

## One man, a rowboat, and a pitiless storm

A little less than a year ago, a retired Chicago cardiologist named Nenad Belic began rowing alone across the Atlantic Ocean. His custom-built boat completed the quixotic 3,000-mile journey in November, but, as writer Peggy Wolff recounts, Belic did not.

From the rattling window hatch in his tiny boat, all Nenad Belic could see was an undulating, uninterrupted expanse of the Atlantic—a vast oceanscape that he had just rowed. For 137 days, Belic had been crossing the sea, facing backwards as he pulled on the oars for up to 12 hours a day, often battling headwinds and facing swells of 20 feet. He had shaved himself bald for the start of his journey, but after four months, his dark, graying hair had grown in. There wasn't an ounce of fat left on his body.

In *Lun*, his rowboat, the 62-year-old retired Chicago cardiologist couldn't see or smell land, but he was close, just 481 miles off Ireland. When he landed, he would be the first American to have paddled the Atlantic, west to east, from the United States to Europe.

But this day—Sept. 24, 2001—when Belic called his oceanographer, Jenifer Clark, by satellite phone, the news was troubling. Clark and her meteorologist husband, Dane, were guiding Belic's journey using data collected by satellites scanning the earth. And the forecast that Clark read to Belic sounded ominous: "Expect foul weather and dangerously strong winds, anywhere from 20 to 55 mph. ... Seas could reach 15 to 20 feet."

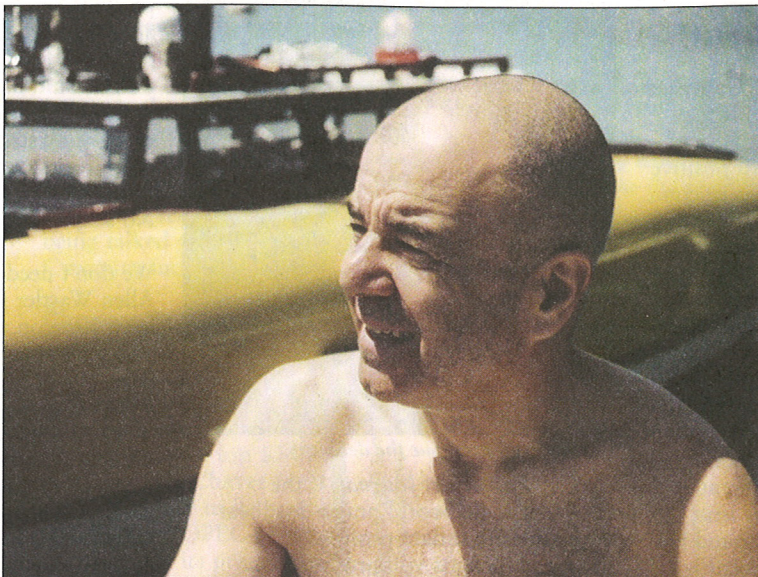
Clark advised Belic to activate his emergency radio beacon, which would bring the British and the Irish Coast Guard to his rescue.

"No," Belic told her. "If I do that, they'll pick me up but not the boat."

The forecast turned out to be correct: The seas kicked mounds of water and the waves exploded, but Belic rowed through the storm without capsizing. His luck had held again.

But another storm was building right behind, and this one would be different. Again, Belic would face it alone, while murderous masses of water pounded like cannonballs against his boat.

The quest had commenced May 11, 2001, from Chatham, Mass., the "elbow" of Cape Cod. In *Lun*, his 21-foot, custom-designed rowboat, Belic had embarked on a voyage of at least 2,580 miles. His goal had been to get to Portugal before September, when hurricane season hits. At the start, he had expected that the crossing would take him 100-odd days. It was a journey epic



Belic and *Lun* prelaunch: 'Reckless, admirable, and a bit mad'

and reckless, admirable, and a bit mad.

In his phone calls home from the ocean, Belic would sometimes say that the horizon looked so close, it was as if he were on a big pond. He was not listening to any of the CDs he downloaded, and not *Moby Dick* on tape, because, he said, it distracted him. It interfered with the sound of the sea, with the rhythm of rowing. He was listening to BBC Radio, remembering his childhood, and whistling familiar tunes, all within a very routine day: up at dawn, eat breakfast, row three or four hours, eat lunch, row, eat dinner, go to sleep.

Ellen Belic thought her emotionally distant husband was becoming one with his boat, growing daily more tranquil and enmeshed, at once more crazy and more mellow.

But perhaps Belic's long days at sea bred a sociable streak. Out of nowhere, he volunteered to take ballroom dancing lessons with Ellen when he returned. Ellen thought he might be homesick. Maybe he missed her.

