

The Strength of Perseverance

David Marlow tells a story that has yet to end.



The best place to start a story is at its beginning, although many tease readers with the ending first. For those familiar with Marlow Yachts, the ending hasn't happened yet, but they are well aware of the craftsmanship and proprietary innovations originated from the mind of David Marlow that are present today. The launch of the 100-foot Voyager Class yacht *ICE* was a technological achievement from the hull to the mechanical and electrical systems to climate control and passenger comfort. So when asked about how he got into boat building, Marlow writes his story starting when he was three years old.

"The first place I am aware of being and, therefore, the first sound recalled was a sturdy oyster dock as center of a modest encampment of rugged men, women, and a few children located eleven miles west of Apalachicola, Florida, near Indian Pass at the westerly head of this famous

estuary," writes Marlow. "Logic being a key ingredient to a reasonable life and scarcity of words common to the time and circumstance, the camp was known simply as Eleven Mile and remains so today, though only rotted pilings and many oyster shells mark its place.

"My age was three, the year 1945, with many able-bodied men away at war in the service of our country. Those remaining in the area were considered vital to the nation's food supply and urged to provide whatever bounty the sea and agriculture could produce. My memory is quite good from age three-and-a-half with little before that time, though it remains very clear with many details from just prior to age four and beyond.

"The first sounds were similar to those in the story of Walter Mitty that sustained his dull life confined in an office where he could hear the early engines on New York Harbor



turning slowly in the working boats nearby. The sound was 'ta-pocketa-ta-pocketa-ta-pocketa.' Though this is the common sound or 'beat' of early engines heard in Walter's head, it is also the sound of the SN202 engine, the Navy hydroplane engine that the imaginary commander piloted fearlessly. ...The author's description fits perfectly with the sound that remains in my head and, perhaps, magnified in a three-plus-year-old mind to signify adventure beyond my wire oyster basket crib on the dock piled high with oysters, clams, fresh fish, and occupied by leather skinned fishermen in thin, white cotton, long-sleeved shirts with well-broken-in straw hats coming and going in their magic carpets to places imagined. The first sound and sight I can recall are inexorably welded in my mind."

Marlow continues to tell an extraordinary story too involved for these limited pages. He is the youngest of 12 children. His mom passed

away when he was four, and family life changed in an instant. The family moved south near Palmetto, Florida, where his father's boatbuilding and construction skills kept them housed and fed, but the "sound, smell, and sight of saltwater, missing its rhythmic cadence to life and the bounty offered for those with ability to fish, find clams, oysters and other bounty to supplement an agrarian diet" called his dad to the coast. Young Marlow soon followed.

"Soon thereafter, my father left our modest settlement on foot to explore the coastal area, learning of a well-established colony of commercial fishermen in a coastal settlement called Cortez over along the coast. This being my first time far from his side, I, too, left on foot alone, at four years of age, to find him. At first sticking to the two rutted sand lanes built for wagons and rugged vehicles, I could occasionally see a clearing or pasture affording a short cut across a bend in the road. Taking these

An early pilot boat; David Marlow at home and at the helm of his racing sailboat Mandrake; the impeccably kept Marlow Yachts manufacturing plant in Xiamen, China

David Marlow (inset) has come a long way from a tin canoe with the 100-foot Voyager Class yacht ICE.



Marlow built sailboats as well, including sailing dinghies (front, top left) and the Marlow 47 (bottom), but it all started with the tin canoe built in 1954.

diversions brought me nearby to a small herd of native cattle including the patriarch of many of the heifers and yearlings scattered amongst the piney woods. Having no experience in the same arena as a twelve-hundred-pound bull, I took a course change, but to no avail as they all began to follow me. ...From nowhere, it seemed, I heard the powerful voice of my father using the coarse shouts the Cracker cowboys used to herd reluctant animals. This caused a hesitation in their curiosity for me and a hurled pine limb that struck one convinced them we were more trouble than worth. My father at first rebuked me for running away from our new shack, but then lifted me to his shoulders...urging me to yell at the cows as he carried me home to demonstrate that though small, I could be loud.”

Shortly thereafter, the Marlow brood moved to Cortez. The connection to saltwater was now apparent and “the infusion of water, boats and the accompanying way of life was in my blood.”

Marlow was 15 years old when his father passed away, but his determination and will to succeed was set.

“Though the period between about five and

fourteen years of age provided enough for a modest life without extras, lack of business skills often caused a loss in building several vessels due to my father’s trusting nature running afoul of those who would take advantage of his broad handshake and completion of the vessels as agreed. Thus, as he began construction on the last vessel from Marlow Boat Works, no bank balance could be found, nor savings of any nature. At age fourteen, my father and I were working under a lovely small yacht of juniper and oak perhaps sixty percent done when a heavy block thrown while lying on his back caused a support to dislodge, bringing the boat down on the two of us. As a skinny, sixty-five-pound kid, I was not physically hurt as my father’s six-four, two-hundred-forty-pound body kept the boat from crushing me alongside him. I was able to dig my way to the chine and freedom, then seeking help from neighbors to jack the boat up and remove my father. His back was broken and though he came home from Bay Pines Veterans Hospital with appliances of the day fitted and despite the iron will of a superman in the eyes of others and me, he could not handle the



David Marlow shows the magnitude of a Burmese Teak log; the usable length was approximately 80 feet.

various components and tools of a boatbuilder. His condition deteriorated despite his efforts to rehabilitate himself by hard labor. With no income, despite the generosity of the many people, our modest home could not support the remaining children with most of the older ones far away at sea, in the military, and some having migrated away in search of their own destiny.

