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Sailing in the Dark



Sailing around the world is difficult business, and the challenges are even greater for this legally blind couple—but that's not stopping them

Story and photography by Abner Kingman

The Valiant 32 looks tiny, set against the expanse of the Pacific. It's a breezy summer afternoon off the California coast and a cruising couple are on their way home toward the Golden Gate. The main is reefed and the jib is partly furled, and they are making about 5 knots running downwind. As each wave lifts the transom and rotates the bow, they head farther off course until, finally, the helmsman realizes the error and corrects it. From a distance, it looks like a toy boat piloted by a whimsical child.

But take a moment to imagine you are running downwind in confused seas on a cloudy night and your compass light goes out. You are

underpowered, sailing conservatively in a heavy boat with a skeg-mounted rudder. It's a helmsman's nightmare. There is no feedback, almost nothing to warn you before the crash jibe. Now imagine that it begins to rain, just as you enter a shipping lane, and there is a problem with your radar. You can make out only the faintest image on the screen, and from the cockpit you can see nothing beyond 100 yards. You might very well be on the verge of colliding with a ship.

That is what it's like for Scott Duncan and Pam Habek as they cruised into San Francisco Bay on this clear summer afternoon aboard their Valiant 32. They are legally blind, and an afternoon sail is just a walk

in the park compared to their main mission—a circumnavigation. They intend to set off later this month to sail around the world, and it's possible to imagine any number of scenarios in which not being able to see could make the trip overwhelmingly difficult.

But as Habek points out, when you have grown up visually impaired, as she and Duncan both have, you don't know any other way. "You just live with what you have, and you aren't even aware of what you don't have." The rub is that much of the technology and many of the conventions in our world have been developed with normal vision in mind. The centuries of accumulated knowledge and many of the tools that we use to sail a boat assume



normal vision. The telltales, compass, chart, radar and weather fax are all visual instruments, and the rules of the road insist on vision. In fact, when Duncan corresponded with Robin Knox-Johnson, whom he calls "one of my heroes," the sailing legend asked the blind man how he planned to obey Rule 5: Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper lookout by sight and hearing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions, so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision. Duncan turned the question around and asked Knox-Johnson how he obeyed the rule when he was asleep in his bunk.

Kidding aside, Duncan and Habek both admit the obvious. Their sail around the world will be riskier than the same project would be for two people with normal vision. "This is really very dangerous. There is no other way to look at it," Duncan says. The question then is, why are they doing it?

Duncan conceived the project two years ago as a solo-circumnavigation, the first ever by a blind man. His goal is to inspire visually impaired kids. "When you're disabled the world in general decides for you what your limitations are. Because of this a lot of kids never reach their capabilities, and I hope to be an example that helps kids get the most they can out of life." The plan is to upload an electronic journal that teachers and students can follow from the classroom, and to meet with groups of blind kids along the way to foster dreams of what they might accomplish in their own lives.

Duncan learned to sail in a Sunfish at a summer camp, which he says did wonders for his self-confidence. Later he went on to serve as director of a camp for blind kids, then founded a company that develops technology to allow blind and partially blind people to use computers through Braille, speech and large print. After he sold the company, he took a management position at the Rose Resnick Lighthouse for the Blind, an organization that helps "promote the independence, equality and self-reliance" of the blind.

Although Duncan's project owes part of its inspiration to a selfless desire to encourage others, there is something else. Like all those who aspire to be the first or the fastest he possesses an overwhelming drive. Longtime friend, Kenneth Frasse, says, "He's very serious about testing himself." And his boss at the "Lighthouse," Anita Aaron, describes him as having "Sheer guts and willpower; he just grinds it out."

The 37-year-old is of medium height and medium build. He has a soft, cheerful voice and a jovial mannerism that projects optimism. He doesn't come across as an obsessive type. It makes you wonder what the source of his drive is. Does he have a chip on his shoulder? In his characteristically mild-mannered way Duncan admits that there is something that bothers him, something that's spurring him to go a little farther than he otherwise might. It's not just about the kids.

Duncan can't stand the condescending attitude people adopt when they interact with the

disabled. He says that he can go just about anywhere with a sighted friend and expect that strangers will talk to the friend and ignore him, even to the point of referring to him in the third person while he is standing there. He says he is blind, not invisible. "You wouldn't believe how unaware people are. I see it every day. You know, people who think I can't do anything. And it drives me crazy. You know what? There are 70 percent of people that are visually impaired right now that don't have jobs. And they don't have jobs because people don't think they can work. I don't mean to get up on my soap box or anything, but if you just think that people are going to be accepted, or whatever, that's a dream world."