By the end of July, with the wind and currents pushing him, he was moving farther north than he had anticipated. His long ocean crossing was now leading to a landfall in France. He had come 1,926 miles in 81 days. Then he got on the wrong side of an eddy, a circular mass of water that flowed clockwise, like a record 60 miles wide spinning in the water. "It's a gorgeous day, the sun is shining, there's no wind, and I'm going backwards!" he told Ellen.

He was sucked in twice before he could row hard enough to escape the eddy's 2-knot current. Even though it had set him back four days, he didn't complain. His cup was always half full.

But on Aug. 22, he took an inventory of his packaged military meals and realized that—even if he stretched it—he could go only four more weeks. He was still 900 miles from France, a distance of at least 30 days' rowing. While Ellen and Kenneth Crutchlow of the London-based Ocean Rowing Society monitored Belic's progress over the next couple of weeks, there was a lot of e-mail discussion about resupplying food—such as the etiquette of requesting food from a passing ship, or the success rates of airdrops.

Then, on Sept. 18, the captain of the Swedish container ship *Rigoletto*

received a call on VHF radio from five miles away: "I am ocean rowing boat *Lun* calling the ship on my starboard side head east. Please come in." The message continued: "Departed from Cape Cod 100-odd days ago headed for Europe. It is taking longer than I expected; could you spare me some food?"

The captain radioed back, and while it was a tricky maneuver to slip alongside a rowboat, the *Rigoletto's* cook pulled out the gangway and sent down a sack of food: ravioli, baked beans, corned beef, sausages, fruits, cheese, and the hard Swedish bread knäckebröd. Belic was thrilled. Being treated to a gourmet food drop prompted a call home and a boast about his breakfast of hot pork tenderloins in mushroom sauce.

The *Rigoletto* left *Lun* in her wake.

On Monday, Sept. 24, Belic called Jenifer Clark on the satellite phone at 10 a.m., just as he had done every Monday and Thursday since the middle of May. Jenifer, using satellites to sight nature's warnings, issued a strong alert that the barometer was dropping and seas would be building.

After reading him the forecast—and warning that wind gusts could hit 40 to 50 knots—she advised him to push his emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB). That day, Ellen begged her husband to stop the trip. She had been arguing with him the week before to leave the boat, and he was cross. "Please call for help," she urged him. "You've been lucky with the weather so far. You decide your own success, Neno. You are the rower who holds a record for being in the water the longest. You are the oldest to attempt this. You can stop now."

"I can't," was all he said.

As it turned out, the low-pressure areas associated with fierce sea weather stayed north of Belic, and he navigated safely through the storm he faced.

Dane Clark advised him that other storms were coming that week, but Belic chose to wait them out. He deployed his sea anchor and faced the storms alone.

On Thursday, Sept. 27, Belic made three calls: to Ellen, who said she would pray for him at Yom Kippur services that day; to Crutchlow, leaving a message saying that the weather was beastly, but that he was fine; and to Jenifer Clark. He didn't call her at the usual time of 10 a.m. She waited until 10:45, then left a warning for him on her answering machine: "Very complicated weather pattern over the eastern North Atlantic ... indications that a ... low-pressure area will develop over the weekend and be centered near 57N 23W by Sunday with the pressure as low as 950 mb!" "Nine-hundred-fifty millibars! It's off the dial!" says Belic's friend George Matavulj, who tracked *Lun's* progress on the Internet every day.

Today, no one knows exactly the ferocity of the weather, but in a six- to eight-hour period of time, Dane Clark says, the winds that blew from the North Atlantic toward Ireland on Sunday, Sept. 30, pushed the waves to rise from around 15 feet high to around 30 feet. Some observers suspect that a *Perfect Storm* situation came up, in which two wave jams—waves steep and close together—became bigger and more violent until they met in a rogue wave: one steep, 50- or 60-foot wall of water, avalanching over the boat.

At 10:30 that night, the Irish Coast Guard and HM Coast Guard Falmouth picked up an EPIRB distress signal from Belic's last position, near 51N 15W, placing him 259 miles west of Bantry Bay, Ireland. The beacon could not have been activated accidentally. Belic would have had to pull the EPIRB off a bracket, flip up a cover switch, reach in, and flip the main switch.

At 11:10 p.m., a Royal Air Force Nimrod aircraft located the beacon's flashing light, then circled the area until an RAF rescue helicopter arrived a few hours later. In darkness, amid gale-force winds, the RAF dropped two life rafts. The airmen anticipated finding the boat and the rower, but all they saw was the flashing beacon. There was no sign of a boat or debris.

Six weeks later, Irish fishermen spotted what they thought was a dead whale. It was *Lun*, upside down a quarter mile offshore at Pouladay Rocks, about six miles from Kilkee.

Excerpted from "Taken by Storm," from the March issue of Chicago magazine. ©2002 by Peggy Wolff. Used with permission.