

WHAT NOW SKIP?

'Oil aboard!'

Even the most careful and seamanlike skippers suffer unforeseen problems. This month, in our brand-new series, a sudden loss of oil leaves the boat drifting offshore. What would you do next? TEXT MICHAEL HOWORTH ILLUSTRATION DAN PAUL



THE PROBLEM You are the skipper aboard *Flying Cloud*, an ageing 54ft (16m) motor yacht voyaging from Palma to the Hamble. Having reached Gibraltar without incident – and loaded with duty-free fuel and spirits – you tell your five-man crew of your decision to cruise towards Plymouth at 1000 the following day. That gives you time to get a last-minute forecast by radio and a four-day forecast from the internet.

The next day, at 1005, you leave Marina Quay and head out to sea. The wind is from the east at 18 knots and is expected to hold good for the next 48 hours. Having cleared the Strait, your faithful old boat creams along, her single engine pushing her through the water at a steady 12 knots.

It's good practice to check the main engine every six running hours or so. When you do this the following day you are perplexed to discover a low oil reading on the dipstick and

even more perturbed to find you have to add a whole gallon to the sump before a satisfactory reading is achieved. It's natural to wonder why you have used so much oil. Six hours later the matter becomes more pressing when the low oil-level alarm sounds, forcing you to shut her down. Investigation shows that you have thrown an oil seal from behind the flywheel pulleys, which turns the belt-driven alternators, water pump and refrigeration systems. Gallons of oil lie in the catch tray below the engine and are threatening to spill over into the bilge.

You suspect that a repair at sea is almost impossible with the rolling, besides which you have no spare oil seal. An on-board search reveals you've got just 2gal of fresh oil left.

Now you have no main engine, little oil, no spare oil seal, and are miles out at sea being swept into the Atlantic. It is at this point that your crew ask: "What now, skipper?"

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THE SOLUTION Any older yacht (and particularly a conversion) making such a long voyage needs a comprehensive spares kit – a serious amount of consumable items, such as fuel filters and lubricating oils, are sensible additions to every stores list. Don't forget that if venturing offshore, a well-equipped tool chest is also a prerequisite – and I don't mean just a set of spanners and two different sizes of hammer. It is good practice to undertake a proper engine overhaul or at least a full service before setting out on any long trip, but whether or not that would have highlighted this particular problem is uncertain. In this situation, if appropriate, I would first fly a 'not under command' signal. Next I would consult the charts, passage plan and pilot books to ascertain if there were any ports that could accommodate the yacht for a repair or if there were any anchorages I could use while I went ashore to try and find an oil seal. With the right tools and a roll-free anchorage it is possible that an experienced crew member or a locally recruited engineer would be able to complete a repair.

But let us assume the worst and that we have to motor some considerable distance before we can manage either of these. I would then transmit a general 'All Ships' call on VHF or GMDSS, to try to

acquire a fresh supply of oil. If that failed, I would use a portable bilge pump and evacuate the sump tray of all the spilled oil and then dry the tray with rags or paper towels. I would use the empty oil containers that every good skipper keeps on board (just in case) and fill these with the recovered oil. I would measure and carefully strain the oil as I moved it from container to container, using paper coffee filters, ladies nylon tights or even clean drying-up cloths from the galley to assist with the filtering. The really important thing is to ensure that no water is gathered with the oil – that could emulsify the oil and ruin it for its next use, poured back into the main engine.

By reusing the oil and topping off with some of the spare new oil it should be possible to run, at low cruising revs towards my revised destination for another hour. After one hour I would reduce revs and repeat the oil recovering process, again measuring the amount of recovered oil. By estimating the loss of oil and allowing for adding the fresh oil, I could work out roughly the maximum running hours I have left.

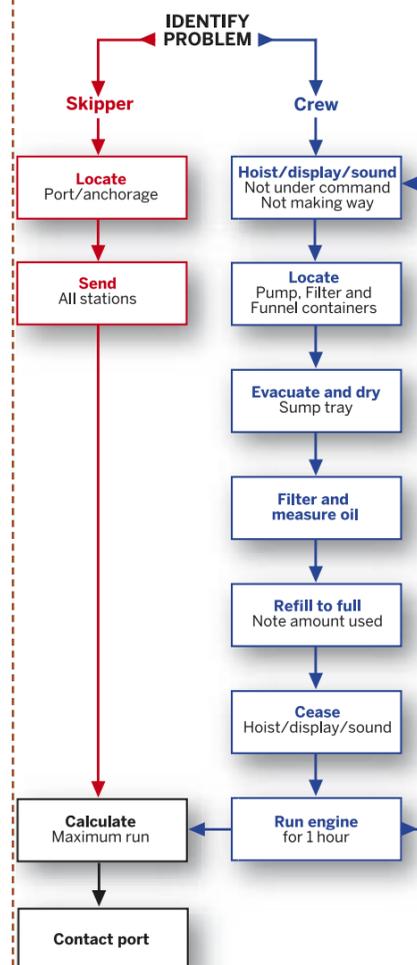
As soon as possible I would radio my chosen port to advise of my predicament. If time were short I'd consider the use of a port agent to secure an engineer, the parts and supplies I might need.

NEXT MONTH

It seemed like a great day to take the boat out. But what happens when fog descends quickly while you're on passage through the Solent? Your brand-new radar and GPS have chosen today to start playing silly buggars. You can see a buoy up ahead – but is it the right buoy? What

would you do to get out of the situation? Check out the full scenario on our website at www.mby.com and add your comments. We will choose from the best, the wisest and the most amusing to include in our 'What Would You Do?' round-up.

THE NEXT STEPS



WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

RESPONSES FROM THE *MBY* MOTOR BOAT CHAT FORUM AT WWW.MBY.COM

Twisterowner says: "Reduce engine speed to see if the leak lessened, shut down the fridge to reduce electrical load and minimise deflection of faulty seal, as well as loosening the oil filler cap to ensure the crankcase is not pressurised. Finally, send a PANPAN message if you really need help."

Leyton C says: "How much vegetable oil was on board? If the engine has to be rebuilt anyway you could dilute the oil with some diesel to increase your stock of oil."

Soog says: "Allocate each of the crew a task, such as contacting the shore or other vessels, and updating the charts."

TCM says: "You officially grass yourself up to EU authorities for VAT fraud, and they will promptly come out and tow you to safety!"