Duncan believes there is a lot of room for improvement in the way the blind are treated, but he is optimistic enough to think that a project like his can truly make a difference. He points to Eric Weihenmayer's successful quest to climb the highest peak on each of the seven continents. Weihenmayer has become a celebrity, appearing on magazine covers and television shows, a testament to the abilities of the blind.

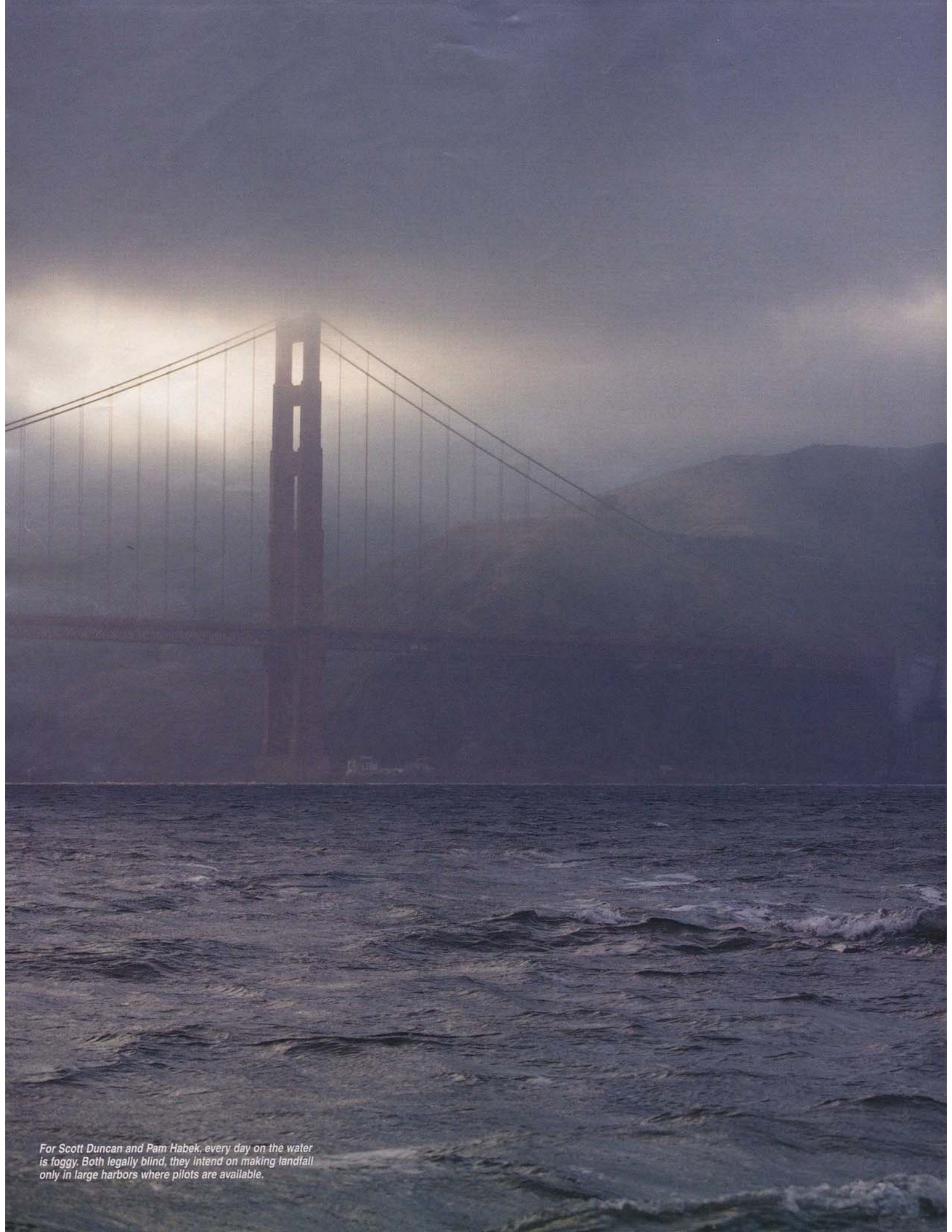
Whether Duncan attracts as much attention, and by that standard, succeeds to the degree that Weihenmayer has in making people think twice about the blind, will in part depend on



his charisma. His willingness to engage the media suggests he'll adapt easily to the role of a celebrity, and his perpetual cheerfulness makes him easy to like. When a local rock station's morning disc jockeys made fun of him, saying he might as well sail around in circles for a year, Duncan arranged to get on the program. He arrived in the studio with blindfolds and made the DJs wear them while they performed basic tasks. And he told a funny story about riding a scooter as a teenager, taking voice instructions from a friend on another scooter. The were pulled over by a policeman and, "He's looking at me, and he's like, 'Do you have some trouble seeing?' Just a little bit."

