



## at sea with recovery

*This is an abridged transcript of an audio piece created for the "at sea with recovery" SSU.*

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It's a Sunday evening, somewhere a mile or so of the south coast of Cornwall, on a three masted, eighty foot, seventy-four tonne gaffe ketch sailing vessel. She's called Tectona and she's a big boat. On deck, it's dark. You can just about see the clouds glowing orange from Plymouth's street lights off to the North-West. It's also wet and choppy, and difficult to keep your balance.

Below deck, it's still difficult to keep your balance of course. But it's warmer, lighter and smells like dinner. Fifteen people are eating tonight: three permanent crew (the skipper, first mate and bosun), two medical students (I'm one of them), two staff members from a rehabilitation centre in Hampshire called *Phoenix Alpha* and eight people recovering from addiction.

It's fair to say this isn't a stage everyone passes through during their recovery from addiction.

I got the chance to see first-hand a voyage that some people with addictions undertake as part of their road to recovery. I have to say, it's unlike any I'd read about in textbooks, or seen signposted in GP surgeries. It's certainly not a traditional approach.

As a medical student, we do learn about addiction, or at least some aspects of it. Trying to understand provision for addiction and recovery in the NHS is difficult. It varies depending on where you are in the country, but certain things hold true no matter where you are. Firstly, GPs are able to access a lot of vital care for people with addiction. They can prescribe maintenance therapies, they can manage drug withdrawals, and they can refer to specialised care like rehabilitation units and psychological treatment.

There is also a good understanding that in order to help people with addiction, we need to adapt our services to make them easy to access. Many people with addiction live chaotic lives, and calling up a few weeks in advance for a ten minute appointment with a GP in a practice miles away just doesn't work for them. Allowing self-referral is important. We've also made hubs - centres with social services, psychological input, doctors, chiropractors, accommodation advice and hot meal provision all in the same area.



Tectona is different though, and focused at those in rehabilitation and recovery units. It is a week-long sailing trip. But finding willing people to spend up to six nights at sea on a boat built before penicillin was discovered is sometimes a tricky task in itself.

There aren't any formal criteria to come aboard, but you do have to be abstinent, you can't be on any rehabilitation related medicine like methadone, and you have to be actively participating and investing in the recovery process at your unit.

But that's it. You might not be a master mariner, you might never have sailed on a tall ship in your life, you might not know your bosun from a bowline, you might not be able to swim, you might actively dislike boats, you might not cope well in confined spaces, you might get seasick at the thought of the English Channel, and you might not like the idea of working in a team, but that is no reason not to take part in a voyage.

In fact, the whole experience is pretty reliant on you being in an unfamiliar environment. As one of the guys I spoke to put it:

*Rob: A lot of things that happen in life are out of your control, you just need to learn to get on with it... and not press the sod it button and go what's the point?!*

We started our voyage from Plymouth Yacht Haven, and managed our first hoist of the sails in the safety of Plymouth Sound. We planned to set sail through the night and head as far west as we could get. To do this, we had three hour watches in two teams. I was in the "smugglers" and we had first watch whilst the other team, the "pirates" cooked.

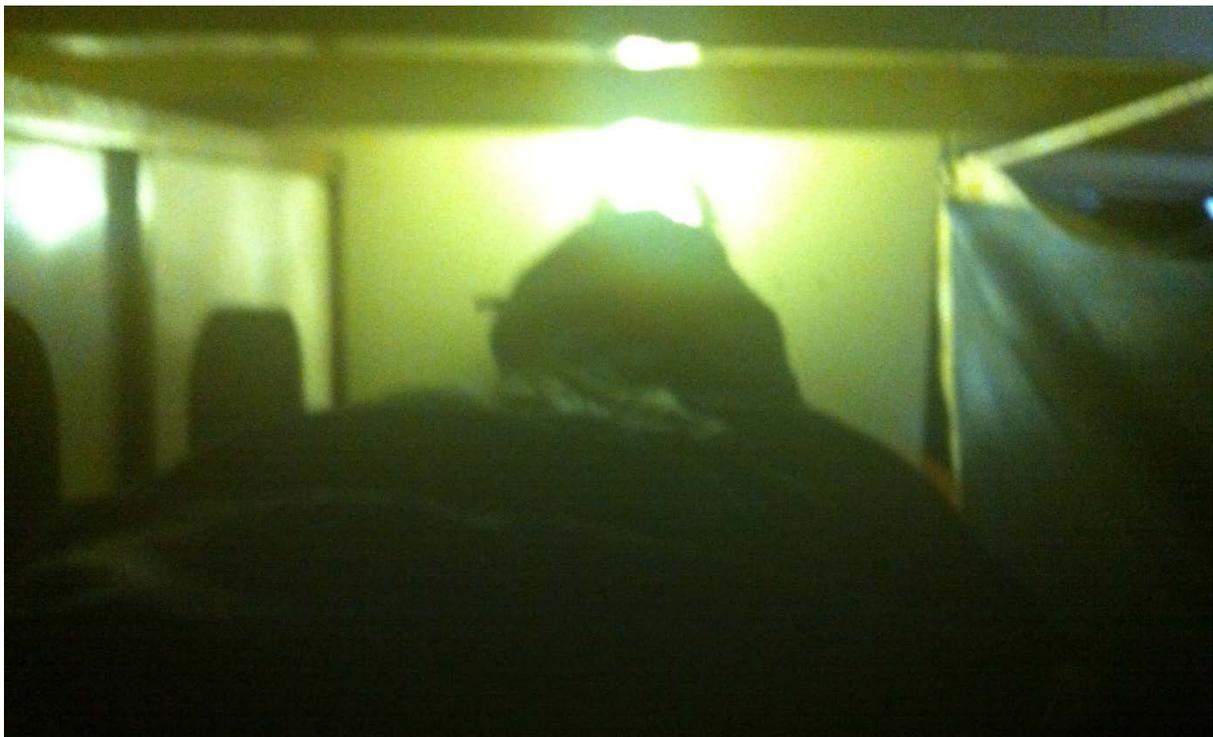
It was a strange, excited peace up on deck as the sun set and the wind started to pick up. The boat beneath our feet gradually started to move a lot more too, which posed a problem for our food. Not only was it very challenging to prepare and cook dinner, it was a task to eat it, and, for some, to keep it down. Fortunately, expert advice was on hand:

