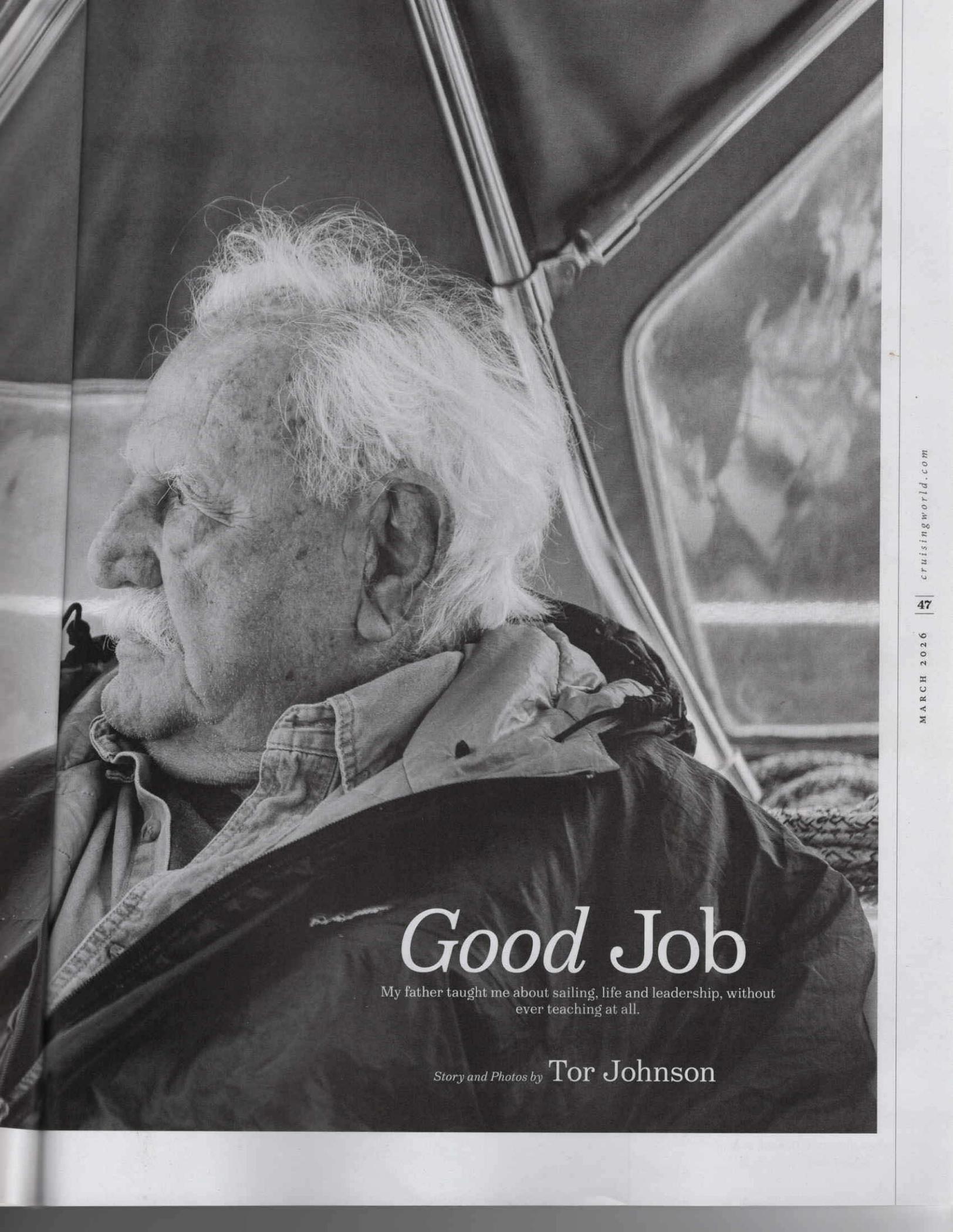


# CRUISING WORLD







# *Good Job*

My father taught me about sailing, life and leadership, without ever teaching at all.

Story and Photos by **Tor Johnson**

## *I like to say*

that my father, Donald Johnson, has wrung more salt water out of his socks than most of us will ever see. I grew up sailing the world with him. I wouldn't say he taught me how to sail. He wasn't much of a teacher in the traditional sense. I remember trying to learn celestial navigation from him. He reduced his sextant sights by intuition, combining a number of corrections and calculating them all at once. It was impossible to follow. I had to learn the steps on my own. Dad did nearly everything on the boat. You grabbed a job, and if you could do it, you might get to keep that job.

