

Survival of the Fittest

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A tinny voice over the VHF marine radio commanded, "State your position."

Bud said, "Uh--unsure of position. In the Gulf Stream. Somewhere between Marathon and Miami."

Silence. Then the tinny voice commanded, "State your vessel size."

Bud said, "Thirty-two-foot sailboat. Engine malfunctioning. Four sick passengers." After an endless pause, the voice asked, "Will you accept a commercial tow?"

Bud hesitated. He knew a commercial tow would be expensive.

"Yes!" we all screamed into the microphone.

With this, the rescue began.

Bud and I were sailing our second bareboat charter while still in school. We furnished our own captains (Dan and Bud), supplied our own food, cooked our own meals, and took responsibility for the boat, and ourselves. We planned to pick up the charter boat in Miami, sail the Intracoastal Waterway part way down the Florida Keys to Buttonwood Sound, then sail back up to Miami in the open ocean.

To get to the Atlantic Ocean, we had to cross the reef of the Florida Straits through a narrow channel, at Alligator Reef Light. This was our first attempt at offshore sailing but expected it to be the first of many. We planned someday to circumnavigate the globe.

The previous year we took a four-day bareboat charter in the Keys and loved it. After that, we studied offshore sailing in periodicals like *Sail Magazine* and *Yachting* and read all the books we could find. We dreamed of following in the footsteps of Joshua Slocum, Sir Francis Chichester, and the intrepid sailors who told their stories in the sail-cruising magazines.

The crew was Bud, Dan, me, Jim from our previous trip, and Al and his new wife Carolyn. Dan had been a sailor all of his life and was from a nautical family. Al and Carolyn had never been on a sailboat before, and this trip was to be their honeymoon.

We spent hours planning meals and charting courses. Each member of the crew planned to cook one meal onboard and to bring the necessary ingredients. The experienced sailors chose hot dogs and spaghetti. Carolyn planned *coq au vin*, a gourmet meal requiring extensive preparation and lengthy simmering.

Bud and Dan meticulously plotted the course we would take through a narrow channel between the keys and the barrier reef which leads to the open ocean. Past the infamous Alligator Reef light. Then they planned to sail

north to Miami, a distance of only seventy miles. The boat would be in the axis of the Gulf Stream and gain three and a half knots as we sailed north. This meant seven hours of offshore sailing.

When we arrived in Miami to meet the owner and check out the Gulf 32 sailboat, we were told that the only forward sail available was the large Genoa jib. The storm jib and the working jib had been stolen the week before. Uh-oh.

Also, there was a whiff of diesel fuel from the auxiliary engine. No big deal. Diesel fuel was not explosive. We were cocky and eager, so we took the boat, loaded up our supplies, and sailed out of the harbor and into the afternoon breeze.

We traveled southwest for several idyllic days, via the Intracoastal Waterway through the Keys, in smooth waters, with perfect winds, and beautiful sunsets. We had fabulous *coq au vin*, simmered for hours on the gimballed alcohol stove during gentle broad reaches. We had brought a guitar, so we relaxed in the evenings over beer and sea shanties, as we rocked gently to sleep on the anchor. The newlywed couple was hooked on sailboat cruising, and already dreaming about their next one.

On the day before our planned exit from usually calm waters to the ocean, we crossed Buttonwood Sound. The charts indicated the water there to be deep enough for our five-and-a-half-foot draft. But on the day we sailed across it, the water was much shallower than predicted, because a brisk wind out of the northeast, after a frontal passage, had blown a lot of water out of the sound. Uh-oh.

As we sailed across Buttonwood Sound, we felt the irregular "thump" of boulders against the hull. Bud kept the sails trimmed, and the crew sat on one side, to heel the boat over as much as possible. We sailed across the sound without running aground.

Then we anchored for the night in choppy waters in the deeper part of the sound, near the narrow channel we planned to take the next day. Just one more day, the Gulf Stream, then home. The weather forecast was good, and we were looking forward to some great blue-water sailing.

The weather check still sounded good the next morning, though the forecast winds and seas had picked up. After breakfast, we motored through the narrow channel between the islands and through the barrier reef, into the open ocean. We hoisted our sails as we passed Alligator Reef light.

