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Do Hard Things

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The Mag: Do Hard Things

Zac Sunderland is 17 and sailing around the world by himself. Watch his journey.

This was the cover story in the June 15 issue of ESPN The Magazine.

Zac Sunderland was four weeks into the hardest part of his journey, the long, mind-numbing leg between the tiny island of St. Helena in the middle of the Atlantic and the tiny island of Grenada on the edge of the Caribbean. The crossing was the last great hurdle in his quest to be the youngest person to sail solo around the world. It was a desolate, often windless stretch -- 4,278 nautical miles that, on a good day, he covered at just six nautical miles an hour. The math could make seasoned sailors talk to themselves, let alone a 17-year-old California kid who'd just realized he'd lost his radar.

For 10 months and 20,000 nautical miles, Zac's Raymarine C70 had guided him around the globe, delivering shrill warnings before ocean liners or storms could get too close. But on that late April day, several hundred miles off the coast of South America, a giant container ship passed within eyeshot of *Intrepid*, Zac's 36-foot Islander, and his radar stayed mute. In a panic, he scrambled belowdecks to a cabin that was not unlike any teenager's bedroom: couch draped with a sleeping bag, battered laptop, dented microwave, surfer magazines, cupboard full of Pringles. In one corner sat the Raymarine, spitting out useless white noise. Zac stared at it for a while, digesting his new reality. The loss of radar meant he'd be nearly sleepless until Grenada. For the next several days, he would have to wake up every 20 minutes to poke his groggy head topside, just in case a ship was bearing down on him.

"I ended up having some really weird dreams," he says. "You're supposed to dream for the first 10 minutes after you fall asleep and the last 10 minutes before you wake up. So, like, I never slept without dreaming."

Then came the wave. Four nights into the radarless portion of his journey, Zac was standing at the base of his boat's mast, fixing a line that had worked itself free. Clouds blocked out his friends, the stars, casting him in complete darkness. Only the eerie green glow that *Intrepid* left in its wake gave him comfort: The phosphorescent phytoplankton whipped up by the boat's hull reminded him he was sailing across a living thing. Then Zac heard a noise, a rumble, low and loud -- and growing louder. He flicked his long brown hair out of his eyes and looked over his shoulder to see a 30-foot wall of green where there had been only black. He held his breath and squeezed his arms around the mast as the wave -- a rogue wave, an impossible wave -- slammed violently into his boat from behind.

Water poured into Zac's cabin, soaking his sleeping bag and magazines. Worse, it shorted out *Intrepid*'s electrical system. That's when he remembered that his satellite phone, the one he used to make calls and send e-mails home to California, was out of juice. Now he had no way to charge it.

Without his radar, his world had gone dark. Without his phone, it had gone quiet, too.

After all his nights at sea, Zac had stopped keeping track of time. Hours and days were meaningless to him; weeks could escape his grasp. But now he most definitely worried about time. He worried about what time it was and what time it would be when he'd next see land. And he worried about surviving all the time in between. Later that night, the fog rolled in. Zac could see only 50 yards in front of him and 50 yards behind. All he could hear was the water and the wind. His world was the size of a football field, and he sat alone at the center of it. At that moment -- at that particular hour, on that particular day -- Zac Sunderland became the loneliest boy in the world.

*Jen Edney*Sunderland asleep on his boat.

Back home, in Thousand Oaks, Calif., it was Zac who had raised the idea of sailing around the world. "Do you think I could do it?" he asked his dad, Laurence, two years ago in a lazy SoCal mumble that belied his purpose.

"Yes," his dad said. "You probably could."

"Would you let me?"

"I'll have to talk to your mother. This is a pretty big thing."

