

Overboard

By Carlos E. Bravo

The Ocean never looked so large and so lonely to Jeff.

He thought to himself: “Here I am, the dumbest sailor in the world, floating in this sea of nothingness.”

“Damn, that was a dumb move...” recalling his last steps on the sailboat

He screamed again “Mary! Maaaaaary!” No way could his wife hear him, he thought. She was down below with the kids preparing dinner.

He swims towards the boat but is no match to a set of sails, full with the power of the wind. He stops swimming and tries screaming again, he screams until his lungs ache. Then laughs at his predicament, a nervous laughter mixed with anger at his foolishness.

He remembered the last words they had exchanged: “Honey, can I bring you anything before I start preparing supper?” she asked

“No, I’m OK thanks... what’s for dinner?”

“Surprise”

“Hmmm”

He had set the autopilot to maintain heading at 128 degrees, his last estimate for this leg. They were now over 400 miles from the nearest land Enroute to Bermuda. The breeze blowing from the South provided a delightful beam reach and the sails looked majestic.

He had thought to himself: “This is what it’s all about”

It seemed silly now, but he remembered removing his life vest and harness only a few minutes after Mary climbed down the companionway. The seas were only about a foot;

“calm” in his book, he was getting ready to eat soon and the straps were chaffing at his sunburn. Besides, he needed to bend down and open the Lazarette to get a screwdriver from the toolbox.

He had noticed a loose screw on the compass mounting ring. It annoyed him to no end. Jeff took immaculate care of his sailboat; all the lines were neatly coiled in pre arranged patterns for easy and rapid access in case of need. His engineering background had come in handy in maintaining the boat, there was no area he had not touched and made better.

He pulled the box open and immediately saw his trusted Snap-on #2 Phillips. When he went to grab the screwdriver, he felt a sharp prick in his middle finger’s tip.

“Ouch!” he instinctively jerked his hand back

The screwdriver went flying and landed on the port side toe rail. There it lied delicately balanced between the boat’s rail and the open air.

Jeff got up and, while sucking his bleeding fingertip, he saw the culprit: an open safety pin was there in the toolbox, mixed with the drivers, wrenches and other tools.

“How many times have I told her not to mess with my tools!” he thought
He made a mental note to mention it later after dinner

Still upset, he stretched over to retrieve the driver. He could not reach it. He climbed over the cockpit coaming and bent over the railing and stretched his arm. Just as he touched the metal shaft a sudden wave hit the starboard side of the boat. Not a large wave, just enough to cause a little shudder but enough to lose the balance.

And that is how he fell.

The boat was still fairly close, the last time he looked at the speed indicator, it showed 5 knots. “That was only about 20 minutes ago, or, was it 30?”

“Let’s see, 5 knots, that’s about 450 feet a minute, 7 feet per second, not so bad...”

“How long have I been in the water?”

“Maybe 10 minutes at most...”

“That’s ... let’s see, 4,500 feet... The boat is only 4,500 feet away, yes, that’s right”

He swims towards the boat, tries a Breaststroke, the same stroke he learned in College while training to be a Lifeguard. He always found the Breaststroke ideal for long distance swimming, good speed and did not tire as much as the Front Crawl or the Butterfly.

He feels he's making good distance and after 20 minutes stops to rest a bit. A sense of impotent vulnerability took over his mind, the boat is farther now.

"I must not panic."

"Mary is sure to realize sooner or later that I am no longer at the wheel" He thought to himself.

Would she remember the proper MOB procedures? He wondered when was the last time they practiced this safety maneuver, a virtual requirement of any sailor going offshore.

The man-overboard rescue procedure was basically a methodology to efficiently record and track positions and headings once a crewmember falls in the water. It starts when a member of the crew notices someone missing and sounds off the alarm to all hands. The crew records the boat's position and immediately turns the boat around 180 degrees. All hands are called on deck to act as look outs.