The first sign of trouble came when we passed the light and took up our planned heading. The ocean swells were a lot larger than forecast. The wind direction was out of the northeast, and scudding clouds were beginning to form in the sky. When we entered the Gulf Stream, the updated forecast was for a higher wind, bigger swells, and small craft warnings. But we were committed; there was no way to find our way back to the channel through the reef, even if we had wanted to.

To make matters worse, the wind was in the opposite direction to the axis of the Gulf Stream, so the current at the surface became zero. Further, the wind created choppy seas

and a huge swell.

If we'd had it, we would have used a storm jib, so we could head up higher into the wind. But we didn't have one. It had been stolen...So the genoa jib forced us to sail at greater angles to the wind and reach further into the ocean with each port tack. Our progress toward Miami slowed to a crawl.

We had planned to navigate following our nautical chart using specific landmarks along the shore. But as we sailed further and further from land, and as the swells got bigger and bigger, land disappeared. All we had was dead reckoning and the seat of our pants to find our way to Miami.

At eleven in the morning, Carolyn was the first to succumb to seasickness. The rolling of the boat, fear stoked by the strong wind and swell, and our resulting heel, all played their part. She was not prepared for the lee rail to be under, and for big waves to break over the bow, spilling into the cockpit.

I have never been seasick in my life, but after Al, her husband, and Jim joined her, I became seasick too. We all retreated to the cabin with buckets. Al and Jim crouched on the benches, while Carolyn and I crawled into the bow berth, sharing a bucket between us. After a couple hours of watching waves crash over the clear hatch cover, Carolyn whispered to me in tremulous voice, "Is there any chance at all that we will survive?"

Surprised, I said "Wow! I didn't know you were so worried! We are going to be fine! We are just going to be miserable for a while." I didn't say aloud the thought that crossed my mind, that it would be ironic if we were lost at sea the same day Dwight Eisenhower died. When I recovered enough to go topside, I looked at Bud and he seemed cheerful and confident. But he didn't quite meet my eyes. He asked, "How is everybody doing down there? This is great sailing!"

I said, "They will live. How is it going? How far are we from Miami?" "Unhhh...well, we are not sure exactly where we are—we can't see the markers on the shore. If we head closer to the reef, though, we could rip a hole in the hull with a coral head." "But," he said confidently, "No problem. We know we are heading in the right direction, and we will find a good landmark soon." Then he said as he looked away, "Anyway, we know that Miami is up ahead somewhere, and we can't miss it."

I felt better getting out of the cabin and into the cockpit, so I stayed there and tried to help. The wind was strong against the sails and was increasing and whistling through the rigging.

Clouds raced along the horizon. It was good sailing, all right. Maybe too good. For the passengers huddled in the cabin below, however, as they heaved into a bucket, their only thoughts were surviving the misery.

Bud and Dan did all the work, with a little help from me. I partially recovered, but our passengers stayed sick. I moved between the pitching cockpit and cabin, carrying an

occasional sandwich for captain and crew topside. We had only an occasional glimpse of land, surrounded as we were by the seething ocean.

Al and Carolyn held hands as they gazed heavenward through the clear hatch cover.

Bud eventually started the diesel auxiliary to help keep the boat pointed closer to the wind, and to keep some charge on the battery. But diesel fuel began to leak into the bilge and was thrown onto the floor of the cabin by the engine flywheel. The cabin floor became slick as grease.

For what seemed like an eternity, we slogged on, with the smell of diesel fuel permeating the pitching cabin. The beauty of the ocean and sky was gone. Its enraged terror was unleashed. It was a matter of survival for all of us.

It was late afternoon when Bud and Dan declared our emergency, broadcasting on the hailing channel.

The tinny voice on the radio said "Acknowledged. Stand by". And stand by we did, for hours.

The suffering crew were overjoyed that help was coming, and our ordeal would be over. Bud and Dan stopped trying to sail upwind and stowed the oversized jib. We still bobbed like a cork on the seething ocean.

As we awaited our rescue, the engine continued to cough away. But we all felt a huge sense of relief. The Coast Guard said they were sending a plane, homing on our radio signal.