“We buried him in Bay Pines Military Cemetery in St. Petersburg, and I began a seven-year wander about the earth by a variety of conveyances, from farm trucks across Mexico to Greyhound buses if fortune allowed the fare, or in a cattle car from near Great Falls, Montana, to Yuma, Arizona to escape the bitter winds of late fall. From there to the Texas coast, I soon found myself at sea on a variety of vessels. At about age seventeen, I became co-captain along with a seventeen-year-old North Carolinian on board a Desco Shrimp trawler owned by the Singleton Shrimp Company of Tampa, Florida, primarily trawling the rich Campeche Mexico Bank for the premium shrimp gathered there. Our work ethic and production soon caught the eye of Mr. Jack Solomon, owner of Solomon Seafoods in Tampa, Florida; Honduras; French Guyana; and other locations. An offer of a better boat and increased share caused me to join Jack’s fleet as he was personable, well-founded, and held a trustworthy reputation. Little did I imagine that forty years later he

would come to me and ask me to build him a new Marlow Explorer 70 and a few years later, another. Though he was twenty years my senior, his memory of my employment with him was gin-clear and complimentary. Our relationship until his crossing the bar in 2018 was as it was in 1959-1960, simply spoken words and a firm handshake of agreement.”

Marlow learned the trade of boat building from his dad, even though it wasn’t of much interest during his young days in Palmetto. He preferred to hang out by the local creek, yet at age 12, he salvaged old corrugated tin from chicken coops and with pine tar, shaped a canoe. Boats have been his passion every since, and the lessons his dad taught carry through to this day.

“The journey, abbreviated of course, includes the indentured apprentice child in the years from age six until almost fifteen which provided me with a basic knowledge, unrecognized at the time, of how things work, enabling me to survive in a large and rough environment without guidance, support, or funds of any sort other than by my own efforts across a large part of the western world,” writes Marlow.

He picked up his dad’s boatbuilding skills as well as “his implacable refusal to compromise on structural standards commonly accepted in the boatbuilding trade,” refusing to simplify construction standards by simply cutting and joining by fasteners and glue or bending steamed

(continued)



The Marlow Prowler Havana design offers features not found on typical center consoles. Marlow enjoys a Dawee lunch with the head of Chinese Maritime. The team at the Chinese yard prepare to launch four new Marlow yachts.

oak frames to form the hull framing shape of a single boat.” Harvesting old growth cypress, juniper, and live oak from the vast swamps added weeks to construction time because “it allowed him to determine by visual observation which natural hull frame curves grown by nature could be rendered by manual tools to form without joints, other than where the timbers met the stout live oak keel.”

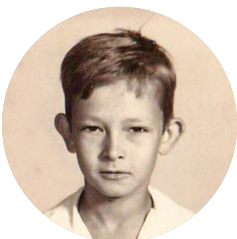
Through these lessons and his perseverance to obtain a revolving credit line to start his first business, a bareboat rental with two houseboats, Marlow went on to own and operate numerous successful boat distributorships and shipyards as well as boat companies, such as Luhrs, Mainship, and Hunter. Hunter is known for sailboats, and not many people know that Marlow was a competitive sailor. He sailed *Mandrake*, a 43-foot ocean racer in England, and had a goal of building a 40-foot high-performance sailing yacht to represent the U.S. in the Admiral’s Cup, an international regatta as the unofficial world championship in offshore racing. The boat was selected to represent the U.S., but the light conditions didn’t bode well as

the vessel was designed for rough seas.

“I returned to my home in Florida, closed the sale on my marine properties portfolio, and retired to Maine to spend the following nine years sailing, land cruising, and exploring the thousands of pig trails, as it were, on land and sea, occasionally wintering in Florida while building and rebuilding modest historically important small vessels, old automobiles, and machinery of a wide range of uses.”

At the time, Marlow felt he had realized the American Dream and didn’t feel he needed to do more than enjoy the fruits of his labor and “learn more of a part of the world my earlier travels had missed for reasons unknown. That remained true until one fine summer evening by the fire. My wife and close companion idly suggested that I build us one more boat for our personal usage only, including all that I had learned from a lifetime at sea and on land in a magic carpet ride through life: albeit one with a few bumps and hard spots.”

It’s easy to think of Paul Harvey’s closing line: “And now you know the rest of the story,” but it’s not time yet. Marlow is still writing his. 🐦



Read David Marlow’s full story as told to Southern Boating.

