

The 1988 Pt Huron Mackinac Island solo was anything but routine.

During the first day winds from the north increased in almost geometric proportions and a large percentage of the fleet sought refuge in Goderich, Ontario. By the time I arrived at Goderich in my Cheoy Lee 38, "WILLING LADY", the waves were washing over the north breakwater of the Goderich harbor. The 'mark' had blown away so we had to do a 'geographic rounding' of the mark. I actually sailed thru the harbor entrance before I discovered that I was trapped in there. A really violent jibe assisted in 'shooting' back out the entrance. We had two or three dismastings in that area that evening. I figured that the Cheoy Lee had not come apart previously so I pressed on into the night.....

Thru the night and the attendant horrors with the violence of the sea state a number of us sailed north with the sea state steadily increasing. Otis B Driftwood hung in. Mahdi (Norm Baumann) hung in, I think Jim Douglas on Ruwach II, also stayed the course.

About 11:00 AM I was off the shore of the Canadian side and I received a call from the Canadian Coast Guard (it was just a call into the blind) that there was a boat sinking and turned out to be about 10 miles SE of my position at the time. I called back to CCG and advised that I was in the area. After changing to the CCG freq. a CCG boat the Cape Hurd advised that they had attempted to respond but that they had lost their Zodiac and would have to recover that after this mission, and that they were ONLY able to make 3 Kts into the waves at the time. The CCG then asked if I would respond and I (wondering why later) reported that I had already started the return to the described area, and that I would proceed as best I could under the conditions.

Going downwind at 10+ became worrisome thinking that I had no idea when I was going to, or if I was going to find anything or anybody. So, I rounded up and dropped sail and started the Perkins. As I turned back down I saw the distressed boat and the fisherman some 1000' ahead. The boat, about a 24' fishing boat was stern down and sinking and the person was on the forepeak as she slipped down. Boater had a lifejacket on bit nothing else. I had arranged a 5/8 40' dock line as my retrieval method and had it on a winch for same. I brought the boat broadside well upwind and had planned to slide downwind under power and 'lasso' the boater who was now in the water. I had his attention and I am sure that he was able to assist in his own rescue. At about 30' or so of the 'meeting' I heard a very unusual sound astern to port. It miraculously was a guy in about a 12-14 foot aluminum boat who came alongside the 'victim' and grabbed his collar, dragged him basically over his port gunwale, gunned the engine in front of a massive wave and somehow corkscrewed the boat back toward shore.....At that point my 14' depth sounder alarm had been scaring me for some time and I immediately turned seaward. When I hit about 20' of water I got the main back up still under double reef and working jib....As you might guess, none of had roller furling at that time....I headed back toward where I thought that I had left the race into waves that were still breaking up into the main on a regular basis. I was then a totally perspired quivering mass of jelly, so-to-speak.

I made a pot of coffee and enhanced my cup with a good wrist of Brandy (ironically my girlfriend's name at the time and later my wife). With the boat relatively stable I got a call from the Canadian Coast Guard Radio wondering if they could ask a few questions. I said OK and they wondered where I had originated, why I was out there, how many on board, destination.....When I gave him the brief story he was flabbergasted to say the least, and couldn't thank me enough for deviating and wondered if there was anything that he could do to help. I asked if he would call the race committee at Mackinac Island and let them know that I had dropped out and returned to the race. As it turned out, the CCG did, indeed, call the race committee and made me out to be some kind of hero, and inquired if their call would be enough to keep me in the race. I later got a framed award from the CCG for going beyond the call of duty during that time and it was co-signed by the skipper of the Coast Guard Cutter Cape Hurd. The Cape Hurd really isn't that great a ship (about a 50' launch of some sort), but it could only make 3Kts into the waves that day.....

The rest turned out very miserable, with the wind dropping almost instantly that Sunday evening; however the sea state remained for another 8 or so hours to torture us further. Humoursly, Norm Bauman's cat food had come loose and was sloshing fore and aft causing Norm to vomit furiously through the next couple days. He WILL avow this! We were somehow able to stay within radio contact throughout. Both of our boats were taking on MUCH water, which at the time we couldn't locate. I eventually discovered that mine was coming thru the water intake for the head, filling up the bowl and happily spilling over. I have since closed the thru hull for that water intake and no more problems.

There is no end to the strange happenings that occur on the water, I have over 60,000 miles still discovering the occasional 'overlook' or plain just 'forget'.....No harm no foul.....

Onward and upward

I DID get a call from the CCG the the distressed boater had indeed been rescued and was in an ambulance and was ("sane and conscious"). I felt good about that.

Joe Vallee  
"BLUE SKYE"