

The *Moquini* Mystery...

by Richard Crockett



The recent race from Mauritius to Durban will always be remembered due to the loss of *Moquini*. She and her crew went missing without a trace. No survivors, no boat, nor any flotsam have yet been found despite a thorough search by the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) - the official South African search and rescue authority - plus a massive private search initiated by the race organisers. Thanks to public funding a search fund was initiated by Dave Claxton, the Chairman of the Organising Committee.

Although the families have not given up hope, and have a deep conviction that their loved ones will be found, a month after starting the race they were still missing. This despite every possible effort, using every possible resource available to find them. Although the search has been suspended, the organisers have not lost hope and are ready to put into motion everything possible should some feasible reason be given to do so.

Regrettably, tragedies like this hit the media headlines very quickly. But fortunately the media and the race website were instrumental in publicising the RNYC *Moquini* Rescue Fund. Immediately, the money flowed in. The sympathy, passion

and generosity of the public were incredible.

But in the cold light of day, it was a traumatic time for everyone - the families, the organisers and all those who volunteered their services and became intimately involved.

The Facts

The race from Mauritius to Durban started off Grande Baie on Saturday 10 September. There were four identical Fast 42 yachts in the fleet, with *Moquini* being one of them, and the most recently launched. Three finished the race in Durban without any problems.

Moquini had six crew aboard - Graham Cochrane, Kurt Ostendorf, Neil Tocknell, Sheldon Dickerson, Mark Dickerson and Michael Goolam. All were experienced, with the least being Michael Goolam, who was a development sailor through the I-Care sailing scheme, although this year alone, he had competed in the MSC Regatta; the Vasco da Gama Race (having sailed both ways), and had delivered the boat to Mauritius.

Moquini did have electrical problems on the way to Mauritius, and this was

repaired in Mauritius by Kurt Ostendorf who is experienced in electrics and electronics. The crew also reported that the boat was wet, although most boats which pound to windward for days on end, do get wet below.

When approaching the southern tip of Madagascar, *Moquini* and *Zeus* were close enough to each other to shout and signal, with the crew of *Moquini* indicating that they had blown out all their spinnakers and number 1 genoa. This was on Tuesday afternoon (13 September). On that evening between 21h30 and 22h00, Denise Cochrane spoke to her husband via satphone. He indicated that everything was fine on board and that the wind was blowing at about 25 knots.

At about 01h10 the following morning, less than four hours later, the StarTrack satellite tracking system failed. The last position it gave just prior to that was 25 50'25S and 47 44' 01 E. This put *Moquini* some 60 nautical miles off the south-eastern tip of Madagascar. No further positions were obtained from the StarTrack, and no further satphone contact was possible.

The StarTrack system was fitted to each boat in the race to enable the public to

follow the progress of the fleet. This system had been used successfully in previous Vasco da Gama races.

The next piece of information from the boat was a single EPIRB stream at 03h40 on Friday 16 September. This was some 52 hours after the StarTrack failed. The single stream of data from the EPIRB was a single 350 millisecond signal which transmitted the identity code of the EPIRB, and which was traced back to *Moquini* via its licencing papers which are filed with the MRCC in Cape Town.

The Big Question?

What happened to Moquini, and when?

The answer to that is simply - we have absolutely no idea.

Did 'the incident' happen shortly after their Startrack failed? Did it happen just prior to the EPIRB signal?

What happened in the intervening 52 hours? How far had *Moquini* travelled in that time? With no spinnakers it could have been at a conservative five knots, which means that they would have made 260 nautical miles from their last known position.

Why was there just a single stream from the EPIRB?

There are many scenarios, but these are calculated assumptions that we may never have the answers to.

What we do know is that other yachts in the area did report a short burst of 45-knot winds for about 60 to 90 minutes starting at about 01h00 the morning the StarTrack stopped transmitting. These yachts were further inshore and closer to the southern tip of Madagascar, and all reported a short period of very rough conditions. The crew of *Unleashed* was within 20 nautical miles of Madagascar and described the conditions 'like being in a washing machine'. *Zeus*, a Fast 42, was a similar distance off, and reported tough conditions, but *Moquini* was furthest offshore (at 60 nautical miles) and likely to be in slightly calmer water than those closer in. The reason being that the continental shelf off the bottom of Madagascar is shallow, so the closer in a yacht goes, the rougher it can become. Sixty miles off was unlikely to be in a 'danger zone' even with 40-plus knot winds.

