Ka-boom! Off went the cannon right in the middle of the skipper’s briefing, shocking 15 sailors out of the reverie of donuts and coffee and sending them on a mad dash to Eastport YC’s dinghy dock where they boarded their tenders for a frenetic row out to their classic sailboats anchored just off shore.

It was an exciting Le Mans-style start to a fun day of racing on the Bay as the fourth annual Elf Classic Yacht Race from Annapolis to St. Michaels got underway May 17. This style of start harkens back to the early days of racing at the Corinthian YC in Marblehead, MA, in the waning years of the 19th Century. Then, boat owners raced from their seats on the arriving trains and rowed to their boats on moorings.

Our start was clean, if not comical. Elf Captain Rick Carrion accomplished his patented “running start” by jumping into the sole of his tender head-first, and dunked his cell phone in the process. Yachtsman and major race sponsor Peter Kellogg was rowed out to his 67-foot entry, Blackwatch, reading the weekend edition of the Wall Street Journal and smiling from ear to ear.

The rest of us sprinted down the dock; quickly untied our dinghies and rowed like mad in an effort to be the “first away” in this challenging 20-mile race across the Bay.

The fleet was a veritable floating armada of maritime history. Rick Carrion estimated the value of the fleet in excess of $20 million, as if one could place a value on a combined 970 years of nautical heritage.
There was Elf, a beautifully-restored 58-foot Lawley gaff topsail cutter. Built in 1888, Elf is the oldest-known small racing yacht in America. The Classic Yacht Race was started by Carrion as a way to bring together similar vessels and to raise awareness (and money) for continued restoration of classic vessels like Elf.

Another 100-year-old sailing vessel was the 54-foot long 1895 Tilghman Island log canoe Persistence. She was “found” abandoned in a horse pasture over two decades ago, and has undergone a complete restoration at the hands of the craftsmen at the Philadelphia Maritime Museum. Six pristine Hinckleys were registered as well, including Huntress, a Bill Tripp-designed Bermuda 40 yawl [hull #1]. One of the jewels of the fleet was Silent Maid, a 2009 edition of the original 33-foot long Bay Head New Jersey catboat by the same name. The smallest boat was the 15-foot long Uffa Fox Albacore, Exotic Material.

My little catboat, Mystic Wind, a 40-year-old, 20-foot Peter Legnos designed Mystic 20, was a late entry to the race. We had no illusions about our ability to win the race. With only 250 square feet of sail, our hull speed under ideal conditions maxes out around six knots. But it seemed like a good time could be had, and we thought we would be okay getting off our anchor ahead of the other, more complex boats.

With cries of “set that kite now!” “shake out that reef!” and “heave, boys, heave!” the fleet got underway like an old man getting out of bed, with lots of fits and starts and more than a few creaks and groans, in ideal conditions with a northerly eight- to 10-knot breeze. All good things must come to an end, however, and as the lead boats rounded Bloody Point, the wind gave out.

We decided to head home and instead drive over to St. Michaels, catching the finish from land with cold beers in our hands. But others in the fleet persevered, making their way haltingly towards St. Michaels. Brad Johnson’s log canoe was waked

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by a passing power boat as he made the
turn, which sent the 10-man and woman
crew scampering on the hiking boards to
try to prevent the inevitable: a swim in the
65-degree Bay water.

Johnson recalls, “With this rig, once
she goes over, we have to unrig the sails
while she is on her side; take the masts off
and secure them to the boat. Then we can
right her and bail her out. It was a cold,
wet process, but not something we didn’t
anticipate.”

At 3 pm, the race was called with only
a couple of boats within sight of the finish
line. Slowly boats began to filter in, some
under sail power, but most with the help of
their iron gennys.

The last boat to arrive was the little
Albacore, after a sail of more than seven
hours. “We don’t have an engine, so had
to sail her all the way,” says skipper Barney
Harris. “When the wind played out, we
were able to catch some zephyrs and move
right along. Before the race was called, we
had passed every boat in the fleet except
Silent Maid. Right at the end, a final gust
put Bear ahead of us. We’ll take that. Next
year, with steady wind, we’ll be right in
there.”

In the Cruising Class, Silent Maid was
the declared the winner. In the Day Boat
Class, Bear came away with the first-place
honors. Elf was accorded the trophy for the
“first off the line.” Persistence won the Cap-
tain’s Choice Award. Mystic Wind brought
home some hardware as well, winning the
award for “Best Dressed Yacht,” although
John, Jimmy and I had a hard time believ-
ing that our little craft qualified for the
“yacht” designation.

According to organizer Bill Sonntag,
the event was an unqualified success. “We
raised a little money for the Classic Yacht
Restoration Guild and the Maritime Mu-
seum, treated participants and spectators to
the sight of some glorious yachts under sail,
and we had a good time to boot. Not a bad
way to spend a spring day on the Bay.”

For information about next year’s Elf
Classic Yacht Race, visit cyrg.org.