Jeff remembers the first time he heard the term. It was at a Coast Guard safety class that he took at the request of his parents. He was only 11 but by then he was smitten by the sailing bug. His father had finally given in and bought him a small sailing dinghy. It was a 13-foot laser, a popular and easy to handle boat that is robust and simple to rig and sail while having performance characteristics matching those of more-complex boats. It was a perfect platform to learn the basics of sailing.

Over the years he had owned a succession of sailboats. His Island Packet, the last one, bought soon after deciding to sell his business and promising Mary and the kids to take a long overdue ocean trip to the Mediterranean. No jets, no cruise ship, just the family together and the power of the wind. "It should be a family adventure to be remembered the rest of our lives," he convincingly pitched the idea to his wife. They were still young and healthy; the kids would gain a new set of experiences that would surely enrich their lives. The preparations for their magic voyage had taken just over a year and here they were, experiencing it real life.

"Too real," he jokingly thought.

His prized sailing yacht was a true "Blue Water Cruiser", a term reserved to those sturdy ocean-going vessels capable of making a safe long range crossing. With flawless joinery, the interior woodwork was a work of art. It boasted a rich teak finish glowing with layers of hand-rubbed satin varnish. The yacht was fitted with all the modern conveniences such as power generator, air conditioning and even a microwave oven, yet retained a sense of nautical tradition. He had painstakingly finished the exterior bright work to a glistening shine. That it was his work and not the one of hired hands was a source of pride to Jeff

and his family. His almost fanatical obstinacy and attention to detail showed in every corner you looked.

The water now feels a little cool. He's tired of swimming towards the boat, a futile battle yet "what else is he supposed to do?" he thinks. He decides to wade and rest a bit. He's tired. It hurts to wade, it hurts to float. "This sure is a lot of work", he thinks to himself.

The boat looks smaller in the distance, almost as if suspended on top of the ocean, its slow movement now imperceptible. The sails are full and he thinks, "Well, it sure looks pretty"

"Mary or one of the kids will soon come to the cockpit and find out I'm in the water" he thought.

He rehearsed in his mind what she would do. As he had taught her: "press the MOB button here in the GPS display. This will activate the man-overboard routine and the system will give you a heading to steer. Turn the boat to that heading and get everyone to look out"

"See here, this X marks the spot when you first find out someone's in the water"

"How long has it been?" "...40 minutes?"

"How long does it take to prepare a simple dinner? For Christ's sake!"

"Hurry, please"

He's tired, tries to float "just relax" he tells himself

"Lay back, let the water lift you", he remembers his father telling him as a boy. He dozes off; a gulp of salty water brusquely awakes him.

"That tastes awful" his nose burning by the water blown out

"MAAAARY! CAN YOU HEEEAR ME?" he screams knowing she can't hear

He can't see the boat anymore. He feels fear taking a grip; he's very alone now. Seeing the boat somehow gave him a sense of connection with people. Now with the boat no longer in sight he's truly alone in this infinite expanse of water.

"I must not panic"

"She's probably looking for me; just made the wrong turn, maybe she forgot to adjust the correct heading on the MOB procedure. Soon she'll realize which direction I am at"

"What is so hard? The boat's heading 128; 180 degrees from that is 308 degrees, simple."

"Just turn the damned boat around"

"Are there sharks here?"

He hasn't seen a single fish, just water and sky, now he realizes there must be millions of sea creatures around him, would any of them want to eat him?

"How deep is it?"

He remembers from the chart, it must be at least 2,500 feet "wow, that's deep"

"That's half a mile!"

He feels so small and vulnerable, exposed; as if a gigantic unseen force wanted to swallow him and he can do nothing about it yet he wants to resist, to fight this test of endurance that life has given him. "This just really sucks" he mumbles.

His mind wanders to the time he and Mary took the kids to Magic Kingdom in Orlando. Their favorite ride had been "Pirates of the Caribbean". The kids talked about it for months after. They imagined going on adventures in far away lands and discovering lost treasures and mysteries of the past. Jeff told them countless stories of travel adventures that fueled their sense of wonder and which the children keenly listened to. He remembers the song they all sang while leaving port, and sings:

"Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me.
We pillage, we plunder, we rifle, and loot,"

"Drink up, me 'earties, yo ho.
We kidnap and ravage and don't give a hoot,
Drink up me 'earties, yo ho. "

"Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me."

