

The Trouble with Otto

A story by Russ Sherwin, cruising in the Sea of Cortez, copyright 2007

The sun has punched out, gone home and left the second shift in charge. The full moon is just rising over the eastern horizon. We've been eastbound from the Baja side of Mexico since 4 AM and a long night and another long day awaits us before we arrive in San Blas, 40 miles north of Puerto Vallarta. The smooth seas and light winds we were promised by Buoyweather before we left La Paz have been rescinded. In their place are 3-5 foot waves on the port stern quarter and 15 to 20 knot winds from the north. Not bad, but wearing when you face 36 hours of watching the little yellow boat crawl 257 miles along the blue line on the electronic chart plotter at 7 miles an hour. Each turn of the screw advances us about 1 foot along the blue line. (These are the sort of nonsense calculations I amuse myself with during long passages.)

We have four crew members on board: Skipper Russ, Chief of Everything Else Donna, Wonder Dog Gracie, and Otto. We've all done this before. Many people like night passages. Three of us don't, particularly. Otto doesn't mind.

Otto's last name is Pilot. He's in charge of following the aforementioned blue line. This particular blue line goes from Los Frailes on the western side of the Sea of Cortez to San Blas on the eastern side, carefully avoiding islands and sharp pointy things like rock pinnacles. The Skipper creates the blue line. Once it's in place and verified, all Otto has to do is follow it. I can lay out a blue line from Cabo San Lucas to Sitka, Alaska if I choose to, and Otto will deliver us, given sufficient fuel and time, to Sitka.

Otto does his job well, especially with following seas which we have tonight. One of the things about steering a boat is you can't just point it east and expect to go east. The sea comes under the stern from the port rear quarter, lifts it up, carries it sideways to starboard, and then dumps it into the hole left by the wave after it passes. Otto senses this, runs the rudder to starboard to push the stern to port. But the wave quits pushing just when Otto is getting into the starboard rudder thing. Oops, now we need port rudder to push the stern starboard. Otto works hard. But his poor little drive motor, about the size of a kitchen cake mixer, can't move the rudder fast enough. The boat moves through the water in a series of port-starboard slewing motions, the average of which is east. *Wheeeeeeuw*-port; *wheeeeeeuw*-starboard; *wheeeeeeuw*-port; *wheeeeeeuw*-starboard; on and on through the night. As whiney as Otto is in this situation, he does a much better job steering in following seas than I can.

Theoretically once Otto gets focused on the blue line he will follow it no matter what. If the blue line should go through an island, Otto will attempt to take us through it. He will be disappointed in the outcome, of course, but he will try. Otto doesn't look up from his work to determine the presence of other boats, either. Like the cruise ship that's coming toward us on the same blue line. He also has some odd quirks, so as much as I love and trust Otto, he bears watching.

Otto has an aversion to the Single Sideband radios on board. Transmitting bothers him greatly, some specific frequencies more than others. It's as if he were struck by a Taser gun. He freezes up and puts the boat into a tight circle until I let go of the mike, then he's back. Once I keyed the mike on 4048 Khz, high

power, to check in with the Southbound net. Otto dropped like a poleaxed steer. It took 30 minutes of anxious rebooting and fiddling around to resuscitate him.

The Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) system tells Otto where he is on the planet; the rate compass in the forward stateroom tells him what direction the boat is headed; and the chart plotter tells him where we're going. All four must work together. Evidence has been accumulating that one of them is slacking off, and to my dismay, it turns out to be Otto.

The first instance was one long night crossing from Cabo San Lucas to Puerto Vallarta, a straight line distance of more than 250 miles followed by a jog to the left. We usually travel with a buddy boat, and when we do, we travel side by side and try to maintain about a 1 mile separation between us. This night it was *Number One*, a 39-foot Krogen. Around midnight, I noticed *Number One's* lights growing more and more distant. For a while, this didn't register. Then I noticed that Otto's bearing number was changing and his course to steer was changing along with it. We were making a large turn to the left, toward the Islas Tres Marias. This shouldn't happen. Further investigation revealed that Otto wasn't in his office. He had left his evil twin in charge, who apparently thought if he just kept putting some numbers on the screen, Skipper would be happy. Skipper was NOT happy.

I was mystified as to the cause of this. I first blamed GPS; I've always thought she was a little bit in orbit. Not me, said GPS. Then I turned my steely eye to the chart plotter, who always seemed to be plotting something. Not me, boss. After some fiddling around, turning things off and on, resetting the blue line, there was Otto at the controls as if nothing had happened. He was a little out of breath and his tie was askew, but he appeared normal. When I directed his attention to the blue line, he obediently put his head down and began working as before. I still didn't know the cause of his dereliction of duty, but he was back. Did he just get tired? Did GPS or Chart Plotter entice him with siren calls to exotic places? He wasn't talking. He never does.

The second time it happened was on another long straight passage. At about 180 miles, Otto disappeared. Again, it took some time to determine that he had abandoned ship. It has continued to happen almost every time we have set a long course of greater than 200 miles. I have learned to anticipate Otto's dereliction of duty, and on this trip, I set about to trick him. I set an intermediate waypoint on the straight line course to break it into smaller segments.

Didn't work. Just after daybreak I noticed we were making a long sweeping curve to the south toward the Islas Tres Marias. This is not only a bad idea because of the difficulty of making progress through an island, these are prison islands where they shoot people for approaching too close. I got us back on course, focused Otto's attention on the blue line once more (I thought) and went below to take a shower. When I came back up we were headed resolutely due south, once again toward the Tres Marias. What is it with you and islands, I thought, as I turned everything off, rebooted the computer, the GPS and Otto. Well, Otto's evil twin was still in charge. He put up a series of strange messages on the screen, the worst of which was

COMMUNICATION ERROR

INSTALLATION REQUIRED

Huh? Go and get Otto, you fool. You don't know what you're doing! Several more attempts produced the same results. I got out the manual to see what manner of hell we were faced with if we had to re-install Otto in the middle of the sea. But after about 15 minutes of hand steering, Otto was back, grinning from ear to ear and not the least apologetic.

Otto goes on these benders infrequently enough that I can forgive him, I guess. He's a valued member of the crew, and indispensable when it comes to steering through following seas. I know he will do this again. We all have our peccadilloes, but I sure wish he didn't have this affinity for the Tres Marias.

The End