Duncan is so personable, in fact, that it's difficult to imagine him as a solo sailor, and he said several times during the planning that he expected loneliness would be one of his greatest obstacles. It is not surprising that he invited his girlfriend, Pam Habek, to join him. Habek has been supportive of the project all along. She encouraged the idea from its inception, and has joined Duncan for much of the practice sailing leading up to the trip. She made the decision to join him just three months before departure, but says, "My life has been all about that boat for the last year, whether I was going or not," so she already feels fairly well prepared. The summer cruise off the California coast was their first off-





For Scott Duncan and Pam Habek, every day on the water is foggy. Both legally blind, they intend on making landfall only in large harbors where pilots are available.



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SAN FRANCISCO, CA.

Scott Duncan and Pam Habek hope to be the first blind couple to circumnavigate aboard their Valiant 32, top. The couple spent the summer sailing out of San Francisco Bay in preparation, facing page.



The Valiant 32, top, is outfitted with a talking GPS. Since neither sees well enough to read telltales or the compass without some visual aid, they trim with the help of a monocular and they steer by the feeling of the helm and the wind on their faces, and read paper charts with the help of a high-powered magnifying glass.

shore journey together after deciding to sail around the world as a couple. At the end of four windy days bouncing around in the little boat, there was no sign of weakened resolve.

Duncan says that their decision to sail around the world as a blind couple will have the same impact as a solo journey would have, both in terms of the ability to inspire blind kids and change the way the average person thinks about the blind. What their decision will change dramatically is the impact on their individual lives.

Habek and Duncan were born with different congenital eye conditions that resulted in simi-

lar vision loss. Neither is completely blind, "but we're very legally blind," says Duncan. He is a product of southern California, growing up in Santa Monica, and she is a product of New England, growing up in Southwest Harbor, Maine. They share the same readiness to smile and soft-spoken mannerisms, but where Duncan exhibits a Californian's attraction to the spotlight, Habek exhibits a New Englander's reserve. She doesn't like to be photographed, and when it comes to attention from the media she says, "Scott is better with that. I'm very supportive of his goals, but I'm not an advocate

... I so don't feel like I'm approaching this from wanting to prove something." But she says she appreciates the potential to make a difference in the lives of other blind people. "I'm making a commitment to the whole thing."

Habek, 42, grew up in a sailing town and her father was a rigger at Hinckley, but as a child, she experienced sailing only as a passenger. In 1986 she moved to San Francisco and, two years later, took a job with the Rose Resnick Lighthouse for the Blind, where she has risen to a senior management position. "I've worked very hard for the last 16 years and hardly traveled at all, and I'm ready for that now. I've wanted to be a lot more adventurous than I have been. I think a lot of people see me as conservative. I would describe myself as conservative, but not conventional."

"We're a good balance. Pam is a really organized, methodical person, and yet she is probably not as daring as me," Duncan says. Separately, Habek says, "I'm detail oriented and organized. He's more big picture." On board the boat Duncan will act as captain and Habek says she can live with that. "As long as we are making decisions together I'll be OK."

Some of the day-to-day challenges will be the same as they would be for any cruising couple. On their California summer shake-down they managed to decorate the galley with a pot of tomato soup and Habek took on the challenge of cleaning up in rough conditions. But some challenges will be unique to the visually impaired. Neither sees well enough to read telltales or the compass without some visual aid, so after trimming with the help of a monocular they steer by the feeling of the helm and the wind on their faces (obviously much easier going upwind than down). They have a talking GPS that calls out heading and course information, and they can read paper charts with the help of a high-powered magnifying glass. They have decided to make landfall only in larger ports where they can arrange for assistance from a pilot.

Sailing instructor, Arnstein Mustad, has donated his time to working with Duncan and Habek on sailing skills and suggesting systems to adapt the boat to their limited sight. After months of practice, he says in his candid style, "The sailing will take care of itself. But lack of mechanical aptitude will hurt them at some point." Duncan agrees that he has some things to learn mechanically, but with a contact through Mustad he has found a diesel mechanic who has been giving him lessons in maintenance and emergency repair.

Now, in their final rush to depart, they are putting their shore lives on hold, trying to get through the boat maintenance list, taking first aid classes, and stowing gear aboard. They both seem exuberant with prospects of the adventure to come, and excited to head offshore. "I'm looking forward to being where what you are thinking about is in the moment," Habek says. While Duncan, looking out over the water, says, "What I can see out there I find beautiful."