



IN COMMAND

IT TOOK TIME, [HARRY PRIVETTE](#) TELLS EMMA BAMFORD, BUT ONCE HIS MARITIME CAREER WAS UNDER WAY THERE WAS NO LOOKING BACK

Between my wife and I, we've been through the Panama Canal 42 times," says Harry Privette. "I've only been through twice." He laughs. "I love telling that story."

There can't be that many people in the world with half a million sea miles in their logbooks – and, equally, there are probably few who have so many different maritime job titles on their curriculum vitae as Commander Privette.

Yacht construction; yacht sales; commissioning, maintenance and repair. Yacht and property management; deliveries; navigation equipment sales; instruction, racing, private captain work – Harry has done it all. And is still doing it, at 77 years of age, from Key West, Florida, where he continues to run his yacht delivery company GPS Yacht Deliveries.

But it hasn't all been work, work, work – there have been a fair few adventures along the way.

Born in Orlando, Florida, William Horatio Privette – known as Harry – first decided he wanted to go to sea when he was eight years old and he met a young navy quartermaster who was renting an apartment from Harry's family at the end of the Second World War.

"The stories he told me filled my head with visions of great naval battles and ships on the bounding main," he recalls. "Everything after that seemed to follow a natural progression from avocation to vocation."

Despite that mention of sailing being an 'avocation', it took Harry quite some time after the meeting with the navy quartermaster before he became a sailor.

He went to a British school in Tennessee, then enlisted in the navy after prep school and flew 'eye-in-the-sky' dirigibles. "The drones of the 1950s – just a bit slower and more visible," he jokes. As a quartermaster and a signalman, he learned navigation Bowditch-style.

It took him until his early 20s, while working as a stockbroker in Florida, to start sailing yachts.

All the water in the world

"I always knew that I wanted to sail but I was land-locked in Orlando. It wasn't until I moved to Miami and I had all the water in the world on my doorstep [that I sailed]."

"When I was about 22, I read a book and went down to

the docks at Coconut Grove [in Miami] and bluffed my way into renting a boat by myself. I followed what it said in the book and everything I read worked and I was just smitten with it – and I've taken every opportunity to sail since then."

Many of his friends in Miami were racers and he soon fell in with the yacht-racing crowd and "learned the hard way".

Mississippi memories

He found himself living in Annapolis, the sailing capital of America, after a chance trip down the Mississippi River, which was effectively his first big cruise. He was in his mid-40s and had left the stockbroking world after 18 years to become professor of investments and finance at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island.

"Being a stocks and shares man turned out to not be all that romantic any more, so I got out," he says. "My hair turned white. Luckily, it didn't turn loose."

"At Roger Williams I had the opportunity to go down the Mississippi River," he remembers. "I took a trip from Traverse City, Michigan, across

Lake Michigan to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico to Tampa, Florida. It was a 77-day trip on a 46ft Chris-Craft Roamer, an aluminium-hulled motor yacht. That was a real highlight of my life, going down that river – just like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, although it was much more comfortable than a raft."

When I ask how he got that gig, he explains: "There was a woman involved." I can almost hear the shrug down the international phone line. He tells me he gave up his professorship to do it.

"She needed someone to help her. She came from Annapolis, and that's how I ended up there."

Everyone in Annapolis was involved in the yachting industry, and Harry followed suit. So began a long and wide-ranging maritime career.

Interestingly, when I speak to him on that Key West phone line and ask him about his most memorable sailing moments, the stories that stand out most for him are not related to destinations, but people.

His favourite is the tale of how he met his wife.

"In 2005 I was transiting from the Atlantic to the Pacific via the Panama Canal and looking for crew for the trip north to California. I met Grace and her husband aboard

'Stories filled my head with naval battles and ships on the bounding main'



Clockwise from above: Harry Privette; with the *French Kiss* crew celebrating in Honolulu after coming third in the Transpac 2007 race; with his wife, Grace



their yacht at the Panama Canal Yacht Club. She was a freelance canal guide and line handler.”

He continues, unabashed: “To make a long story short, Grace jumped ship and we sailed away into the sunset. We married in 2008 – my first.”

Despite his time on the water, people are evidently the main factor in sailing for him, rather than the boats or the locations. When he speaks of what was clearly a favourite commission, six years as private captain of the 50ft Farr-designed Beneteau *French Kiss*, it’s not the boat he mentions so much as the owner and crew.

It was while taking that yacht through the Panama Canal to its owner in California that he met Grace, who is 23 years younger than him. She joined as first mate – in both senses of the word. They proved a formidable team.

“We talked the owner into doing the Trans-Pacific Race from San Francisco to Honolulu – he and three of his buddies, who had never been out of sight of land before,” Harry says. “We trained them in San Francisco Bay for three months – and we got third place. Grace was primary spinnaker trimmer. She’s quite the accomplished sailor. That is probably why we get along – I finally found a woman who did not have to put make-up on to go sailing.”

For a couple of years, in the 1960s, he had his own boat, a 54ft Alden yawl,

Peregrina, which he kept in Port Pierre Canto in Cannes and used as a base for overland explorations of Europe.

“Funnily enough, there wasn’t a woman involved in that one. I ended up in France because it seemed to be a romantic location. I had a lot of money from being a stockbroker. I spent all that, sold the boat and went home.” A state of affairs many a cruiser has had to contemplate.

In his logbook, which deserves to be tattered and torn but which I am sure, as behoves the rest of his personality, is kept ship-shape and pristine, he has listed a circumnavigation, two Pacific crossings, four Atlantic crossings, many famous races, including Sydney-Hobart, the Fastnet, seven Southern Ocean racing circuits and three Antigua race weeks, a Suez Canal transit and those two aforementioned Panama canal passes.

Panama drama

Through all that, plus commissions to skipper large private and luxury charter yachts, including a 62ft 1932 William Hand-designed wooden ketch, a 79ft Steve Dashew double-handed ketch, a Lagoon 44 catamaran and a 72ft Farr sloop, he got to sail in some stunning waters, including Easter Island, the Galapagos, the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, Belize, Honduras, Costa Rica, Hawaii, the Eastern Seaboard, and much of the Caribbean.

Yet when we first speak, he is hard-pushed to wax lyrical on glamorous cruising destinations. When I press him on it, he finally shares his favourite places with me: the Mississippi, the area between Florida and the Bahamas where the Gulf Stream flows, and the Panama Canal.

“It is difficult to describe the one-of-a-kind infrastructure,” he says in wonder. “We were in a 50ft sloop dwarfed by many larger yachts, cruise ships and freighters. Passage through the six locks lifted us 85ft from the Atlantic and then lowered us 85ft to the Pacific.

“It is high drama – an experience you should take, even if it is only on a cruise ship.”

Just keep a close eye on your wife.



FROM TOP LEFT: ROB O'NEAL; C/O TRANSPAC; LISA MASSON PHOTOGRAPHY