Laurence told his wife, Marianne, what their son was dreaming. "He's been training for this his entire life without knowing it," she responded. The Sunderlands had spent enough time on the water to understand its demands. Laurence was a boatbuilder by trade, and Zac's first bed was a basket on a boat. The oldest of seven, he had spent entire years of his childhood cruising up and down the Mexican coast. As a homeschooled teen, he refurbished dinghies and delivered yachts until he had earned his sailor's hands: blackened fingernails, rope burns and countless tiny cuts. Before long Zac had saved $6,000, enough to buy *Intrepid* -- a modest vessel built in 1972, small and no-frills by modern standards. For three months, the boy and his father upgraded almost every piece of it. But even as he prepared for his voyage, Zac remained a teenager on the surface. He liked skateboarding and surfing and In-N-Out burgers. He grew out his hair, wore ratty Tony Hawk T-shirts and painted flames under his boat's waterline. He also read the logbook he'd found on *Intrepid*, laughing at the travails of the three friends who took it around the world before he did. ("Phil stole my pillow last night," read one mutinous entry. "I can tell because it smells like his head.")

Now, though, he had a rabbit to chase. He'd made up his mind to become the fourth solo circumnavigator to leave home before turning 18 and come back alive. On June 14, 2008, while his friends in Thousand Oaks were still learning to drive, Zac launched *Intrepid* into the Pacific at the port of Marina del Rey. He was 16.

From the beginning, Laurence leaned on an abiding faith in Zac and in God. He believed strong fathers made strong sons. "It's no different from letting teenagers go out in a car, being young and stupid," he says. "I'd rather this." It helped that Zac checked in a couple of times each day. And that Laurence rendezvoused with Zac at his accessible stops -- Hawaii, Australia and South Africa, to name a few -- to service *Intrepid* and nourish his son with big bowls of ice cream. In the meantime, Marianne tried to banish her nerves by answering e-mails and updating Zac's blog for a growing legion of followers. But there were moments when she couldn't fight off the fear. Like the time in February when Zac accidentally drowned his phone charger in his onboard sink between South Africa and St. Helena, forcing him to stretch its battery life over two interminable weeks. Or last October, when Zac called home from somewhere off the coast of Indonesia to say that pirates were trailing him. Laurence told his son to make sure his .357 was loaded, while Marianne set about alerting Australian authorities. Then all they could do was wait, until Zac called back two hours later to say the threatening boat had disappeared.

The worst scare, though, came in November when Zac was in the Indian Ocean -- the smallest of the big oceans but the one with the shortest temper. Its 30-knot winds battered *Intrepid*'s boom, the hollow piece of fiberglass that runs along the bottom of the mainsail. The boom had snapped weeks earlier, giving in to months of relentless buffeting, and Zac had repaired it then by screwing a whittled piece of wood into its core. But he didn't trust the fix to hold in the heavy winds, so he decided to rely on his spinnaker, the smaller triangular sail that runs up a coil called a forestay, which stretches diagonally between the bow and the mast.

He was making good progress when, one night, a little after 10 o'clock, he went below to catch some sleep. Just before dozing off, he heard a thump. He had grown accustomed to his boat's noises: creaking lines, water lapping against the hull, the whirring of the small windmill, the flapping of the American flag mounted on the stern. But thumps were different. Thumps always jolted him awake. And thumps in the middle of the night in the middle of the ocean were the scariest thumps of all.

When Zac went above decks, he saw that the wind had broken his forestay loose, snapping the metal clamps at its base. The coil was still attached to the mast, but it was swinging wildly and banging against the hull. Oh, crap, he thought. The storm picked up force, and soon *Intrepid* was adrift on ferocious 15-foot seas, its spinnaker flapping uselessly in the wind. Zac was terrified that the violent swinging of the forestay and spinnaker would pull down the mast. "Without the mast, I would have been screwed," he says. "It would have been over." He called Laurence on his cell, and the father talked the son through his next steps. For seven hours, as the ocean pummeled him, Zac fought to harness the forestay, finally managing to

wrap a lasso around it so he could pull it in and tie it down with three thick lengths of rope. He slumped in relief, but the next night the ropes snapped, and it took two more days and nights to secure the forestay and drop the spinnaker again. In California, the Sunderlands sent out prayer requests.

Zac was exhausted, as physically and mentally spent as he could ever imagine possible. And in his delirium he began to loathe *Intrepid*. He wasn't the kind of sailor who talked to his boat as if it were a friend, and he never adored the vessel that he and his father had so carefully outfitted by hand, as if it were a girl. But now he had some feelings to share: You're nothing but a hunk of fiberglass, he thought.

*Jen Edney*Sunderland's boat on the open seas.