One of my earliest memories of sailing with Dad was standing watch at night, at about 6 years old. We were off the coast of Mexico, making our way south for the Panama Canal. We were hove to, waiting for light to enter a new harbor, just sitting there rolling in a rising sea. Before he went below to sleep, he had had warned us not to leave the wheel loose in a sea, because the big rudder sweeping back and forth could damage the steering.

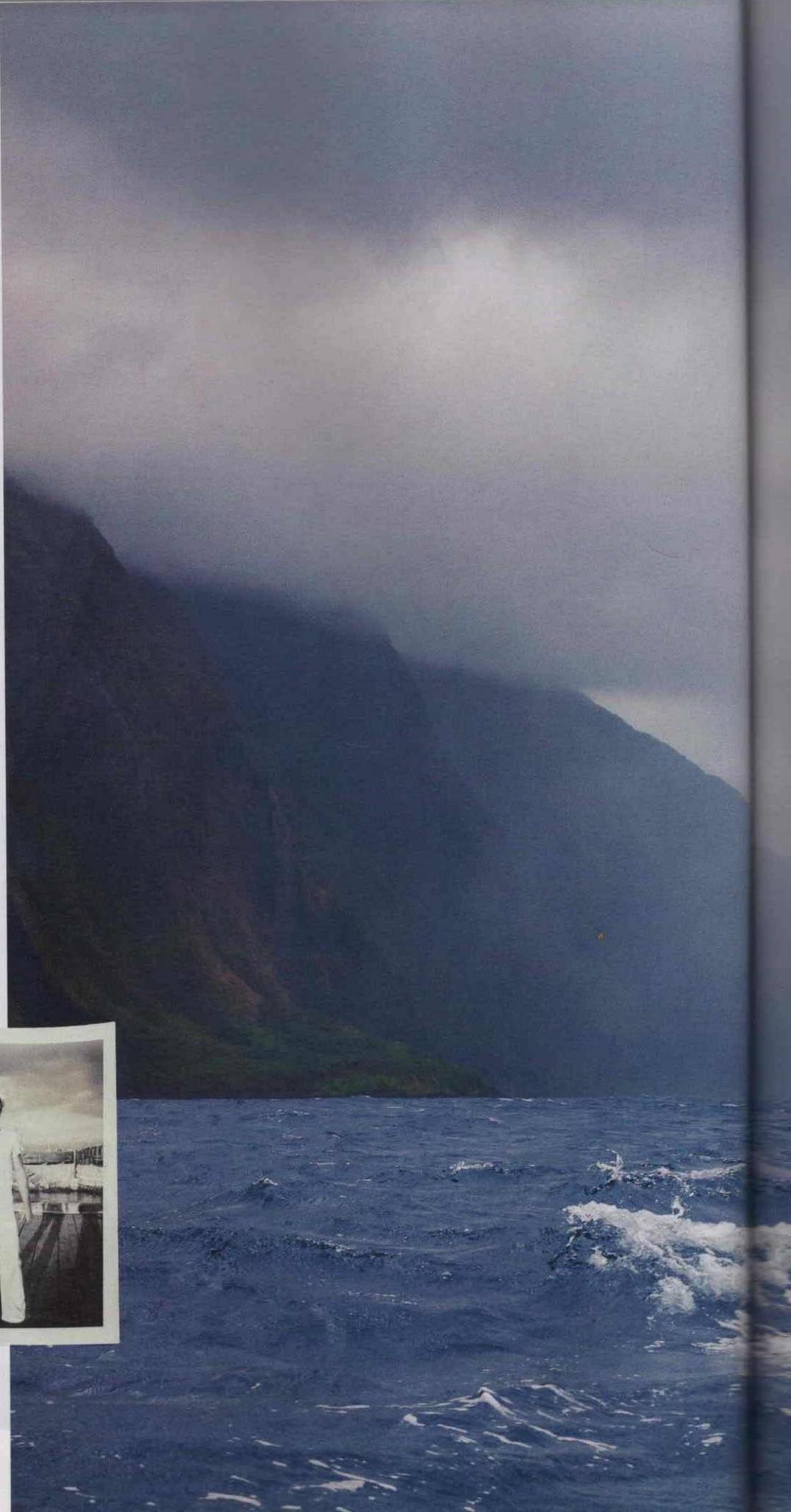
I grabbed a jib sheet (actually a bad idea because, well, it's meant for the jib) and tied up the wheel. Being 6, I didn't actually know how to tie a knot yet, so I ended up just making a huge mess and probably disabling the steering.

