

Royal Highland Yacht Club

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A *Stubborn* winter

Nick Christie

Winner of the Royal Bank of Scotland Cup

At some point in every boater's experience, there comes a time when they find themselves lost in thought and usually covered in grot whilst working through the seeming endless list of pre-season jobs, dreaming of future adventures, warm sun and cool drinks.

For myself, this pre-splash works list would frighten the most seasoned mariner with its endless detail and scale. *Cruinneag III* has been part of our family for nearly 60 years and as she quickly approaches her 90th birthday it is obvious that the joy and satisfaction of caring for her, far outweigh the effort involved, because a guardianship on this scale makes a job like painting the Forth Rail Bridge look easy!

Spotted on the south coast, by returning submariner, George Christie (RHYC member) *Cruinneag* joined our family in the 1950's and brought her own unique and extensive requirements for care and maintenance. It was soon transferred to a book which, to this day, painstakingly documents every repair, modification and restoration. The 'ships book', how very Royal Navy.



Approaching Capo San Vito, Sicily



With our common goal to be ready to get back in the water as soon as winter passes, temperatures rise and before the midge hatches, this is the 'not so' glamorous side to yachting which we all share. One that accounts for so much more time and money than any outsider could imagine or understand and where the only resolve comes from one's own imagination. A time to reflect on past adventures, dream up new ones and pick flakes of antifouling from your face and hair with a sense of satisfaction.

"You do this every year!", "How many coats!", and my personal favourite, "At what point do I get to wear my ***** bikini!". Generations of helpers have grumbled away while usually clenching a dribbling paint roller covered in some 'not so' toxic slurry of paint which appears neither to detract nor repel any modern sea algae I have encountered, they all appear to have adapted to living in our sadly polluted seas.

No, this year was going to be different I would not haul *Cruinneag* out come winter but instead take her south and east, roughly 2500nm into the Mediterranean sea to the island of Malta. It was here that I had discovered several years earlier that the submarine my grandfather had served in during the war was located. So on November 2nd of last year on the most perfect of weather windows, *Cruinneag* set sail to go and see *HMS Stubborn*.

Putting rudder to Ayrshire, *Cruinneag* charged out past Ailsa Craig and south 800nm towards one of our favourite ports, Baiona, in Pontevedra Spain. Baiona, named so because it is the first bay north of the Portuguese border and not to be confused with Bayonne, the first bay in France north of the Spanish border. We would spend Christmas there and in January continue south through the Gibraltar Straights and into the Mediterranean.

Once again choosing a favourable weather window *Cruinneag* and a new crew prepared to depart for Palma, Mallorca. The plan as it usually is with a yacht of *Cruinneag's* weight and size is to get her out in the tail of a stronger passing weather system and enjoy the better conditions, which usually fol-

low. This strategy had been working well and once again after the initial rough start the yacht and crew settled in to thinking it would be a short leg to Lisbon or maybe Cadiz, however conditions strengthened and then veered more westerly allowing us to continue and they continued to change in our favour as we made progress. South towards Gibraltar, east through the Straits at dawn without a breath of wind or much traffic, along the south Spanish coast with glorious fresh wind and full sail and then north towards the Balearics all in one continuous 8 day passage right round the bottom of Europe.



I'll steer, you keep watch

Stopping only briefly for some fuel in Gibraltar, more than £1 per litre less than anywhere so far and an unexpected mid-ocean search by Spanish authorities; curious as to our purpose and eager to provide some field experience to their new recruits. They appeared somewhat embarrassed to have travelled so far offshore with great gusto and expense only to discover three tired crew, two large dogs and an extraordinary volume of dog food in our chain locker.

Selfies were taken by both parties and agreed not to be shared. Belly rubs administered to Yogi and Boo! (our two dogs) and repaid with lots of licks and a few laughs shared as *Cruinneag* pitched in the big waves in complete darkness. Some time later they disembarked and returned to Alicante and we continued on to Palma.

Over the next three months *Cruinneag* and the crew enjoyed many memorable moments and made many new friends while winding our way slowly towards Malta. Being completely out of season and sync with the usual Mediterranean madness we found ourselves, most of the time, on our own and able to choose stunning anchorages, prime positions and places. From Mallorca across to Sardinia and on to Sicily, through the volcanic islands of the Tyrrhenian Sea and then south through the famous Messina straights to Malta.

