks on the inside of the boat."

In the end, staying on the boat was too dangerous. At about 3.30am, they jumped off and waded onto the reef with their inflated life raft, until the coastguard warned them to get into the raft to avoid sharks. After another two-and-a-half hours, at daybreak, they were rescued by fishermen and brought onto the tiny islet of Ile du Sud.

The next day, they salvaged what they could from the boat, removing all fluids and fuel to minimise reef damage, before hitching a lift to Mauritius on a supply boat. Nicholson, who was taking part in his fourth Volvo Ocean Race, said it was the toughest night of his life.

The incident was later put down to human error — not zooming in enough on the electronic navigation charts to see the shallow reef. The damage was bad, but the sponsor Vestas, a Danish global wind energy company and its backer Dutch energy firm Powerhouse, were determined to save the boat. They recovered it from the reef and took it to a

Tough going
The team on Day 8 of the gruelling Volvo Ocean Race; below, the crew await rescue with items salvaged from the boat after it hit the coral reef

boatyard in Bergamo, in Italy, where it was rebuilt over four months to the strict one-design rules of the fleet. Some of the original deck and internal structures were used and it was given a new hull.

Just six months later, on June 7, Team Vestas Wind with two new crew members, including a navigator, rejoined the race for the eighth leg from Lisbon, in Portugal, to Lorient, in Brittany. In Lisbon, on the day of the boat's arrival at

the boatyard, Carlin was looking forward to the final legs to Lorient and then on to Gothenburg, in Sweden.

"I just can't wait to get sailing. I have no nerves. It's strange. You'd think you would have some sort of feeling. I might feel differently when we go sailing, but I doubt it. I had a lot of time to process it all," he said.

Two days before the race, at the Team Vestas base in the Lisbon Volvo Ocean Race village, Carlin was checking the food bags — he had spent a day vacuum-packing protein powder, milk powder and toilet roll for the weeks ahead. He had even vacuum-packed a spare laptop.

Carlin admits that they were nervous while training. "We kept asking the navigator, 'how are we doing for depth? Where are we?' You're always thinking, 'last time I was on this boat, I ended up on a reef'."

The boat finished second in Leg 8 on June 11. Nicholson was "over the moon", while Team SCA, were celebrating their first leg win. The fleet is now en route to Gothenburg for the final in-port race on Saturday.

volvooceanrace.com