Dad came up on deck at dawn, took one look at the disaster and belted, "Who did this?"

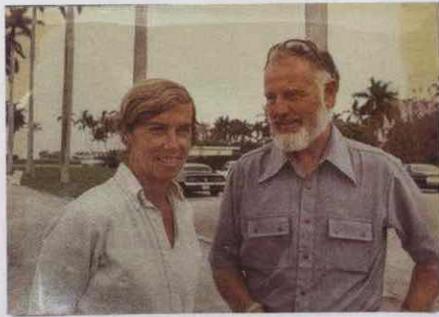
Dad was fairly serious in those days, and we kids were a little



After a Pacific crossing from Sand Point, Alaska, to Hawaii, *Kāhea*, a Beneteau 473, sails beneath Molokai's towering sea cliffs. Left: Donald, back in his Navy days.







afraid of “The Skipper.” In retrospect, I think his seriousness may have had something to do with the stress of keeping all of us—my adventurous mother,

Madeline, my older brother, Alex, and his twin sister, Anne—safe at sea while making it up as he went along. Of course this was early days, when family cruising was yet to become “a thing.” Most people thought it was irresponsible to take a young family to sea at all.

Anyway, I confessed it was me.

“Good job!” he said. He appreciated that I’d taken the initiative.

As a housing developer, Dad was able to work on a project basis. We boys were of course enlisted to help. When he’d finish a project, we’d fly to someplace like Hong Kong, where we took delivery of a yacht from the yard next door to the legendary builder Cheoy Lee. We sailed through the Philippines and out into the Pacific twice. Later, we bought boats at the Swedish yard of Hallberg-Rassy and sailed all over Europe, then several times across the Atlantic to the Eastern Seaboard and back.

Dad often talked about his years in the Navy during World War II. Growing up on a farm in Tillamook, Oregon, Dad had become heartily sick of getting up long before dawn to milk their cows. He couldn’t wait to flee the family farm. Dad was 17 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Some of his classmates went down with the *Arizona*. Dad lied about his age at 17 and joined the US Navy.

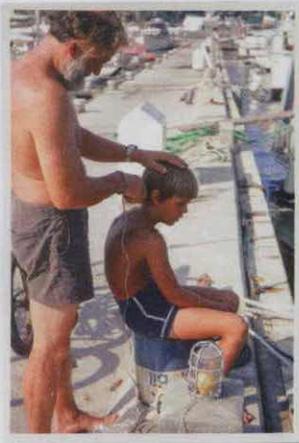
“In the Navy, they let us sleep in till 6 a.m.!” he’d exclaim with a laugh.

He was assigned to a small sub chaser escorting Russian vessels across the North Pacific. A violent extra-tropical cyclone hit the ship, and the situation rapidly deteriorated. When waves began breaking over the wheelhouse, Dad’s gunnery officer lost his wits and had to be put in a straitjacket. Dad thought it was all a big adventure. At age 17—an age when kids like me were sneaking out of school to smoke weed in the bushes—Dad got the job of chief gunner’s mate, in command of 40 sailors. Fortunately for them, they survived both the weather and the Japanese subs, and the war ended before they could be deployed to the shores of Japan.

We kids missed a lot of school. We read books instead. I eventually learned to navigate with a sextant. We sailed to places like Japan, where we met old Japanese guys who, like my Dad, had fought in the war. Dad’s one-time adversaries treated us all with an impossible level of kindness and hospitality unique to the Japanese, taking Dad to local shrines for their many who perished, and treating us kids to endless meals and sublime hot baths.