Did the yacht hit a whale? There is always a possibility of this as whales do migrate to this area to mate at this time of the year. There were no major sightings of whales unlike in the 1987 race when they were sighted by just about every yacht, and near misses were the order of the day. And, if they had hit a whale, would it have sunk the boat that quickly? It could have, but it is unlikely, although Gordon Webb will tell you that when *Pioneer* was sunk by a whale in the 1971 Cape to Rio race, they had 90 seconds to abandon ship. However, there are few reports of whales inflicting that sort of damage to yachts, resulting in the crew abandoning so quickly.

Did the yacht hit a container? Again



a possibility, but without spinnakers or a number 1 genoa, would it have been going fast enough to inflict such catastrophic damage that the boat sunk immediately?

Was there a gas explosion on board? If this had occurred, the integrity of the boat would in all probability have been breached in some way, and some flotsam in the form of lifejackets, bunk cushions, life rings etc., may have been visible during an air search. Would it have killed the crew instantaneously?

Did the keel fall off? Possibly, but would the boat have sunk immediately with no sign of the crew?

Was there a rudder problem? If so, and had they jury rigged an emergency rudder, they would have made landfall by now.

Were they dismayed? Possibly, but under jury rig they would have made landfall.

Is this a case of piracy? This cannot be discounted, but the southern tip of Madagascar is not a known piracy area. If 'the incident' happened when the Startrack went down, would pirates be interested in a yacht 60 nautical miles from land during the hours of darkness, with known winds of 25 knots or stronger at the time? Pirates are generally looking for guns, money, drugs and electronics. The chances of them wanting the yacht are slim as it would be too slow for their use.

Were they hit by a ship and sunk immediately? This is possible. But, with at least three crew on deck all the time, would they not have seen the ship, or possibly even heard the engines? Other boats did report shipping in the area, but none reported near misses. To sink the yacht almost instantly means that the ship would have had to be going very fast, and would had to have T-boned them. This is possible, but would the helmsman not have attempted to steer the yacht into a 'broadside' collision situation, rather than a T-bone situation? And again, would there not be some flotsam or evidence of the yacht around?

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The EPIRB

The EPIRB used aboard *Moquini* was a Sailor 406 EPIRB. The unit was new and properly licenced and registered. This is how the single stream from the EPIRB was able to be identified as having been transmitted from *Moquini's* unit. The unit was programmed with its identity code prior to the boat leaving for Mauritius, and at the same time was tested - and a test report given. The unit was fully operational.

What cannot be explained is just why one single blip was transmitted, and nothing else. Most people believe that once an EPIRB is activated, it cannot be turned off, and will transmit until the battery dies.

Wrong! Some EPIRBs can be turned off. This model could be turned off, and simple instructions on the back of the unit tells one how. Plus, it had a manufacturer's guaranteed minimum transmission span of 48 hours.

But let's go back to some basics of EPIRBs. Once activated, an EPIRB will transmit a single 350 millisecond stream of information ONCE every 60 seconds. This EPIRB model did not have an integral GPS unit built in, so would have had to transmit for 10 - 15 minutes or longer, before being picked up by satellites and a position being 'fixed'. The signal from an EPIRB is not continuous.

This model was a manually activated unit which would have to be physically taken out of its mounting bracket to be activated. It could not be activated under any circumstances while in the mounting bracket. This model also has a water activation ability, but again, for it to be activated by water it would have to be physically taken out of its mounting bracket.

So, why was the EPIRB activated and then either turned off or stopped transmitting? It's a question no one can answer. It either had to have been physically turned off within 60 seconds of it being activated, or it had to be more than half a metre under water. An EPIRB will not transmit while under water.

One possibility is that the EPIRB was activated, either actively or accidentally. However, it would then immediately have activated the powerful strobe light on top

of the unit, and as it was dark, this may have blinded the helmsman and crew, who quickly de-activated it. But someone would have had to know just how to do this, and quickly within 60 seconds. Or did the boat sink immediately with the EPIRB attached to it so that it was unable to escape and float to the surface? Was it a false alarm, or was it a genuine emergency?

There have been comments passed that the EPIRB did not work, and that they are unreliable. I believe these comments to be a little irresponsible. 52 hours after all contact with the boat was lost, the EPIRB did indicate that there may have been an emergency on board. In this respect it did its job and pre-empted a search. Without that signal a search may only have begun many days later - not mobilised within 12 hours of it being received. The fact that a position was never given due to just one single data stream being transmitted has been covered, and does not necessarily indicate a failed EPIRB.