The kids were watching him intently, joining in the singing, excited at the adventure ahead of them. Jeff remembers looking at them proudly and with his heart wanting to jump out of happiness. He was glad he could provide this adventure for them. He had

long ago vowed to provide his children with rich experiences and give them a taste of what life has to offer. “To ensure their education was well rounded” was always his argument.

Mary was below unpacking, she showed her head through the companionway “You pirates, get ready for some burgers”.

That seemed like a long time ago “When was it?” he asked
“Only four days, a lifetime ago!”

“Damn, this water’s cold” His arms are burning from the constant wading, he tries to lower the hands and rest them while kicking to keep himself afloat.

He sees something in the distance

“A sail!”
“She’s coming to get me! About time!”

He sees the sail jump out of the water and then disappear
“A fucking fish”

He’s tired, wants to sleep “must not fall asleep, I have to keep wading”

Jeff wonders what’s the world’s record for wading in water... “24 hours?” he does not remember. Twenty four hours seems like along time. He’s been in the water perhaps four hours? maybe five. He’s tired, cold, hungry and angry. “Damn, what’s taking her so long?”

“Maybe I can relax a little, sink and then swim back up”
“I need to rest just a little bit”

His lungs burn “why do they burn?” he wonders, in a light-headed stupor
His mind wanders to the time they left Newport. The whole family, happy, laughing, loading supplies on the boat. The kids are teasing each other, one cries: “mom!” Mary tells them to go below and watch a video, it’s staring to rain and they have to get everything loaded up.

He feels hot, “why am I holding my breath?”
“Oh, it’s a game...” as he used to play. He’s now with his young brother, playing who can hold his breath the longest. He used to hold it for a minute and 45 seconds, his personal record.

“Why are my ears hurting?”

“I can’t hear a thing…”

“The water’s so cold yet it feels good now, it’s cooling my burning head”

He needs to breathe, his body is begging, burning with the desire of a large breath of fresh air.

He can breathe, he’s just dreaming. Oh, so sweet, he smells the sea, inhales

Takes a big gulp, coughs under water, startled.

He swallows, salty brine burning his esophagus, he feels it going down to his stomach
“nasty stuff” he complains

Lungs burning, eyes burning, ears feel like something is compressing them, in a press
He vomits

He feels better now, he’s back on the boat with Mary and the kids, he’s breathing the fresh sea air, arms stretched on deck, the kids laughing, his wife smiling. It was all just a dream.

Jeff closes his eyes for the last time

EPILOGUE

MILLIONAIRE SOFTWARE EXECUTIVE LOST AT SEA

Hamilton, Bermuda (Associated Press)

Jeff Turne, the High Tech entrepreneur that created a software empire out of a personal hobby has been lost at sea.

Turne had been sailing solo in his 45-foot Island Packet “Software Dreams”. He departed Newport on August 7th Enroute to Bermuda, the first leg of a cruise to Europe and the Mediterranean. Turne was due to arrive at the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club in Hamilton by the 13th of August. His contacts at the Yacht Club notified the Coast Guard when they failed to establish communication. The weather had been mild and not expected to have been a factor.

The Coast guard found Turne’s sailboat under full sail with the autopilot engaged. The boat was empty and Turne is presumed to have fallen accidentally.

Turne’s life, a veritable “rags to riches” story took a tragic turn soon after selling his company to Microsoft for \$800 million last year. He lost his wife and two children in a freak automobile accident while on vacation in Hawaii. After the accident, Turne became reclusive and had stayed away from public life. Even his personal life for the past year has been a mystery to his close friends. Chris Tanner, his childhood friend and former business partner said that he was in shock over the news and that he had not seen Turne since soon after his family’s accident. Tanner said that the Turnes had made a plan to sail around the world but he thought that the plans had been scrapped by his friend after losing his family.

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