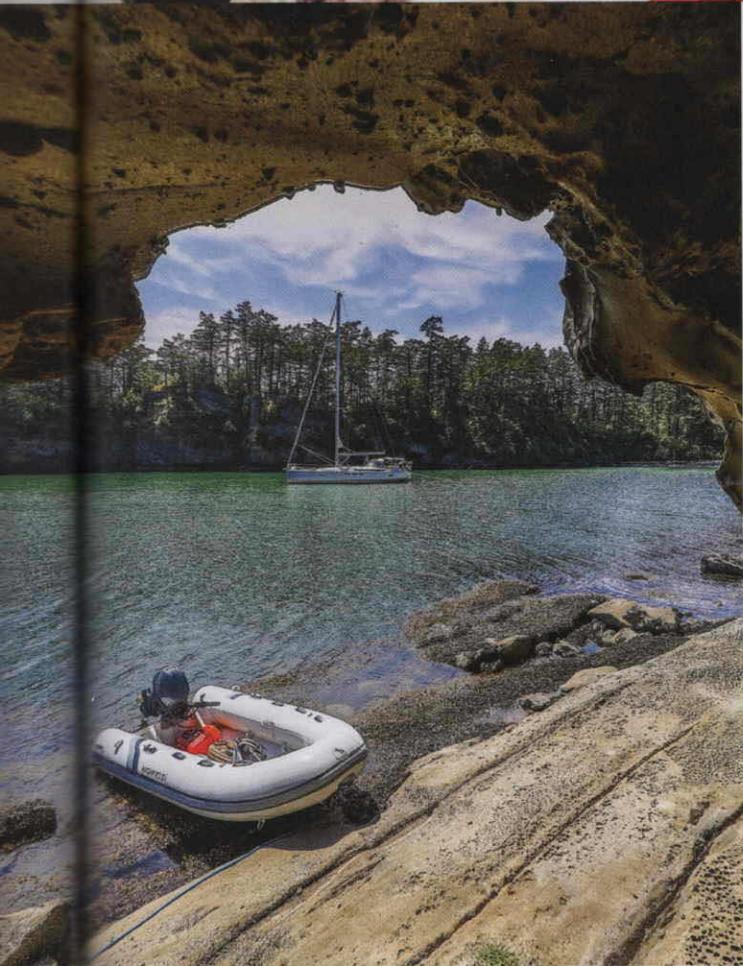
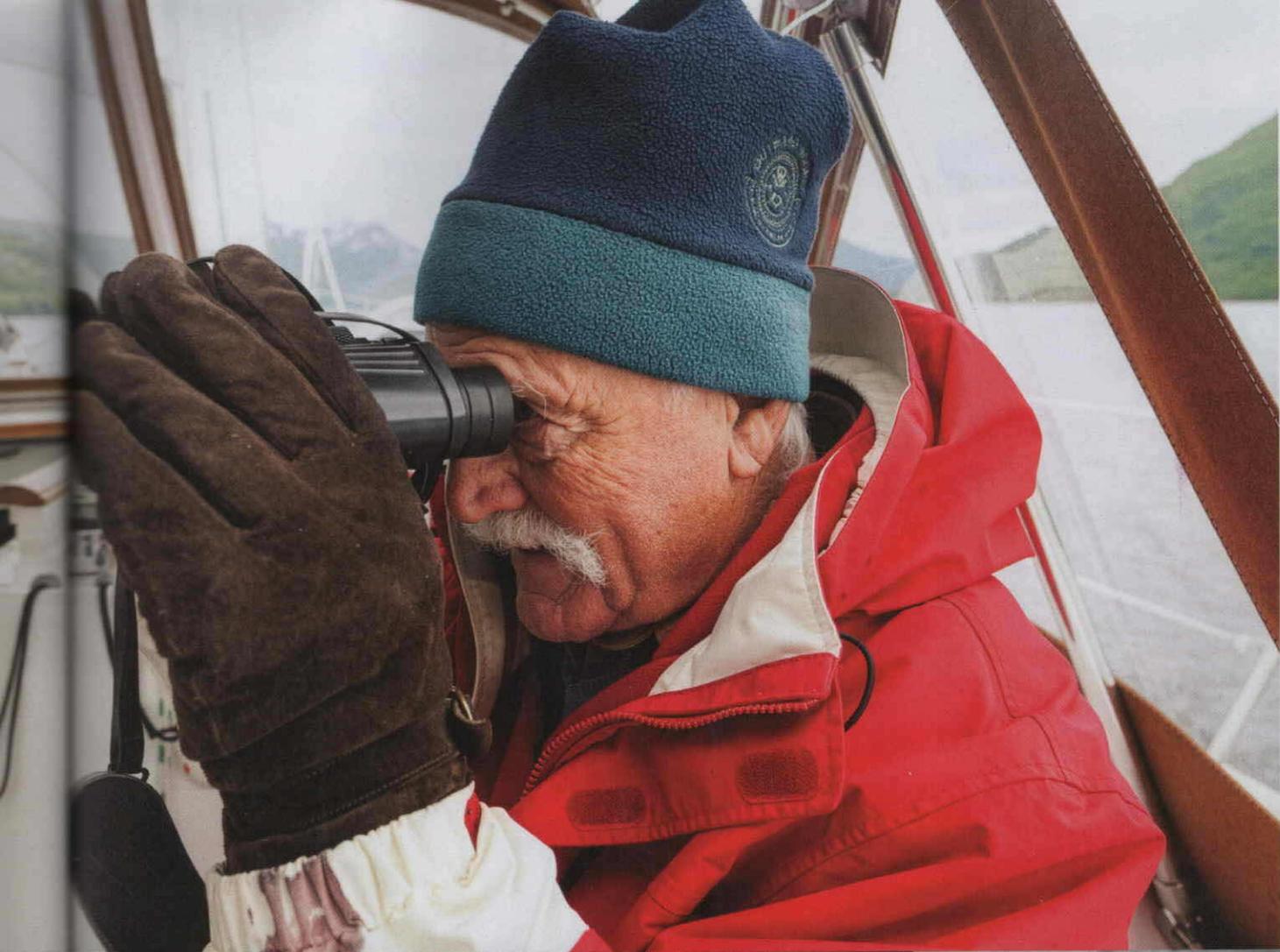
We sailed back to the United States via the North Pacific. There was fog nearly every day, a condition that made celestial navigation a challenge. My father pulled off a feat of navigation involving dead reckoning and occasional glimpses of the sun, and after three weeks, we finally made landfall in the Aleutian Islands. Or we thought we had. We couldn’t see anything through the fog, until the sky finally cleared overnight. Our little yacht lay becalmed amid a series of active volcanoes covered in snow and ice. My father never forgot that landfall. We had all earned it in those three weeks of fog and cold.