The voyage had however not been just plain sailing. Nursing an antique yacht some 2500nm through the Atlantic and Mediterranean during the winter had created some serious challenges along the way and as *Cruinneag* swung gently at anchor near Valletta's Grand Harbour and we watched yet another incredible fireworks display I felt some relief and satisfaction to have made it.



Cruinneag newly arrived at RMYC Malta



Cruinneag launching at Patmos

We had had some wild weather and experienced some mighty rough seas. We had had some injuries and visited several veterinarian clinics along the way. We had had one emergency operation and broken one very large piece of wood also but we were here now and at that point had absolutely no idea that the trip home, later in the summer would eclipse the outward voyage in adventure.

It was now May 2022, anchored off Manoel Island, which served as a strategic outpost for the British Submarine fleet during WWII and directly opposite the Royal Malta Yacht Club. Armed with a photograph of my grandfather aboard *HMS Stubborn* and a letter of introduction from the RHYC off I went to announce our arrival and intentions.

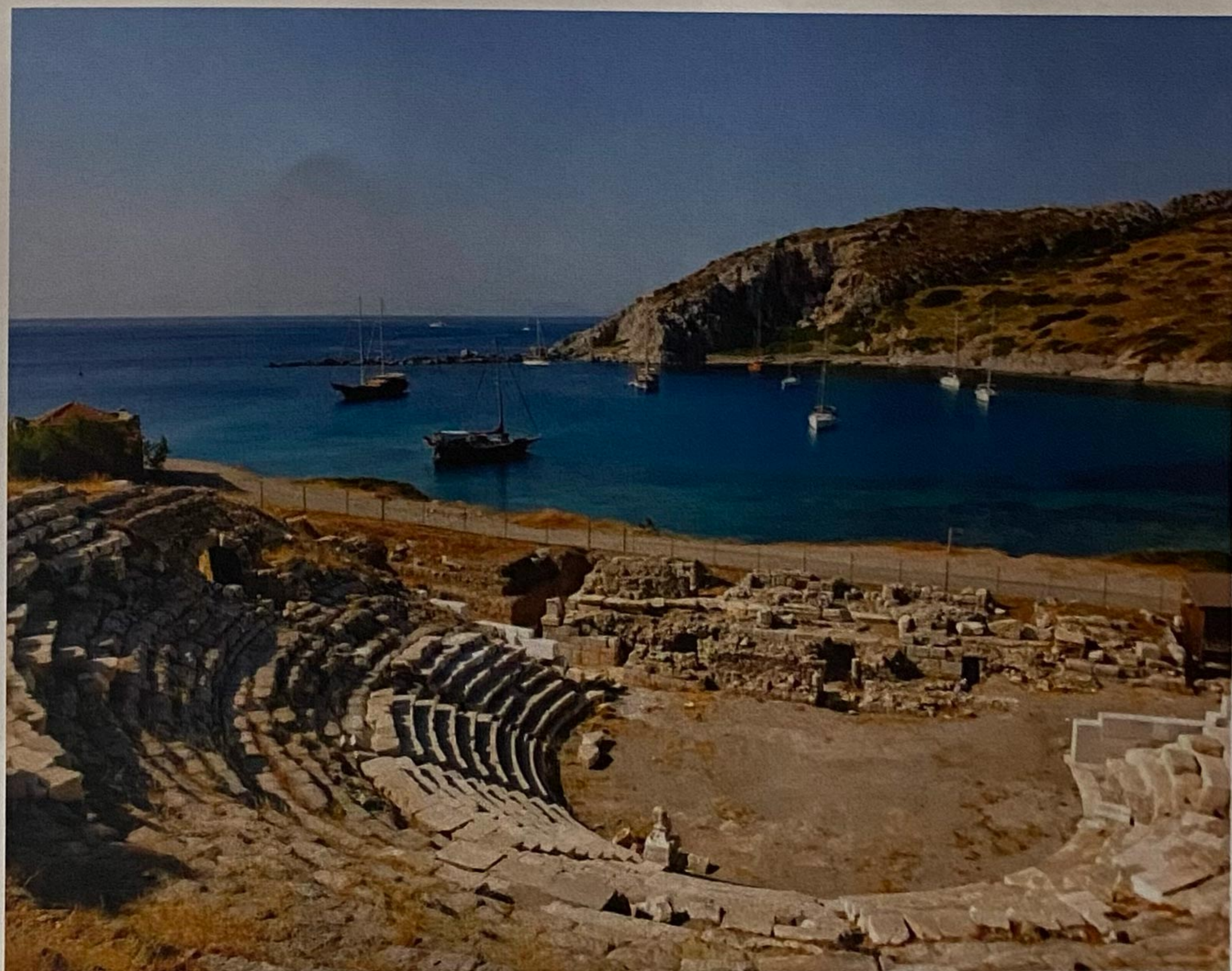
After some early mixed reactions and reception my 'stubborn' determination began to pay off. It was clear that there was only one yacht at anchor in the harbour and within days interest in the old yacht and my purpose there in Malta became news.