*Kelly: ...the best advice for throwing up over the side? You have to be kneeling with your head through the railings on the side of the boat...*

*Lawrence: Yeah, so if it didn't come up naturally you'd just choke it out!*

By the end of our first watch, the smugglers were keen to get the relative warmth of below deck, a cup of tea and our sleeping bags. Our bunks were *cosy*, and when you were finally tucked up you felt pretty isolated, but safe. I was in a top bunk, which required some dainty gymnastics to get into, and some strong rope and tarpaulin to make sure I stayed in there when asleep.

Despite this, I don't think I've ever felt so comfortable in my life - hearing the ocean rush past, being rocked forwards and backwards and anywhichway by the waves, and feeling so far from anywhere at all.



I thought about how I was feeling. The stresses and deadlines that form part of my day normally felt physically distant from me. Essays and tests seemed alien out here - I felt really taken away from everything familiar. That makes sense on a 'recovery voyage'. But it's not headspace. It's not a retreat. Instead, you're given a task as part of a team, in an enclosed environment, and you find new problems and worries to replace those you left ashore.

I figured: maybe that's what Tectona is good for: you're let loose in a fantasy world of wooden planks and sails with ridiculous names, where your navigation depends on the phase of the moons and words like 'neaps' and 'springs', when you alternate between 'sweating' and 'tailing', and where your safety relies on twists in ropes called 'bowlines' and 'hitches'. And in this made up, fantasy world, you have to get to somewhere, using only wind power, and manage your problems along the way. Maybe Tectona's recovery voyages are good as dry runs for back home, on land.

Then I thought about my crewmates - were they thinking the same thing? Was this them taking a break from their rehabilitation and recovery? Or was this a continuation? I remember being told that the Tectona voyage was like a floating therapeutic community. But then why exist at all? What a strange idea to bring people recovering from addictions onto a boat. I know that some people from previous voyages had got involved with the trust, or decided to pursue a career in sailing or something to do with boats, but that surely can't be the aim of the voyage? To convince everyone that sailing is great and that they should work in the area and, somehow, through this path will be able to achieve abstinence? I slept unsure.

Over the course of the rest of the voyage, we pushed a little further west, into the river Fal.

*Rob: What am I looking at? I'm looking at a river, with lovely trees on it with calm water. Looks idyllic and calming. It looks nice.*

*I like the massive clusters of trees on the water and reminds me of those movies where they go and discover America and they think it's all nice and peaceful and out of nowhere then they go get attacked by natives or whatever. it's just a really nice view*

Fortunately, we weren't attacked by natives. We managed to sail on. Having moored onto a pontoon in the River Fal at dusk, everyone was relieved to get a night's sleep that was consistently horizontal.

The next morning it was quiet and still, a contrast from our choppy night before. This, plus being well rested, brought some of us a bit of confidence - enough to have a go at charting the course and steering Tectona back out to sea. And actually, it wasn't long before the wind started to pick up. For some, this was great news:

*Me: What's been your favourite part so far?*

*Danny: The voyage so far has been banging, last night in reflection as I was saying it's all been banging, even the weather. For me that was the best bit, going up and down on the boat. I hope there's more bad weather, it's good. Bad weather just makes it... if we were just sailing along calmly it would be boring wouldn't it?*

*Sean: Hitting the bad weather and riding through it, and waking up next morning, and being in that little inlet. It looked like we were in Africa - all the trees could have had mangoes on them or something, it was mad.*

For others, less so:

*Rob: Choppy waves make me stressed... I just hope there isn't any bad weather like last night!*

It turned out there was no need to worry: we swung round Pendennis Point and flew. The sun came out, we were going along quickly but pretty smoothly and it felt almost like a holiday!