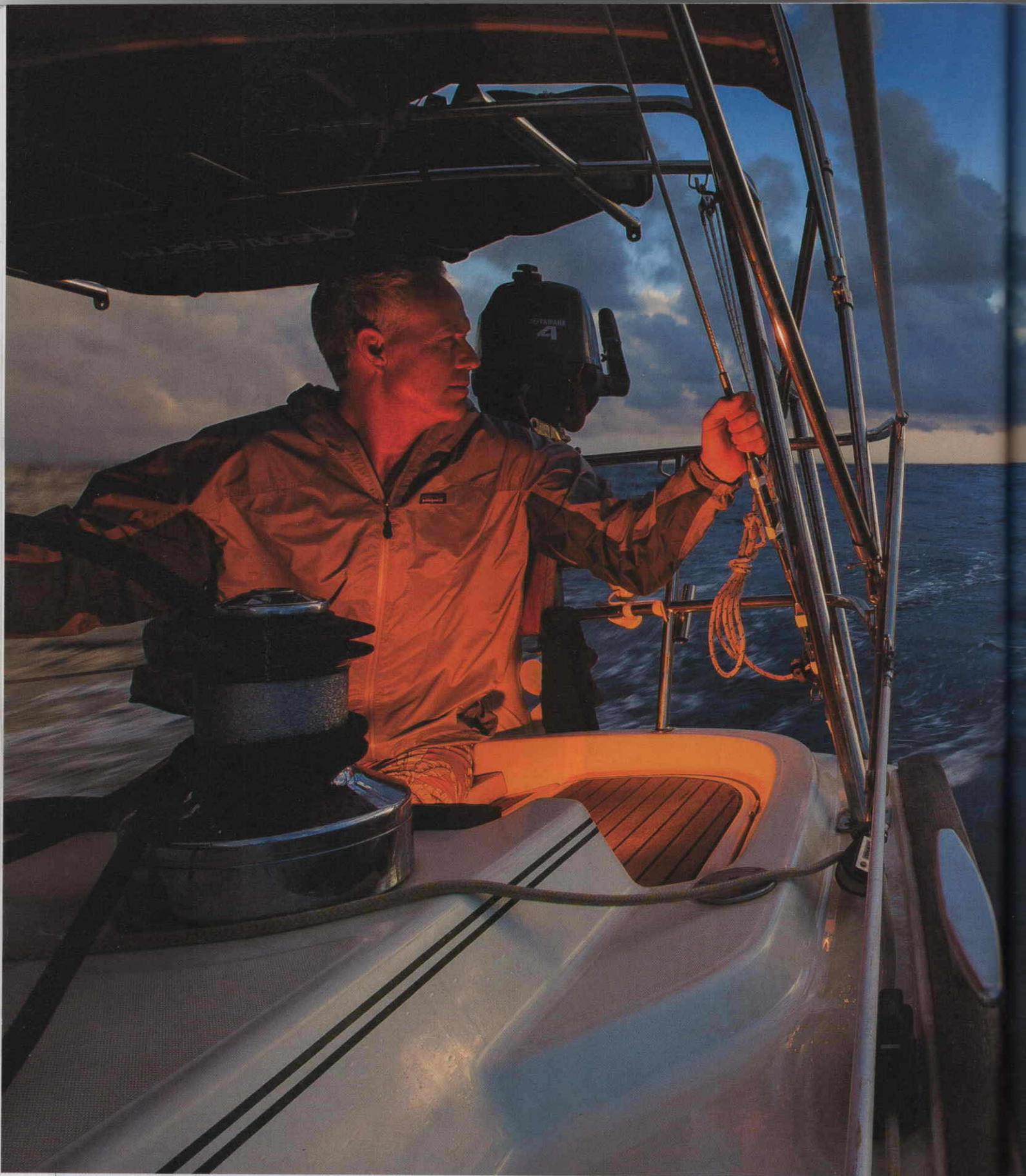
We ended up in Adak, a US military base. Unfortunately, it was off-limits. The military police were about to send us back out to sea when an officer discovered that Dad’s ship had called there during World War II. We were given free roam of the island and allowed to shop at the PX.