HMS Stubborn was well known in Malta, she symbolised part of the island's heritage and featured in several exhibits, including the Heritage Malta Underwater Cultural Unit where it is possible to explore the site virtually. (www.heritagemalta.org and www.underwatermalta.org)

The Times of Malta ran two articles about our trip and my goal to dive and visit *HMS Stubborn*, explaining not only the news that we had sailed the captain's yacht to his submarine all the way from Scotland but including never before seen photographs of memorabilia which are housed aboard *Cruinneag*.

After the war *HMS Stubborn* went on to serve for a further year before being sunk on April 30th 1946 for sonar practice. Lying in 57 metres about 5km off the coast, she sits upright and listing slightly to starboard. In remarkable condition having been submerged for 76 years she is intact, torpedo tubes and hatches open and all manner of sea life thriving on her.

It is possible to dive the submarine and a major part of Malta's thriving tourism industry focuses on scuba diving. Malta and the surrounding area is littered with historic wrecks which have become popular dive sites for skilled divers and new sites have been created, in recent years, by sinking disused ships at shallower depths to allow less skilled divers an opportunity to experience wreck diving. *HMS Stubborn* however was over 180ft deep and 5km off shore making any visit to her an offshore technical dive and to do so would require myself going back to school!



Turkish cruising



Cruinneag anchored in Cala Pi Mallorca

Additionally due to the location of the wreck offshore it was also too early in the year to visit the site, weather systems and currents throughout the winter batter the barren coastal features of the islands. Malta, Comino and Gozo, are all low lying, sparsely vegetated, dry, rocky outcrops with very little sea or bird life to be seen. Almost exactly middle east-west of the Mediterranean Sea and middle north-south between Sicily and the boot of Italy to its north and Libya to its south. Malta has been a strategic military stronghold throughout history and the city of Valletta is home to several world heritage sites and impressive fortifications as well as a stunning natural harbour.

Time then to go back to school for some training and further study! We stayed at anchor outside the RMYC for several weeks, often the only yacht in the harbour. Discovering Malta and all there was to enjoy and in my case back at school after a fortuitous meeting one morning walking my dogs on Manoel Island when I saw what I knew to be a group of Tec Divers training and approached them.

I spent several weeks studying and passing the various Tec Deep dive course modules with a team from Dive Systems Malta, While Simon the owner and Tom the course director planned out how and when the actual dive could take place. A decision was made that August would present the best conditions for the actual dive, when it was hoped that the weather and sea would be more settled.

With our plan set to return to Malta in August on our way home for the dive, it was now early June and the buzz of tourists and other yachts was just beginning. I knew when we returned in August it would be the height of the tourist season, hot and busy, I could not have imagined how hot and how busy!

We set sail and headed east and for the next two months *Cruinneag* and her crew ventured through Greece and on to Turkey and back. Temperatures soared and winds blew hard. I could write a whole cruising guide about these two months if time permitted but suffice to say Greece is not without its challenges. Stern to berthing became second nature and you can never have enough chain out when the ferry arrives.

The winds in the Dodecanese are not to be underestimated, one morning we watched a 30m motor yacht drag through the anchorage, strike us and then motor away leaving *Cruinneag* and her now dislodged anchor then to drag herself. She narrowly escaped ending up on the rocks thanks to a Mo Farah sprint and a 007 tender rescue. The next morning I rose to discover our cockpit table and chairs floating away, blown clean off the boat!



