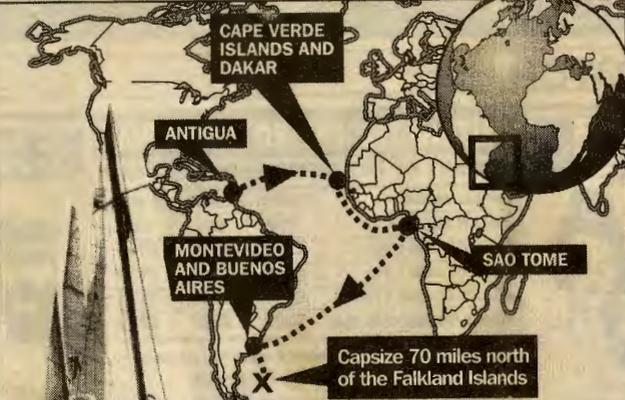


Family are saved in yacht miracle

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**Britons are
winched to
safety by
RAF crew**

A BRITISH family were plucked from the Atlantic by an RAF helicopter 24 hours after their yacht capsized in 30ft waves. And as they recovered in a Falkland Islands hospital the father thanked the Sea King crew who winched him, his wife and their two young children to safety.

"We thought every minute was going to be our last," said Nick Schinas.

The family's ketch Maamari capsized twice and its mast snapped, leaving them with no chance of regaining control of the stricken vessel. For a day and a night they drifted helplessly in a Force 9 gale eventually sending out an SOS. As the storm continued to rage Nick and wife Jill clung desperately to their children Matthew, four, and Xoe, three — and the hope that they would survive.

By LISA REYNOLDS and PHILIP FINN

"We never thought we were going to make it," said Nick, 40, as he relived the ordeal. "We're just glad to be alive. The seas were extremely violent. The mast of our ketch snapped and damaged some of the hatch covers."

giving up hope. Initially it was touch-and-go whether the rescue would succeed, because of 30ft waves lashing the yacht. Timing had to be exact if all four were to get off the yacht alive.

Nick paid tribute to the Sea King crew which saved his family. "I can't say too much in praise of the RAF officers who risked their lives to save us," said an emotional Nick. "Every one of them was a hero."

The first thing he did after landing was to phone his father Jim, in London, to tell him of their brush with death. And as the family recovered at the King Edward Memorial Hospital at Port Stanley he told his father: "Thank God we're all safe."

But Mr Schinas, a retired businessman, said the escape would not put them off sailing. "He's got the bug," he said. "Once they sort out some money I'm sure they'll carry on."

Nick became a journalist after leaving St Edward's, Oxford, but after a couple of years at a London agency he left to take up yacht delivery.

He had begun sailing as a youngster, and in 1981 he joined his parents for a five-year world yacht trip.

Drifted

On his return to England he continued delivering yachts and met Jill when she became a crew member.

"After that they took off together in a boat I gave them and they've been floating gently around the world ever since," said Mr Schinas.

The couple married in Brazil in 1990, and sailed to Antigua, where they lived for two years. Both their children were born there, but by the time Xoe was six months old they were crossing the Atlantic on their way to the Cape Verde Islands, off West Africa.

After nine months there they drifted along the coast

Losing
"The seas were running very high and we began taking on water. Jill and I took turns operating the pump but we knew it was a losing battle."

Disaster had struck as the family sailed towards the Falkland Islands on their round-the-world trip.

Around 120 miles north east of the Falklands they hit a gale and, as the sea swelled, conditions began to deteriorate rapidly.

The violent sea took control of the boat, tossing it 20ft into the air and capsized it for the first time.