Top: Madeline and Donald in Palm Beach, Florida, where he later served as harbor master. Above: The author gets a dockside haircut. Opposite from top left: Donald stands watch off Alaska, scanning the horizon for icebergs; navigating the old-fashioned way, with charts, pencils and hard-earned intuition; one of Donald’s favorite anchorages on Matia Island in Washington’s San Juan Islands.









The author surveys the horizon at sunrise during one of many Atlantic crossings with his parents.



Back in Santa Cruz, California, I enrolled in Japanese language courses at Cabrillo College. I'd been so impressed by our Japanese welcome that I wanted to know more about their culture. I eventually became fluent and worked with the Japanese in Hawaii, where I married the awesome Kyoko, a Tokyo native. Dad had fought the Japanese at my age, but I discovered a deep admiration for them. A life at sea can make for some interesting twists.

When Dad got older, he left the major ocean voyages to me, and I began crossing the Atlantic and Pacific with my own crew.

I eventually ended up buying two sailboats in Europe, sailing them home to the United States across the Atlantic. Two of my nephews, my sister's son Rowan and my brother's son Quinn, have sailed with me on a number of ocean crossings and yacht deliveries. They've become solid crew. A little like my father, Quinn always wants the hardest jobs, like diving under the hull to cut the prop free of a fishing line. Rowan can keep the boat sailing under spinnaker in a good groove all day long. They are the next generation of sailors to carry on Dad's legacy, and I'm proud to say that with either of these guys on deck, a captain can sleep soundly... or, at least as soundly as a captain ever sleeps.