Later, we had all seven sails up as we were sailing to Cawsand. It was beautiful, and it suddenly occurred to me that we, as a crew, were directly responsible for getting this all done. We had set the sails, we had kept her clean and mostly steered the course, and all from next to no experience just a few days ago. That feeling of accomplishment was incredibly powerful - it's probably my own most memorable part of the journey.

On Friday morning, we were up early to get back to Plymouth. Everyone was a bit quieter than usual - we were all worn out and all a sad to see our journey ending. It was also us trying to get our heads around re-joining civilisation. Everyone we could see back on land had been getting up and going on runs and driving to work every morning this week, but we'd been out at sea, moored up in rivers, pouring water on ourselves and going for swims. How can you go straight back to normal after that?

We got back to our berth in Plymouth Yacht Haven and had our final reflection of the voyage, all together around the table below deck. Then was time for the 'deep clean', where we go through every part of the ship, and make sure it's all wiped down, all present, and then all back where we found it. Towards the end we started slowing a bit - I don't know whether we were starting to lose energy, but I reckon, at least subconsciously, we were trying to prolong our time on board. Finally, Tectona looked brand new again, and the guys from Phoenix had to go get their minibus home.

The best part and worst part reflection is another thing I'll take away from the voyage. At the end of the day, or an activity or even the whole voyage, you gather round as a group and share your best bit of the time you're reflecting on, and the worst bit.

It serves a few purposes. Firstly, it's introspection, it allows you to make sense of how these experiences you've just had have sat with you. Secondly, it brings everyone together. Once you've shared some personal struggles and achievements with a group of strangers, everyone becomes less strange, more familiar. But my favourite thing is that it's changes the mood instantly. We go from fifteen people squashed and busy below deck to everyone sitting around the table, listening to everyone, in turn, summarise their day.

Here's how it's done:

*Me: My worst bit was coming on board, not knowing anyone's name and sitting on watch in the rain and the cold looking at this light which I didn't even know which way it was going but I was supposed to make sure we didn't hit it... that was horrible. My best bit was steering when everyone seemed to know what to do and I realising that we can pretty much sail the entire ship altogether only after like 5 days!*

And, of course, your reflection ends with a thank you.

*Everyone: Thanks Jack.*



In retrospect, I actually find it difficult to put my finger on what my voyage on Tectona has taught me. I know I've learnt about sailing, of course. I also know more about addiction and recovery, and have had the chance to talk at length to people with first-hand experience. That's something I know will stand me in better stead for the future, and may make me a better doctor. I've learned more about myself too, especially how I cope with unfamiliar environments, lack of sleep and stress.

How might it affect my practice? I am now more aware of how little I know about people's lives, especially those with addictions. The chance to spend some time really talking to my crew mates about their lives and experiences with doctors has made me acutely aware that as a profession we are distressingly good at simplifying our patients' stories into a presenting complaint, and then categorising them into a certain population. I aspire to avoid that when I need to – when considering a patient's messy, complex, confusing circumstances may help explain why they have presented to ask for help. When taking the time to look at their bigger picture might actually inform a treatment decision. When engaging with them as a human, above being a patient, could form the basis of a meaningful change in their lives.

Tectona voyages don't have a curriculum or one specific lesson in mind for you. It depends on the individual. I know for some, it definitely helps them in their recovery. For a small number, it inspires them to sail more, or get a job, perhaps in sail training. But then, for others, the trip will just be a nice break. And it's conceivable that it might negatively affect some people, if the experience is too stressful too early on in their recovery.

But ultimately, *Tectona provides a safe environment to challenge yourself in*. A safe environment albeit out in a stormy sea, on an old boat, with a partially leaky deck. And I feel so fortunate to have had that experience.

Because *Tectona provides a safe environment to challenge yourself in*. To try and perhaps fail, but when you fail to be supported and encouraged, and patted on the back and given a cup of tea, and given the opportunity to try again. An environment different from the zero tolerance, hard luck reality of some aspects of recovering in today's society.

But also, *Tectona provides a safe environment to challenge yourself in*. To try and succeed. Like all of us did in many different ways on our voyage. And when you succeed, to be supported and encouraged, and patted on the back and given a cup of tea, and you know, when given the opportunity to challenge yourself again, you might just succeed.

*Lawrence: Has this been a gift in your recovery?*

*Sharon: NO!*

*Actually, it has. I've proper come out my comfort zone on this. And even though there were lots of times I was stressed yeah, not one time did I think about drugs. Not once. And I thought about that today because I was ill and my bones were hurting me, and the last time that happened was when I was doing my cold turkey. And not once did I think "I could do with a bag of gear today". It's good to know that I don't need drugs when I'm having a bad time, I don't need drugs when... I just don't need it, emotionally, mentally, physically.*

*I can just have a laugh anyway.*