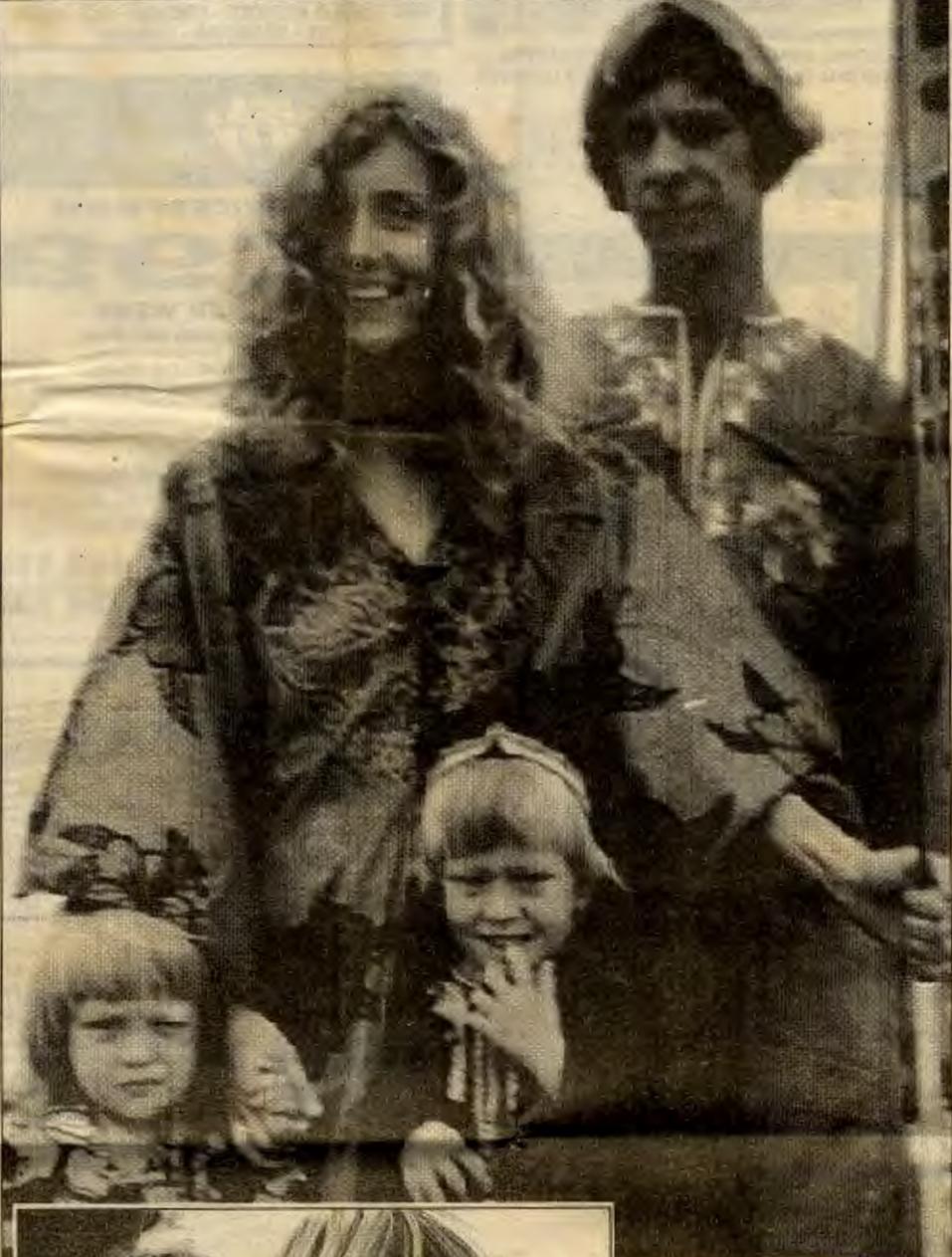
One of the masts snapped, but the yacht righted itself then, as the family frantically fought to regain control, it turned over a second time.

This time the couple realised they needed rescuing — fast. They released an emergency beacon.

Both Nick and Jill, 36, are experienced yachtsmen and knew the dangers ahead, but they had to stay calm for the sake of the children.

Six hours later the distress signal, picked-up by a satellite, was beamed back to the RAF Rescue Co-ordination Centre in Plymouth. They then contacted the RAF's 78th Squadron on the Falklands but it was several more hours before it could launch an air rescue, because of the bad weather.

A Sea King helicopter eventually set off at to search for the yacht. Three hours later a patrolling RAF Hercules spotted the ketch's dinghy drifting about 70 miles north off the Falklands. Five minutes later the Sea King found the family — just as Nick and Jill were



BRAVE: Nick and Jill with children Matthew and Xoe

then crossed the Atlantic again, to Montevideo.

Mr Schinas joined them as they made their way towards Buenos Aires. They set-out for the Falkland Islands after he left them.

"Their intention was to go to Port Stanley, stay there two weeks and then to go around the Cape up the other side and onto Chile," said Mr Schinas.

confident of riding it out until this wave smashed into them."

Mr Dickin added: "Jill and Nick got this 43ft yacht, which had been made in Australia, and decided to set sail to nowhere in particular. It was a brave thing to do but I don't think they could face settling down to a hum-drum existence in this country."

"They planned to stop where and when they felt like it. While they were in Antigua Jill wrote a book about the slave history of the island."

Worried

"We last heard from them when they had reached Buenos Aires, where they had taken on plenty of provisions in readiness to head for the Falklands and then on to see the whales off the southern tip of South America."

"We were never worried about them because they were having the time of their lives and because Nick was a very experienced yachtsman, having sailed around the world with his father in the late 80s."

"It will break their hearts if the yacht sinks or is permanently damaged. It was central to their lives and was part of the family."



TO THE RESCUE: Sea King

Children were the brave ones says air hero Labs

WINCHMAN Steve Labouchardiere looked down at the stricken yacht and thought of his own two young children.

With 30ft waves engulfing the boat he could have refused a rescue. But the 32-year-old Flight Sergeant never gave it a second thought.

"Where young lives are involved you don't have an option," he said. "You have to give your all to save them. All I could think of were my children, David, six, and Alex, two, at home."

Sgt Labouchardiere, known as Labs, said of Matthew and Xoe: "These kids were absolutely amazing considering their ordeal."

"They were obviously



WINCHED DOWN: Labs

frightened to death, but they were both fully aware of what we were trying to do to save them.

"We only had minutes to rescue. The boat was bouncing at crazy angles, as high as 20ft. The seas were over 30ft high."

"It was extremely difficult getting on the deck and the look in Mr Schinas's eyes told it all. Both he and his wife gasped: 'Thank God, you're here!'"

Matthew was rescued first. Labs took him in his arms and was winched up on a 150ft steel rope. Then Labs went back to save sister Xoe.

The third time he went down, Nick and Jill Schinas were attached to him and all three were hoisted back together.

"It was an incredible act of bravery," said pilot FI-LT Mark Dennis.