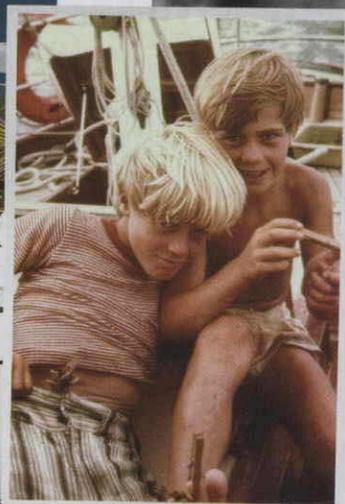
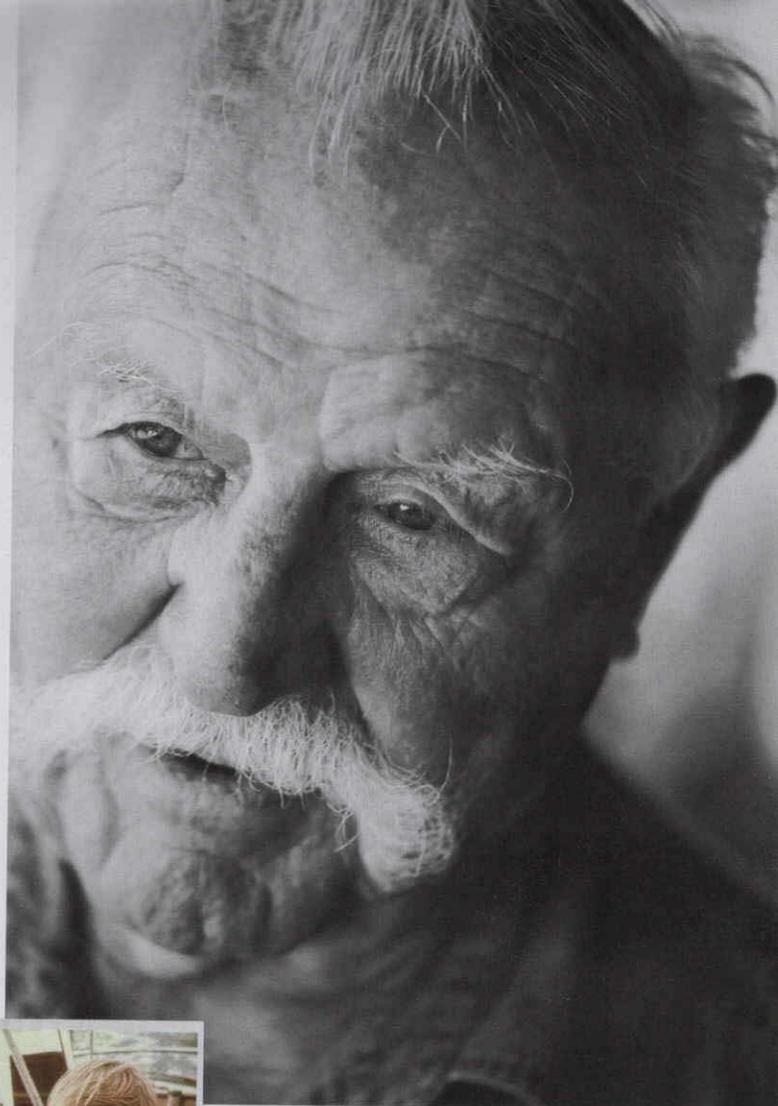
Well into his 90s, my father was still sailing with me, exploring the San Juan Islands in the Pacific Northwest. He loved a quiet anchorage, being the only boat in a small cove on a calm evening. Having sailed all over the world with Dad, I felt it was on me at that point to get him out on the water as much as he wanted. When we sailed together, he'd often compliment me on my sailing of our Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509. The truth is that on a modern rig, with all lines led aft, it has become fairly easy. Dad was used to things before chart plotters, roller furling and AIS, when it took a lot more work than it does now.

At 100 years of age, Dad had a group of visitors at his front door. These military officers, one from each of the armed services, had come to pay their respects. They recounted Dad's Navy career and presented him with an American flag.

Dad died this fall, well into his 101st year, in his house overlooking the Swinomish Channel, where he loved to watch the native fishermen, loggers and pleasure boaters come and go. I hoisted the flag the officers had presented to Dad on the stern of my boat *Kāholo* and sailed out to some of his favorite little secluded anchorages, just me and my loyal dog, Guinness. Watching Dad's flag wave in a light breeze in the setting sun, I thought about our life of sailing, and what a life it's been.

And I thought about where my own family will sail next, and all the adventures still ahead. Who knows where a life at sea might lead? 🌊





With storm clouds building, Donald prepares *Kāholo* for cyclone season at Vuda Marina in Fiji. The author and his older brother, Alex, making do with clothespins (left)—proof that creativity thrives when cruising. Above: Donald Johnson—a life well lived, shaped by the sea. Opposite left: A serene sunset over the central San Juan Islands.

