

# Capt. William J. Hurst, US Navy

In memory of Captain Bill Hurst, our beloved sailing coach - Shared by Amy Baker '87



I met Captain Hurst when I arrived on campus in the fall of 1983 and found my way onto the sailing team. At the time I thought a retiree as a coach was quite normal, but looking back the fact that a decorated naval war hero would choose to spend his golden years on a chilly lake blowing whistles,

strictly and proudly on a volunteer basis, is amazing. This is all the more remarkable because Captain Hurst hadn't gone to Dartmouth: he was a Naval Academy graduate from 1942 who was fast-forwarded to a 1941 commencement in order to fight in WWII and who later fought in Vietnam. I've only learned recently how Captain Hurst ended up in Hanover rather than Annapolis, and how he got talked into coaching the team, but at the time it was clear to me that his commitment to us was absolute. It is safe to say that without his involvement over decades, the team would not be where it is today.

Captain Hurst was the opposite of the naval captains you see depicted in the

movies- he was slim in stature, never raised his voice, didn't say much and didn't miss much. The quiet, amused smile didn't show up a lot my first two years on the team, as he seemed to have catalogued all the injuries that could befall anyone caught "horsin' around." He was prone to shaking his head at our antics and saying "it's all fun and games until someone gets hurt" and more than once put a firm end to reasonably innocuous water fights between boats.

Captain Hurst held the title of coach, but interestingly he defined the role differently than most. Rather than focus on tactics or boat handling techniques, he guided us to coach each other and collaborate - a tall order for a competitive group vying for spots at each weekend's regattas, and an important life lesson. He put his time and efforts into making sure we had the structure and resources we needed to practice and compete, but he carefully never told us what we should or shouldn't be doing in the boat (except not horsin' around). I've often since wondered if his philosophy was that we would learn more if we worked it out for ourselves, or if he felt it simply wasn't in his job description.

I do remember one afternoon when either his sailing envy or his frustration with us got the better of him, and he finally said "here, let me sail one of these darn things" and climbed into an InterClub dinghy. I know I was not the only one who revised their estimation of Captain Hurst when he proceeded to whup the better part of all our butts. He maybe did not beat every single one of us around the course, but probably all but one. It was an interesting reminder that he had not just gone to the Naval Academy, but sailed for them, with distinction. At his memorial service his son told us he had once earned the Naval Academy's highest honors for an athlete, beating the entire football team and other successful athletes. Characteristically, that day he nimbly trounced us all,



*Capt. Hurst with the winning team at the '94 Hurst Bowl Regatta.*

he got back into the committee boat and didn't mention it, wearing his trademark, slightly amused smile.

The team itself had an unusual history, starting in the late 60's as a club sport the year several dedicated undergrads spent an entire winter in the wood-shop, building out a clunky but serviceable fleet of dinghies that they then raced on Lake Mascoma. With the help of Captain Hurst and Art Allen, '32, those humble beginnings evolved into a Varsity sport supported by the College until times got hard and budgets were threatened.

A sailing team is a sitting duck when Athletic departments choose where to cut; they are low profile, little followed, with poor spectator opportunities. Dartmouth would have plunged the team back into the midst of club sports were it not for Captain Hurst and Art Allen, who asked the College if it would maintain the Varsity status of the team if we became self-endowed. In the mid-twentieth century "yacht racing" and "personal wealth" were reasonably intertwined, and Art had no trouble tapping sailing alums (including one rather famous America's Cup winner, Gus Mosbacher) to raise enough money for us to survive without College funding.

The result of this was a uniquely democratic team in the realm of varsity sports: we were essentially self-funded, self-coached and self-governed. Built on the bedrock of Captain Hurst's and Art Allen's fund-raising efforts and continuous promotion of the sailing program to the college administration, we had a large fleet of boats, a stunning lake

to sail on and access to Dartmouth owned cars to get to regattas. At the time, some of the best collegiate sailors in the country were keeping their boats together with duct tape and driving their own questionably maintained cars to regattas, so we understood the privileges we enjoyed. The drawback was that our coach did not typically come to regattas to coach us on weekends, and poor Captain Hurst would have no idea how any of his teams (Varsity, Jr Varsity, Women's, Freshmen) had performed unless we called him.

