Louise Burke’s Obituary, printed in The Capital Gazette, June 24, 2020

ANNAPOLIS, MD — Louise Kevin Burke 85, of Annapolis MD, passed away on June 16, 2020 in Danvers, MA.  Born in Swampscott. Louise was the daughter of the late Edward and Marguerite Kevin. Louise attended Swampscott schools and graduated from Swampscott High School in 1952.  She worked as a computer programmer at General Electric in Lynn. In 1962 she married Les Burke.  Shortly after, they bought a sailboat and enjoyed sailing and scuba diving together. In 1970 they decided to take the big leap and sold everything to move aboard the 52 foot custom sloop “Avatar” as professional skippers.

They sailed south to the Caribbean where they chartered the yacht for George Baker its New York owner. But tragedy struck in April of 1972 when Les suffered a heart attack aboard Avatar and died a month later.  Widowed at 37, that fall she decided that the beach was no place for her and she returned  to Avatar and the Bakers and sailed away the hurt logging 15,000 miles astern.

In 1976, Louise was introduced to Alexander Graham Bell Grosvenor, descendent of the telephone inventor, who helped establish the US Naval Academy’s sailing program by soliciting donations of large racing sailboats for the fleet.  Grosvenor invited Louise to join the Naval Academy as its first female sailing instructor.  At the time of her hiring, the Academy received the donation of the 82 foot Herreshoff Schooner Mistral which was built by the Britt Brothers in the Saugus River in 1938.  Mistral was slated to be the US Navy’s representative in the Humble River Review celebrating Queen Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee in 1977. In mid-May, Louise, along with 12 midshipmen, a retired army general and two  ensigns set out for England and arrived, after a succession of wet cold gales, 48 hours before the review.  Mistral then set out for a circumnavigation of the Atlantic Ocean logging 9,300 nautical miles in 66 days. Louise averaged 8,000 miles a year of mostly heavy duty offshore sailing aboard Mistral while teaching safety at sea, piloting, celestial navigation and even weather broadcasting for NOAA.

Louise eventually rose to the position of Director of the Naval Academy’s offshore racing program which grew to a fleet of 12 donation boats from 40 to 68 feet, 12 J-24’s and 190 midshipmen which at the time was the largest sailing team in the world. After 14 years with the Naval Academy she retired but stayed involved as a Trustee of US Navy Sailing and helped with the Vets on the Bay program.  Louise traveled extensively both sailing and scuba diving around most of the world from Siberia to Antarctica, through the Atlantic and Europe and many islands of the Pacific down to Tasmania. She lived an incredible life which she chronicles in her biography titled “Aye, Aye, Sir, Ma’am to be published posthumously.

As a trailblazer for woman in professional yachting she was recently nominated for induction into the US Sailing Hall of Fame in Annapolis.

Louise was one of the founding members of the Eastport Yacht Club in Annapolis, was a member and served on the board of the Explorers Club in Washington DC and was one of the originators of US Sailing’s Safety at Sea program.

She was also the first woman to be invited to join the prestigious Storm Trysail Club.