With no spinnaker, Zac had to put what was left of his faith in a tenuous mast and its makeshift boom. Protecting the boom by angling it to catch only whispers of wind, Zac and *Intrepid* limped 200 miles to a small dot in the Indian Ocean called Rodrigues Island. The members of the island's coast guard, who towed him into harbor, marveled at the American teenager, hair matted, face thatched with thin whiskers, skinny arms and legs covered in scars and bruises. Taking pity on the boy, a customs agent rustled him up some dinner and a place to sleep. "It was such a contrast," Zac says, "out on the ocean one minute, howling around on the back of a motorcycle the next."

But now, in the warm April waters off Grenada, his fortunes looked to have switched again. Laurence and Marianne knew Zac's radar was out -- he'd called to inform them before he lost his phone, too -- but the minutes of silence were turning into hours and days. Marianne began to pick through the possibilities. Maybe her son had taken off his safety harness in the heat and fallen off his boat, and *Intrepid* was sailing west without him. Maybe a freighter had run him down, its captain oblivious to the gentle bump against the bottom of his hull. Maybe there had been a galley fire and Zac had been forced to abandon ship and take to his raft. Or maybe he had become so lonely he had turned everything off, switch by switch, wishing to go undisturbed forever. Maybe, Marianne thought.

Right about then, the loneliest boy in the world remembered a last-ditch piece of equipment buried under the junk he'd accumulated after nearly a year at sea: his SPOT satellite messenger. It was the thinnest form of communication, a modern-day smoke signal beamed through space, but it was something. By pressing one button, he could issue an emergency beacon; by pressing another, he could request less-urgent help; by pressing a third, he could send a preprogrammed text to his mom's cell. He turned the device in his torn-up hands and thought about the places he had been and the storms he had weathered. He looked at his broken radar and lifeless sat phone and the walls of fog that surrounded him. Back in California, Marianne reached for her phone with her heart in her throat and looked at the screen through filling eyes.

"Hi Mom," it read. "It's Zac. I'm OK."

The cleared, as it always did, and the sky and the water resumed their battle of the blues. For every curse on Zac's voyage, there had been an equal or greater blessing; for every pirate and breakdown, there had been the sound of whales chasing his boat in the moonlight. "They say sailing is 80 percent hard work and 20 percent bliss, but somehow the 20 percent outweighs the 80 percent," Zac says. "It doesn't make any sense, but they're totally right."

Sometimes it was the ocean that was perfection, and Zac would slip into a zone, a sailor's high, everything working, mind and body freshened by the wind, boat gliding along. (At times like these, a peculiar brand of ingenuity struck: Zac once mined the ball bearings out of the wheels of his skateboard to fix a weather vane.) On other days, it was the sight of land that lifted him. In October, he spent nine days on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, the same atoll in the Indian Ocean that harbored Charles Darwin and the Beagle 173 years earlier. Coral reefs and aquamarine surrounded bars of bleached sand and green jungle. On one of the islands, about 500 Sunni Muslims lived; on another, about 150 surfers had decided to leave civilization behind; Zac anchored off an uninhabited isle. There he befriended a 16-year-old South African named Jed Johnson who was sailing with his dad. Zac surfed the board he had stowed and hung with Jed, like two boys barefoot on a raft on the Mississippi. He slept on the beach under the stars and wondered if he'd found the most beautiful place in the world.

Each time he entered a port he made friends, and each time he left he suffered through two or three days of missing them. Sometimes his buddies back home lit up his sat phone from a bonfire on a Southern California beach, and after they hung up, Zac would sit on his deck in the quiet, eating clam chowder or cold chili out of a can. It was easy to feel sorry for himself. He had turned 17 on *Intrepid*, pushing two candles into a dehydrated cake and thinking about his 16th birthday, which had been loud, bouncing, brightly lit. "The best night ever," he says. This time, he blew out his candles alone in the dark and tried to choke down the cake -- he had lost 20 pounds on the trip, his appetite disappearing along with his friends -- before slipping into his sleeping bag. There were times when he felt like pulling it over his head and not waking until his boat struck bottom.