The Boat?

Moquini is a Fast 42 designed by Alex Simonis and built at the Fast Yachts factory in Pinetown. Some 40 of these boats have been built by this yard, with boats having been delivered all over the world.

About two years ago one Fast 42 did develop a keel problem at the keel to hull joint when being delivered on its own bottom to Australia from Durban. The boat was sailed back to Durban where the problem was repaired. But no Fast 42 has ever lost a keel, despite being involved in collisions with containers, bounced on reefs in Mozambique and crashed into a wreck in Maputo. Some of the incidents occurred at significant speeds.

About a year ago, a Fast 42 was being delivered to Europe aboard a ship which encountered heavy seas off the Cape. The yacht, in its cradle, fell off the ship, losing its keel in the process, yet it still floated and was eventually salvaged a few days later.

These facts should dispel any assumption that the keel 'fell off'.

The boat was involved in a collision during the RNYC Windhoek Regatta in early August. The damage was

Goldschmidt	Loots Family Trust
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Gordon Leach	Lucinda Southey
Gorven	Lyn Minnar
Goulden	M Van Schalkwyk
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Howard - Good Luck	Michelle & David H
Hughes	Michelle Ziervogel
Hunter Family	Mike Miller
Hurter	Millard
I D Lintels	Mills
I Horn	Mitchell M
I G Sales	MJ Kaplan
Iain Shuker	ML Clurin
Ian Mountain	Monitored Health Risk Man.
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Johan Yacht Al	North Sails
John Martin	Nothvaal Sailing Asso
Jolly	NP Camara
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Kevin Tremearne	Ostendorf Bm
Kevin Dbn	Our Dianne
Kiderlen	P O'flaherty
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Lawrie	Penney
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Liberty Life Pmb A Asselberg	Pilling Bayshore Mar
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professionally repaired before they left for Mauritius.

Moquini is a balsa sandwich construction hull. Fast Yachts no longer use gelcoat when building their boats. The reason for this is that one is easily able to ensure that the sandwich layers are properly wetted out and bonded to the core, and that no air bubbles or imperfections occur. Completed hulls are painted.

The boat sailed to Mauritius, and no structural damage was noted or commented on.

The 'Official' Search

Once the EPIRB stream had been routed to the MRCC in Cape Town, the search and rescue operation was in their hands. The EPIRB signal was picked up by a NOAA satellite, transmitted to Brazil from where it was routed to Australia and finally to Cape Town.

The MRCC did not take long to mobilise, and immediately sent an Air Force C130 to Madagascar to begin the search from the yacht's last known position - 60 nautical miles off the southern tip of Madagascar. As the aircraft only left Pretoria after midday on Friday 16 September, it had a short search time before basing itself in Madagascar to fly at first light the following morning.

The MRCC has sophisticated computer software and models to calculate drift, currents, weather and the like to assist them in determining the areas to search in. Their models gave them three options - the drift of a disabled boat, the drift of a liferaft, and the drift of bodies in lifejackets. The areas the models gave for these three scenarios were searched.

They spent the entire Saturday in the air, but regrettably on Sunday they did not fly as crew members were ill. This decision was not communicated to the race organisers who only found this out late on Sunday. Naturally there was a lot of anger over this, but on Monday they flew a grid for the entire day, before returning to Durban. On Tuesday they did a third search that included a coastal leg to the Mozambique border before heading due east to intersect the rhumb line between the southern tip of Madagascar and Durban. This search was designed to have the return leg occur at night so as to aid with the spotting of flares or lights.

While coming home that night, they picked up a strobe light. Hoping that it might be the strobe light from *Moquini's* EPIRB, or at least the water activated light on top of the liferaft's canopy, there was some excitement and positivity. There was a second white light in the area, and they eventually requested *Opela*, a competing yacht with SAS Chairman Kieron Moore on board, to go back 30 nautical miles in the dark to assist them identify the vessel and light. *Opela* beat back into some heavy seas, but were only able to identify a fishing vessel. As visibility was poor that night, the MRCC aeroplane went out the following day to the exact spot, but were

unable to locate the vessel.

It was at this point that the MRCC advised that it had done everything it could possibly do to find the missing crew, and that they were suspending the search. This naturally again incurred the wrath of those involved, although the MRCC did advise that if any new evidence presented itself as being credible and worthy of furthering their search, they would immediately re-mobilise.

