

# 50 years on

by Bob Fisher

In mid-May the Eric Tabarly Museum in Lorient, France, hosted a day of celebrations to mark the occasion of Eric Tabarly's participation and historic win in the 1964 solo transatlantic race, then known as the OSTAR.

With two years to go to the next edition of this famous race, now known as The Transat, it is fitting that Tabarly's victory acts as a reminder of all that is great about this legendary race. The racing boats may have changed beyond all recognition in 50 years, but the essence of solo pioneering spirit, courage and determination remain the same today.

The second OSTAR in 1964 was the launch pad for one of the most influential figures in the history of single-handed sailing, the development of sailing as a sport in France and in offshore race boat design. In 1960 Francis Chichester had managed the North Atlantic crossing in 40 days, then 32 year-old French naval lieutenant Eric Tabarly won the 1964 race taking just 27 days, 3 hours and 56 minutes aboard his 44-ft ketch *Pen Duick II*. Publicity from the first OSTAR turned the second race, that started on 23 May 1964, into a media circus with a number of the 15 competitors signed up by national newspapers.

Tabarly, the only Frenchman in the race, was the sailors' favourite for the race with the advantage of sailing the largest boat and the only one purpose-built for the event. He had also carried out an in-depth study of the weather and was physically very fit, which was not the case for all the competitors! Arriving at the finish in Newport, Rhode Island, he had no prior knowledge of his win – he had not used his radio during the race – and, almost as a passing comment, let slip that his self-steering system had only worked for the first eight out of the 27 days it took him to complete the course.

Tabarly became an overnight hero in France and for his endeavour was presented with his country's highest honour, the Legion d'Honneur, by President de Gaulle. Nevertheless, the skipper never lost sight of his priorities, and declined the first presidential invitation because the ceremony coincided with the day he had intended to repaint his boat! A few months later, a somewhat begrudged De Gaulle sent another invitation, in the following terms: 'I would be delighted to be able to count on your presence... if the tide is favourable of course'.





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Tabarly's last major race was the double-handed 1997 Transat Jacques Vabre, when he won the monohull division. Just a few months later, in early June 1998, Eric Tabarly drowned after he was knocked off *Pen Duick I*, his beloved Fife cruising yacht, during heavy weather whilst on a routine delivery off the south Wales coast. So France lost its father of modern day ocean racing.

The influence of Tabarly cannot be underestimated. His win in the 1964 and then the 1976 OSTAR caused such a sensation in

France that it motivated an entire generation of sailors to follow his example.

The Transat is the heir to the oldest single-handed transatlantic race, the OSTAR, which shaped modern offshore racing on a 2,800 mile north Atlantic course renowned for wild depressions, icebergs and freezing fog. The last 12 editions of the race, held once every four years since 1960, have produced a rich history of triumph over adversity and have accumulated record-breaking results. The first race was competed by just a handful of pioneering sailors

including Francis Chichester and Blondie Hasler, who coined the phrase: 'One man, one boat, the ocean'. The race, over the years, has had tragedy, rescues and drama. Over time The Transat now serves the professional end of offshore sailing. There are few modern day races that can reflect on such a long and outstanding history.

The next edition of The Transat is planned for May 2016. Follow it at: [www.thetransat.com](http://www.thetransat.com) ↴



*Pen Duick IV* - a trimaran ketch which Tabarly raced in the 1968 Singlehanded Transat.



*Pen Duick VI* approaching the Rio finish line after a race from Portsmouth in 1976.



The schooner *Pen Duick III* starting the Sydney Hobart Race in 1967.