Yogi discovers paddleboarding



Captain Caspar (future pirate)

discover our cockpit table and chairs floating away, blown clean off the boat!

The only one unaffected by the conditions appeared to be our dog Yogi, who discovered paddle boarding while we were away and had to be rescued himself after his human fumbled and went for a swim and he drifted off carefree!

A good inflatable dingy, powerful reliable outboard, two types of anchors, two chains. 24/7 anchor/berth watch and the ferry timetable were my comforts as I watched my varnish bake and crumble off in the heat and my deck caulking literally melt before my eyes, the winter job list was growing into a book I thought as I sipped a cool drink and someone got to wear a bikini!

Returning to Malta we were feeling good about our adventures, the boat was sailing well again after we managed to find a wonderful traditional boat yard in Patmos and build ourselves a new Oregon pine main boom. Simon and the others were expecting us and this time had a mooring waiting for us, courtesy of the dive shop in St Julian's Bay. I was even able to use some equipment from the dive shop to service and check the mooring. It was the safest *Cruinneag* had been in months and I slept well knowing this.

The date for the dive was set and the final preparations made. There was even time to enjoy some rec-

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Islay



Nick on Stubborn's conning tower with burgee

reational dives to other sites. Through an underwater cave-tunnel on Gozo to an inland sea and several other WWII wrecks and an oil tanker sunk for tourism. I passed below the 60m mark on several occasions and was looking forward to finally getting aboard *HMS Stubborn* and to stand where my grandfather had stood so many years before when he was Lieutenant (later promoted Lieutenant Commander).

On our dive day, Friday 19th August, the masses of equipment and tanks were loaded onto the Dive Systems boat for the team of five. Amongst my technical equipment I had three items that did not belong; first a bottle of my grandfather's own whisky. This was a happy story, the crew all survived and went on to live amazing lives. My grandfather returned home to discover he was to be a father and went on to become a Captain and later a distiller of whisky and then the owner of *Cruinneag III*.

He had a long amazing life and was a devoted member of the RHYC to the end. He wore the RHYC badge upon his hat and flew the club's burgee at all times. I had lowered *Cruinneag's* club burgee that morning and tucked it into my dive pocket next to his bottle. The last item taken was on the request and loan from my 6 year old, named after my grandfather

George, I am not exactly sure of the significance - but those sunglasses came with me as well!

There was an excited and professional mood aboard Simon's boat as we headed NE 5.6nm from St Paul's bay and the main island of Malta. It was clear bright 31°C day at the surface. The team suited up while Simon located the submarine with an electronic bottom sounder, he knew pretty much the exact location and it is not marked correctly on the charts. I had tried to find her coming back into Malta with *Cruinneag* and had circled several times. There are no visual signs and once over the submarine a shot line was deployed. The divers then entered the water and when ready submerged following the line right to *HMS Stubborn*. The temperature plummeted as I descended and at depth was in the low teens. Although some of the sun's natural light made it to our 57m depth everything around was a deep dark royal blue but the unmistakable silhouette of the submarine loomed in the distance.

During the 20 minutes on the bottom I was able to stand on the conning tower where my grandfather had stood and show the other divers where *Stubborn's* name was located and still existed beneath 76 years of sea growth. I was able to take the bottle of



Cruinneag's crew

whisky and let it sink down through the conning tower hatch deep into the submarine and for a moment fly the RHYC burgee 180ft below the waves aboard *HMS Stubborn*; not very Royal Navy.

The dive had surpassed everyone's expectations and the return mood was jubilant with stories, music and maybe a few cans of beer! Later back aboard *Cruinneag III* with the Captain's daughter, my mother, I hoisted the burgee back where it belonged and we toasted his good self one more time with some special bubbles.