The Helpers

Once news was out that the EPIRB on *Moquini* had been activated, the offers of help came thick and fast. Nicholas Mace and Matthew Thomas, his number two aboard *Gumption*, immediately offered their services and began looking at all options, including running models of possible search areas on their MaxSea computer race navigation and routing software.

Thomas collected information and guidelines on how to conduct and organise a search as those involved were certainly amateurs at search and rescue, but knew yachts and yachting.

A meeting of the families and concerned parties was convened, and Thomas was requested by the families to head the Search and Rescue Team. He is a professional yacht captain with top class credentials and he has operated in the USA for many years; he came with some knowledge and experience of search and rescue.

Offers of aeroplanes were received, crews from other yachts volunteered their services as spotters on planes, and things were mobile very quickly.

I was stunned at the quick response from people all over the land. A call to Tyneside in Durban had Captain O'Brien delivering charts of Madagascar and the search areas within ten minutes, not once, but twice as the following day he repeated the exercise as the first set of charts went to Madagascar on a search plane. Ian Hunter of the weather bureau in Pretoria was called and without hesitation provided all the information we needed. He also alerted the French meteorological authorities, and requested them to plot possible search areas on their models. The US NOAA (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency) provided additional weather information as well as a possible drift pattern for debris and a liferaft. The French Navy assisted, as did the Royal Navy. Investec offered one of their aeroplanes, as did Grindrod shipping. John Martin offered his assistance, and he even managed to get the Navy to release *Protea*, which was in Mozambican waters at the time, to assist. Regrettably the MRCC put a stop to this as they felt that the *Protea* fell under their control in this instance, and at that time having suspended their search, did not feel that the *Protea* would contribute significantly to the search effort. And Bruce Dunn of SMD Telecommunications gave invaluable sage advice on EPIRBs.

All this assistance was just the tip of the

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Sundaystar
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W Clark
W Seite Bedford Gard
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NAC Durban
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Foster Aero Maintenance
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South African Airforce Major
Charl Cilliers & his crew
The Tyneside for Charts
MRCC in Cape Town and their Team
Tempest Car Hire
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Schools (donations from children)
Seaforth College
Darnall Primary
St Mary's
Kloof High School
Hillcrest Christian Academy
Kearsney College

Special Thanks
Tristan Dickerson and his team of "Observers"
Andrew O'Flaherty
Liz Coxen

iceberg. Regrettably there are just too many people and organisations to mention here, but all those who gave of their time and resources so compassionately are listed separately in this article.

Things were frenetic at the Royal Natal Yacht Club control centre where the search and rescue was being conducted from, but a calm and responsible approach was always visible.

The Fund

Knowing that the MRCC search was likely to be terminated, Dave Claxton requested permission from the RNYC Commodore, Chris Frost, to establish the RNYC Moquini Rescue Fund to solicit funding for a private search once the MRCC had suspended their search. This private initiative was launched on the race website late on Monday night, and by Tuesday morning as the banks opened, the money began pouring in.

The generosity of the public, yacht clubs, boating industry, and concerned citizens from around the world was phenomenal. It certainly restores one's faith in mankind. Youngsters with little more than their piggy bank robbings turned up to make their contributions. School children donated their lunch money for a specific day, and other similar fund-raising activities occurred all over the country. It was a humbling experience for all concerned.

The Private Search

Various areas were identified and searched as thoroughly as possible. The Southern tip of Madagascar from Tanjon Andriamaanao in the west to Tolanaro (Fort Dauphin) in the east, a distance of about 250 nautical miles was searched thoroughly at about 100 metres above the sea for two days. Plus, a seaward area where the currents meet and begin to push up the Madagascan coast was also searched thoroughly.

The Mozambican coast and an area 250 nautical miles off the coast from Inhambane southwards was also done over two days. The rhumb line route from the tip of Madagascar to Durban was done in the vain hope that the guys were disabled, but still steering a course for home. These search areas over successive days started at 450 nautical miles out to sea. And took in the coastal area from Ponte do Ouro southwards to Durban, and even the Wild Coast. In total an area in excess of 45,000 square miles was searched.

As every search brought no news, it was inevitable that the organisers decided to suspend (as opposed to halt) the search. It was a difficult decision, but with the public's cash having been pledged, it had to be used responsibly. The families were made aware that should any new and plausible evidence be presented, the search would continue.