As a rule, the Dartmouth team drove the farthest to these regattas, and we often would get back late on Sunday night, wiped out and far behind on studies. Captain Hurst insisted we call him when we got in, no matter how late, and I am ashamed to say it didn't always happen. Our team meetings were on Monday night, and more than once he fumed that he had to shrug when asked by his colleagues how we had done that weekend. "If you kids don't call me" he would bluster, "what am I supposed to say to them?" Although he railed at the embarrassment of being the last one to know our standing, I began to suspect that he actually really cared for us, and beneath his crusty exterior he was staying up late worrying if we all got back okay.

All this changed, of course, when one time we didn't all get back okay. In the spring of 1985, one of those Dartmouth cars went off the road and we lost our top freshman crew Jenn Crary ('88). My '87 classmate **Heather Archer's** injuries earned her a year in rehab, and she ultimately graduated with the '88's. The night of the accident it was Captain Hurst who



sat in the interminable waiting room at Mary Hitchcock Hospital while those of us who made it back to campus got admitted. A few enterprising pre-med friends of mine managed to sweet talk a nurse into letting them go in the back door and see us, but Captain Hurst followed the rules and waited, becoming the first official Dartmouth figure to welcome us back. He was there later at Dick's House infirmary, he was there at Jenn's memorial service, and definitely he was there erring on the side of caution when we all personally deemed our injuries fully healed and declared ourselves ready to compete again.

I may be remembering this wrong or exaggerating, but that accident was a turning point in our relationship with Captain Hurst. One might expect a death on a team to have a bonding effect; in addition it became very clear to us that Captain Hurst cared about us like his own children. It was as if any use he had for the crusty exterior became obsolete, and from then on he led with the softhearted part we had all suspected was there anyway. He checked in with us, reprimanded us less, and shared a lot more smiles. He still didn't say much, but what he did say was usually really funny, showing that he didn't miss much and more importantly, was amused by it all.

I remember one evening that spring of the car accident **Kent Hoxsey** came over to Dick's House after practice to cheer me up, arriving in the van that the team used to get out to Lake Mascoma and back. He ended up driving me up around some reservoir and when we got back to Dick's House, whom should we run into but Captain Hurst! Captain Hurst said later that our faces displayed a pretty comical mixture of surprise and hang dog guilt. Although it was totally verboten to use a College van for personal use, he went easy on us and just shook his head, chuckling.

One of the loveliest aspects of Captain Hurst (whom I never got around to addressing as Bill, even though he invited us all to) was his wife, Mrs. Hurst (whom I still can't bring myself to call Chris). She became an early indicator of his

softhearted side, as well as a self-appointed den mother for the team. She would bake us cakes, come to practice to cheer us on, and greet everyone by name at the alumni regatta. Occasionally she and Captain Hurst would have us over for dinner. She had been a nurse until marrying him, choosing to follow her husband to the various places around the world they were stationed. It was through her that we gleaned the outline of Captain Hurst's successful career in the Navy (although we only discovered at his memorial service that he had run Camp David for several years), and through her that we heard about their children.



*Captain Hurst enjoying the christening of a new fleet in 1997.*



*Capt. Hurst (back left) with the team and Art Allen '32 in the fall of 1984.*



*Captain Hurst touched the lives countless people. Pictured on the left with wife Christina Hurst, and on the right with Art Allen '32.*

Senior year, **Paal Gisholt, Kate Harris, Ken Hedley** and I would house-sit for them, battling with snow blowers and caring for their cat. They even put up my family at graduation, and as we went forth and multiplied, Mrs. Hurst would knit each of our children a little mini Dartmouth sailing sweater. Theirs was a generation where you kept in touch with handwritten notes, and they never missed a

response to a Christmas card, or a chance at Alumni Regattas to catch up on the details.

Captain Hurst was 93 when he died, having lived a long, good life. I know these passages should not be a surprise, but you're never really ready when an important figure in your life passes on. I raise my hat to a modest, accomplished, caring man, long may his influence on all of us live.



*Many sailors remember the gracious hospitality of Captain Hurst and his wife, Chris during dinner at their home.*