But Zac escaped those moments the way most teenagers do. Electricity from the windmill and the solar panels attached to *Intrepid* afforded him a few luxuries, not least of which was power for the video game and sound systems he'd installed. While on board, he finished *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* three times, let out a scream when he mastered DragonForce on *Guitar Hero III* and sang along to the 10,000 songs on his iPod until he was hoarse. ("If someone makes a movie about this, I want Sum 41 to do the soundtrack," he says.) Mostly, though, he discovered a new resilience, gleaned from the humidity-swollen Mark Twain collection he had stored in his cabin, with its invocations to live an extraordinary life, to believe that something larger is waiting if we just lift our fat asses off the couch. Zac has a brown T-shirt that reads "Do Hard Things," and mile after mile, ocean after ocean, he pulled it over his head to remind himself why he was wending his way around the world at six knots.

It helped that he wasn't entirely on his own. Five months after Zac began his voyage, a 16-year-old English boy, Mike Perham, began his own solo circumnavigation. (A 16-year-old Australian girl, Jessica Watson, plans to set sail in September.) Despite a late start, Perham had the faster boat, having been sponsored into a 50-foot racing yacht by TotallyMoney.com. Perham is also younger than Zac by a few months, which meant that if the

Briton somehow beat the American around the world, Zac couldn't even lay temporary claim to the record. They chased each other like shadows, crossing paths in Cape Town, South Africa -- Perham had headed east against Zac's west -- where they got to check out each other's boats. "He's built for speed, I'm built for adventure," Zac says. As they tracked each other's progress online, the boys knew bragging rights would probably boil down to days.

But in that anxious week before Grenada, none of that mattered. On April 28, Laurence landed by plane in the Grenadan capital of St. George's. All he wanted was to see his son, to fix the boat, to fatten him with ice cream. But for two days he waited with no word or sign of Zac. Finally, on May 1, *Intrepid* appeared on the horizon, a tiny speck that might have been a whitecap or a gull. Laurence jumped in another boat to meet it. Hunched behind his dodger, his hand unsteady on the tiller arm, Zac looked gaunt, salt-dry and worn out. He had poured a bucket of water over his head and tried to tidy up his cabin but was fooling nobody. He had spent 34 days alone at sea.

"How do you feel, Zac?" Laurence yelled across the water.

"I'm really, really tired," his boy said.

*Jen Edney*Sunderland and fellow circumnavigator Mike Perham met up in Cape Town.

The local yacht club had given Zac a villa at a high-end resort in which to recover. He hobbled, weak-kneed, to the front door -- equal parts fatigue and land sickness -- took a shower and fell into bed. The air conditioner blew and a ceiling fan hummed, and the most exhausted boy in the world pulled the covers to his chin and slept a dreamless sleep.

The next night he went to dinner at the yacht club. His boat waited in a nearby slip, its big blue letters, *Intrepid*, peeling from its hull like sunburned skin. Laurence had sent out five bags of laundry and scattered his son's belongings across the concrete wharf to dry under a setting sun: couch cushions stripped of their covers, tools in rusty bundles (the ocean turns everything to rust), souvenirs from his long journey -- an Aboriginal didgeridoo, an African mask. An electrician began work to restore the boat's power, and a sailmaker patched the holes torn by Atlantic gales. Port meant restoration. Port meant, if only for a few days and nights, that it didn't matter which way the wind blew or who was going to finish first or whether Zac loved or hated his boat. Port was the place he could learn what had happened while he'd been away -- "Who's Michael Phelps?" was one of the first questions he asked -- and where he could be a kid who wanted nothing more than a cheeseburger, fries and a Coke.

"Thirty-four days at sea," his dad said to no one in particular. "That's really quite something."

Zac nodded, then his dad asked the waitress to bring two big bowls of ice cream, six scoops each. Mango, rum raisin, chocolate ripple. Zac put them all down, deliberately, carefully, as though he'd never eaten anything so magical in his life.