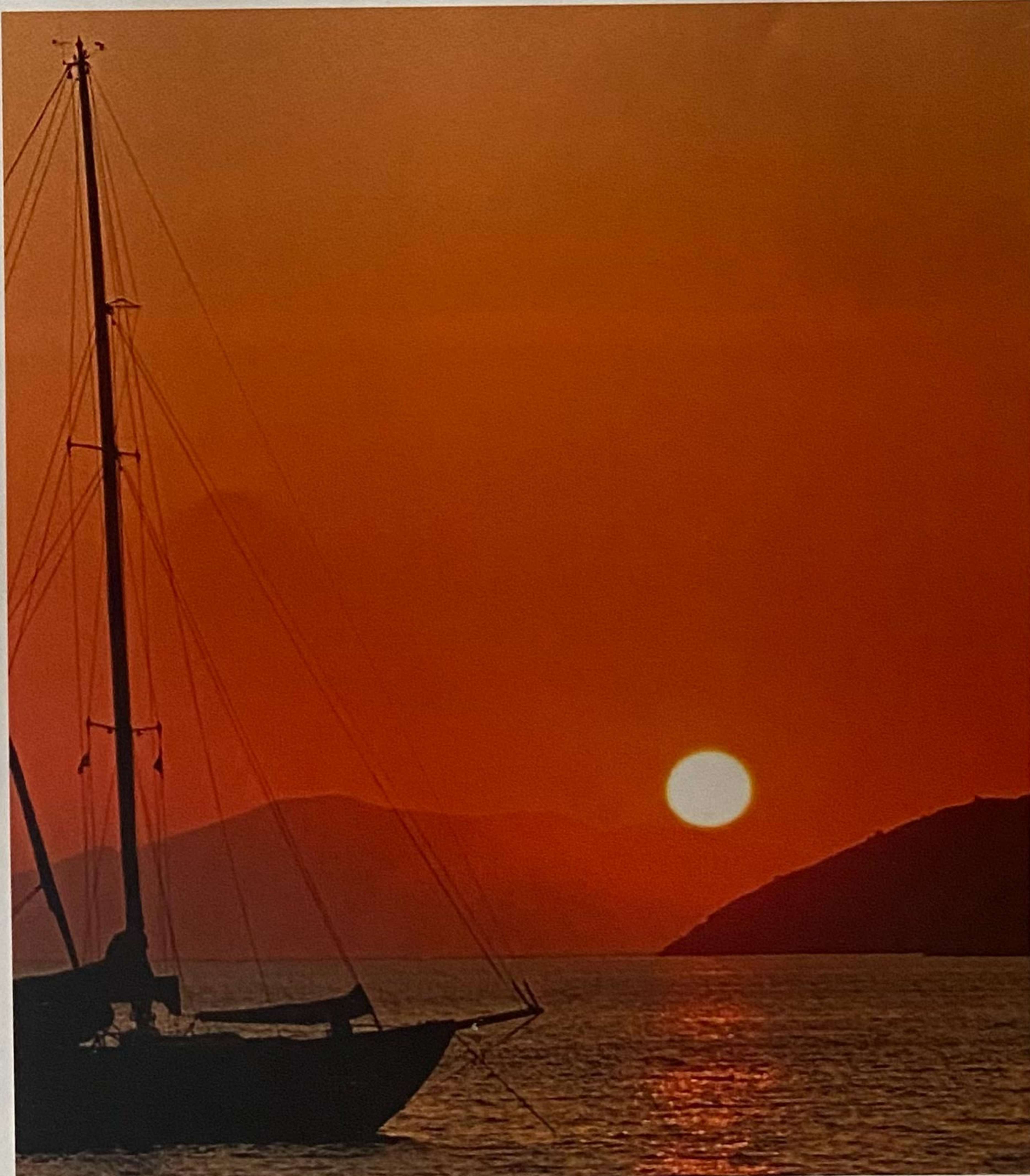
Spirits were high as we packed up and prepared for the long voyage home. We knew it was going to be long and tough and we wanted to get going and give ourselves as much time as possible before winter. Freak storms were already being reported with hurricanes in the Atlantic and the Med. It was time to head home and start the 'book of jobs' volume 1. So we said goodbye to Malta and departed

on the following Tuesday. My timing was impeccable a day earlier or later and it might never have happened but that is another story! *Cruinneag*, Yogi, Boo! and the crew all arrived home safe and sound before October and that's all that matters.

The Times of Malta followed our dive and journalist Claudia Calleja published a second piece reporting on the accomplishment with photos and a video of the dive. Well worth a look.

Our thanks go to the RHYC and those who made this trip possible and we hope to see you on the water next year.

(It is worth looking up HMS Stubborn's history during WWII - Ed.)



Cruinneag; sunset in Amorgos, Greece