The Media

The media played a very responsible

role in this entire drama. They were sympathetic in their reporting making the public aware of the situation, and advising the public of the fund which had been set up.

What I found interesting was how some of the local media in Durban wanted to find out more about the boat, and the safety aspects and equipment carried. They requested to see all the safety equipment a yacht like *Moquini* would carry, and jumped at the opportunity when I managed to persuade Lifesaving Equipment here in Durban to specially inflate a liferaft and demonstrate its operation for them.

I would like to thank them for that positive attitude.

What Can be Learnt?

There are always things which can be learnt from disasters and tragedies like this.

Here there are issues of general and personal safety that need to be addressed.

The *Moquini* EPIRB was from all accounts stowed in its mounting bracket in a saloon locker, and not mounted close to the companionway where it would have been easily accessible. EPIRBs should always be easily accessible and preferably mounted rather than left in a locker.

There have been calls since this tragedy suggesting that yachts should have EPIRBs that are hydrostatically controlled. I do not believe that had *Moquini* had a hydrostatically released EPIRB, things would have been much different. We still have the unexplained 52 hour period.

I would, however, recommend that instead of purchasing the cheapest possible EPIRB, one should get an EPIRB with the GPS unit included. This will give a quicker fix, within a few minutes.

Moquini's liferaft was again, from all accounts, stowed below deck in the saloon. It is unsure whether the liferaft was stowed under the saloon table, or was merely in the saloon. Wherever it is stowed, it should be 'easily accessible' and the determining of this phrase is one which will be debated robustly around the teak reefs of yacht clubs for a long time to come.

In the case of *Moquini*, the liferaft and EPIRB were unlikely to be more than an arms-length away from each other. The big question is if - or when - they may have needed the raft, it was 'easily accessible'?

When racing, it may just be better to stow the raft on deck - with the raft's painter securely attached to a strong point.

A question that should be asked of anyone who stows a raft below deck is simply this: Where do you attach the painter which will launch the raft? My guess is that it is unlikely to be attached to anything below, and could well be forgotten when needed in an emergency. Was *Moquini's* raft tossed into the water without the painter attached to anything? It's a distinct possibility.

The issue of lifejackets always gets raised in these incidents. The fact of the matter is that while it is compulsory for yachts to carry a lifejacket for every crew member, crew seldom if ever wear them.

The reason is that they are too bulky and cumbersome to wear on deck. The solution to this is for crew to have their own PFDs (personal flotation devices), and to get into the habit of wearing them in rough weather and at night, or whenever on deck.

This is an issue of personal safety, rather than boat safety, and is an area where I believe, in this country, our yachties lack knowledge. So, we can learn from this.

Another item of personal safety is a personal EPIRB or SART, or even a small portable strobe light or water-activated white light attached to oilskins or lifejackets.

A more difficult issue is that of SSB Radio versus satphone. Should a satphone be carried in place of an SSB as the rules in this race permitted? It's again a difficult one to answer, although my gut feel says no. An SSB radio has emergency channels on which a Mayday can be broadcast, and which could be picked up by many different operators in a wide area. A call on a satphone is to one person - who may or may not answer, and who may or may not know how to cope with the emergency, or even take down the co-ordinates. It appears that there are too many negatives to this for it to be a good option, and I am sure that people far more qualified than I will provide the answers soon. What is a given, is that if the ship's power is down, neither an SSB or a satphone will work. And, even if the Satphone has its own power supply, it will still need charging from the ship's power supply.

Conclusion

This is a tragic situation which will undoubtedly have repercussions in the sailing world for a long time to come.

The organisers did everything they could in the circumstances, and were always positive that the crew would be found. As I write this they are still missing, yet their families are still positive and hopeful. I can only trust that their faith, along with that of so many other people, will still bring the guys home. ↴

Statement From the Families

"We, the families of the missing crew aboard *Moquini* have not given up hope of the crew being found, and would like to acknowledge the incredible and selfless effort the rescue team has put in to finding our husbands, sons, and brothers. We would like to express our appreciation to the media for their responsible and sympathetic reporting on this search and rescue mission, and to the public at large for the wonderfully generous support of the RNYC Moquini Rescue Fund, and for their care, sympathy and support. We have been astounded at the support from school children who have donated their lunch money, to the corporate giants of South Africa who have supported us. Words just cannot express our thanks and appreciation sufficiently. With all our hearts we thank you."