Earlier in his voyage, Zac received a call on his sat phone from the astronauts in the International Space Station, circling 250 miles over his head. A member of NASA's ground crew had stumbled upon Zac's blog and thought it would be a good diversion for all of the travelers. Their conversation was interrupted by fade-outs and static, but it was a minor miracle that they were able to talk at all, the astronauts and the aquanaut, each in their respective tin cans, crossing their respective voids. They talked about what it was like spending so much time inside their own heads and what they missed about their former lives. They laughed about craving the strangest things: the smell of an orange, a drink with ice cubes clinking in it. But mostly they talked about things only people who have ventured so far from home can know. People say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but the astronauts and the aquanaut knew love isn't a function of how long two things have been apart -- what matters is how far. The conversation galvanized the feeling in Zac's stomach that there would be the 17 years before he sailed around the world and all the years after. Like the astronauts, he really, truly believed that anything was possible. "We can do whatever we want with our lives," he says. "It's up to us."

He had found that whenever he stopped -- in Grenada, in St. Helena, in Cape Town and Mauritius and Hawaii -- people hardly ever asked him about the places he'd been; they were more interested in where he was going. And the funny thing was, most people, most strangers, assumed he would fall back into an ordinary life. They assumed that, despite doing this one incredible thing, he would follow it by going to college and getting a job. Then he would retire, and then he would die; that was the accepted order of the universe. Except the strangers had no idea, not the way Zac did, just how big that universe was.

"When you talk about sailing 25,000 nautical miles at six knots, it's almost impossible to contemplate," he says. After all that he's been through, it is just as impossible for him to contemplate staying in one spot for more than a breath. Zac's worst nightmare has become standing still. "I'd rather be caught in a storm than caught in the Doldrums," he would tell them.

He knew about the Doldrums. Just before St. Helena, he suffered through windless days near the equator, where low pressure stifles the wind. *Intrepid* would stall on the endless lily pond and Zac would cook in the heat and boredom. He might have seen the world, but he had seen it through the same bedroom window. Stuck with no wind, with no maneuvering to occupy his mind, he banged his head hard on the cabin's low ceiling. His finger got trapped in a hatch, and he dented the top of his microwave with his fist. He needed to get out.

So he pulled down the sails, tied a rope around his waist and jumped into the ocean. And the water that had confined him set him free. Nothing on the horizon and clear skies above, thousands of feet between him and the bottom … it was the sort of risk he never would have taken at the start of his journey -- before he left home, seeing the back of his boat from the waterline would have sunk his heart -- but after several months at sea, it seemed like necessity. He was restless and exhausted and alone, and the rope around his waist was as much anchor as he could stand anymore. Swimming in the Doldrums was Zac's way of continuing his voyage even while he was going nowhere.

After only two nights in Grenada, Zac's head was already on its way, gone over the horizon again. For the first time in nearly a year he felt that finishing was within reach, hopefully by late June, one year after he first set sail. He was thinking about getting through the Panama Canal, about going up the Mexican coast and about the harbor in Marina del Rey. He imagined that first day back home with his friends on the beach. (His dad imagines it too. "I probably won't be able to talk," Laurence says. "I'll be bawling like a baby.") And Zac imagined the days that would come next. He probably won't be going to college. "Adventuring doesn't need a degree," he says. And he almost certainly won't work 9-to-5. "I'm not sure I'd be able to do that anymore."

What he saw, when he closed his eyes and looked past the 5,000 miles he had left in his voyage, was his next journey. It was as though there weren't a seam between what he was doing and what he would do next; it was just one long trip. He wasn't sure where he would go or how he would get there, but he was starting to think he might dogsled across the Arctic Circle. He talked about mushing dogs over an icy tundra even as he looked out over the water in Grenada. Sitting in one of the most perfect spots on earth on one of its most perfect days, he still believed he could know a better place. And he had hope for the strangers he'd met in the past 10 months, the ones who'd assumed he'd end up living like them. He hoped that one out of a thousand of them would choose to become a kid again and live like him. Who's Michael Phelps? Who cares? Everybody knows that.

Zac Sunderland wants them to know what he knows. He wants to share his secrets. He wants them to know that some boats are built for speed and some are built for adventure, that we see and hear the best when it's dark and quiet, and that there has never been any shame in being lonely, because there has never been any shame in going it alone.

Want to get in touch with Zac? Hit up his blog right here.

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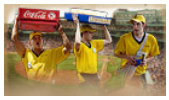

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