After several hours of staring into the sky, just before sunset, we saw a small plane circling high above us. Over the radio the pilot said he saw us, and everyone came to the cockpit to cheer. He said he would continue to circle above us and guide a cutter to our location. We expected that to be any minute. But as it turned out, it took a lot longer.

Bud asked the pilot to say our location, so we could place ourselves on the nautical chart. After a pause, he gave us our coordinates. They were so far from our intended course that Bud and Dan thought they must be wrong.

Battery power was getting low, so the pilot told us to turn off the radio. We'd need to talk with the cutter captain when he arrived.

And so, we waited in the dark for our rescue. Bud and Dan were clipped to the lifeline topside, while the rest of us huddled below in the cabin. The wind velocity decreased, but the boat still lurched on the huge swell.

Finally, about midnight, a floodlight appeared out of the darkness. It was the Coast Guard cutter, Cape Knox. Her stern looked huge, towering above us.

We were happy to be rescued at last. We hoped we would be taken aboard the cutter and whisked back to civilization. But ahead lay one of the toughest nights of our lives. With both boats pitching and rolling as they were, the captain said it was unsafe for a Coast Guard midshipman to board us. He planned to tow us to Miami, and we would have to handle our end of the tow rope.

After several attempts, Dan caught the two-inch hawser pitched over to us, and attached it to the foot of our mast.

Bud struggled at the helm to keep the boat in position.

We had to keep the boat directly behind the cutter, with the hawser taught and always on the port side of the forestay. The cutter would tow us “above hull speed,” to help us maintain our position, and keep the hawser taught. If we relaxed for a second, the hawser could swing around and snap off the mast.

Bud and Dan took turns at the helm every hour. They were exhausted and wet from the effort and spray. In the dark night, lit only by the spotlight of the Cape Knox, they kept the hawser taut and our boat in its necessary position.

The rest of us collapsed below in the dark, lurching cabin, with its diesel stench, as the boat slammed from one huge swell to the next. “BLAM!” “BANG!” came the sounds from the cans in the cabinets, as they were tossed with every wave.

We braced ourselves, as best we could, drenched, groggy, and sick, as we were dragged across the sea. The ordeal lasted the rest of the night, as we struggled in the violently pitching sailboat.

As dawn was breaking, the lights of Miami appeared on the horizon. We all began to cheer and shout. Our fatigue vanished, as we hugged each other.

When we arrived at the pier, we staggered up on to the dock. A young man in khaki pants and a blue shirt approached us and asked who the skipper was. Bud came up and introduced himself. The young man said he was the pilot who had found us and circled above, guiding the cutter to our location. He said he was glad to see us safe.

After thanking him profusely, Bud asked him about the coordinates he gave us, since they were so far from where we

thought we were. The young pilot said, “Yes, well we have a hard time knowing where we are up there,” and smiled as he walked away. He probably didn’t have the heart to tell us just how lost we really were. It was years later we realized that those coordinates were probably correct.

The Cape Knox circled around as soon as she dropped us off at the dock. Before we left the little sailboat for good, Bud broadcast on the hailing channel: “To the Captain and crew of the Cape Knox: We are alive because of you. Thank you.” Those are joyous words, even today.

As the years went by, we continued to sail on many cruises and bareboat charters. We even owned our own sailboat on the Chesapeake. We have had many other boating adventures, the subjects of many another story.

But since that trip, our sailing has always been on inland waters like the Chesapeake Bay, Puget Sound, and the British Virgins. These are protected waters. We never dreamed of sailing offshore again, or of circumnavigation. The ocean is a very unforgiving place, especially for the ignorant and unaware.

Our *Sail Magazine* subscription lapsed, and we moved to Kansas, where we live today. Though as soon as our sons reached sailboat age, we took them on their first bareboat charter. In protected waters, and always in sight of land.

A Wikipedia entry shows the Cape Knox is a 95-foot Coast Guard cutter. Under her current name, Yoshka, she sails the waters of the Galapagos Islands, patrolling against poachers of sharks and whales. Protecting and ensuring the survival of the fittest. As well as the lucky.