

It Won't Be That Bad

by Ron Thronson

The wind-swept mist swirled around our boat as we began to untie the lines that held us to the dock at the Matt-A-Mar Marina, located on the north fork of Long Island. The diesel engines rumbled patiently in the engine room of our forty-two foot cruiser.

Valhalla is a sturdy cruising yacht with an elevated aft deck that houses a large owners' stateroom, thus the designation sundeck-trawler. Inside, the all teak wood interior was very comfortable with two staterooms, a complete galley and a spacious salon.

Marian and I had left our homeport of Long Branch, New Jersey a week earlier with no particular destination other than to enjoy a leisurely cruise around Long Island Sound. We had anchored in some of the many coves and harbors some nights, and at other times had tied up at marinas so we could taste the flavor of the seaside villages.

We had been at this place for three days and had pretty much exhausted the tourist activities such as wineries, restaurants, and antique shops, and were anxious to get to Westbrook, Connecticut where we had arranged to meet friends. The weather forecast had caused us some concern. NOAA weather reported, "Winds out of the east gusting to 25 nautical miles per hour and seas of four feet in height." Not that bad and certainly within the capabilities of *Valhalla*. She is equipped with radar and electronic chart plotting and even in misting rain or fog, could reach our destination safely, although it could be a bit of a rough ride. Slowly, *Valhalla* ghosted out from the protection of the river and into the bay that opens to Long Island Sound.

"This wind is more than twenty-five knots," Marian said, her voice edged with anxiety. "And we are not even out in the open water yet." It was true; the wind was whistling through the radar arch and the plastic windows of the conning bridge were being whipped and back and forth by the gusts. "Should we turn back?"

I peered ahead as though trying to see through the low thick clouds and rain that hid the coast of Connecticut from my view. "Turn on the weather channel," I said to Marian. "Maybe they have updated it."

"Wind out of the east, gusting to twenty-five nautical miles per hour, with seas four feet in height," the voice still reported.

"What do you think, Ron?" she asked in a voice showing the strain that she felt. "It might be too dangerous to turn back once we are out of the shelter of the land." She spoke from experience for this was not our first rough-weather trip. It was true. Large waves could tip the boat over when struck from the side.

I peered ahead as though trying to see through the low thick clouds and rain that hid the coast of Connecticut from my view.

I continued to peer into the mist, silently trying to see what the conditions were out in the sound, but it was no use. Turning back was not an easy decision. Besides, we had told Gayle and Dave that we would meet up with them this afternoon.

"It's your call, Ron."

"It won't be that bad," I replied. Then after a pause, "*Valhalla* can make it with no problem." We donned our life jackets and prepared for the rough ride.

When *Valhalla* cleared the spit of land that had protected us from the open sea, we were committed to continue because the wave heights had grown into seven-foot rollers that were being hurled at us. Turning around was not a good option.

The eastern part of Long Island Sound empties into the Atlantic Ocean, and the area is subject to swift currents. Also, high winds blow in from the open sea. The wind and tide interact with each other in different ways, depending of the direction that they are traveling. In this case wind was coming from the east and the tide was flowing from the west, which causes the waves to pile up to greater heights. The wind then blows the top off them causing a great deal of sea spray, which reduces visibility.

Marian had taken her seat alongside the

chart plotter-radar so she could hold on to the hand rail and watch our progress on the screen to make sure that no other vessels were on a collision course with us.

The radio was still silent and we knew that we were alone out there. As scary as it seemed, we still were confident that we would make our destination safely. We have been boating together for many years and are a well-functioning team with confidence in each other's abilities.

"I wonder what is going on down below," she said, knowing that she had secured everything before getting underway as she always did. The refrigerator door had been bolted shut so the contents would not spill out when the bow lifted up over large waves.

"We will find out when we get to Westbrook," I replied while hanging onto the wheel as an unseen wave struck and lay the boat over at about a forty-five degree angle. "Hang on. I didn't see that one coming," I laughed.

"Coast Guard, Coast Guard," the radio suddenly came to life, "This is the *Wanderer*; please come in." We looked at each other. "I guess that we are not the only ones out here after all," I observed. The voice on the radio sounded like a man who was in a state of panic.

"This is the Coast Guard. Come in."

"This is the *Wanderer*. I'm taking on water and the engines have quit running."

"What is your location and description of your boat?"

"We are a forty-four foot Trojan, 1972 year and I don't know our location."

"How many people are on board?"

"Five of us."

"Are you all wearing life-jackets?"

"No, sir."

"Put them on immediately."

"Yes, sir."

"*Wanderer*, can you give us your location—what is your lat-lon?"

"No, sir. I don't have any navigation gear."

I shook my head, "These people should not be out here. He has put five people in danger with an

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old boat that probably is in poor condition.”

“Wanderer, this is the Coast Guard. Tell me all you can about your location. What port did you come from?”

“We came out of New Haven harbor about an hour ago.”

“Wanderer, we will dispatch a helicopter to search for you. If you hear us, shoot a flare so we can find you. Do you read me?”

“I don't have any flares on board.”

“Wanderer, it is illegal to operate a boat without safety equipment.”

“I didn't know that. I just bought the boat.”

“Wanderer, we will do our best. Coast Guard out.”

“Hang on,” I shouted. “Here comes another one.” Just then another roller slammed into the Valhalla pitching it severely over. I spun the wheel to bring the bow into the oncoming series of waves, sending spray over the top of the radar arch. I had been listening to the plight of the *Wanderer* and my attention to my own situation had lapsed.

The boater's code requires that all boats render assistance to a boat that is in peril. We looked at each other, the same thought in mind, but quickly realized that we were too far away from the *Wanderer*; it would take us many hours to get to them and by then the Coast Guard would have taken care of them.

“Wanderer, this is the Coast Guard calling. Please come in”.

“This is the *Wanderer*.”

“We have you in sight and have a boat on the way. What is your condition at this time?”

“Water is over the floorboards and rising.” There was a pause, but the man continued to hold the transmit open. Then in a weak exhausted voice, “Please hurry!”

“Wanderer, we will be alongside you in about fifteen minutes. Do you read?”

“Yes,” he answered. Then a woman's voice in the background, “I told you — — —”

“I'm not having any fun,” Marian said tensely.

I smiled. We have been in bad weather before and I knew this was her way of dealing with her fear. “Look at the screen. We are making progress.”

“Not very much. We are right in the middle now and not moving very fast toward Connecticut.”

The sound of the steady, reassuring thrum of the engines that came from the stern was reassuring to me. I had been a diesel mechanic when I was younger and knew that they were in top condition. I had done all of the maintenance work myself.

After another hour of shrieking wind, heavy downpours and crashing into the oncoming rollers; the electronic chart showed good progress toward the Connecticut shore.

“Wanderer, this is the Coast Guard. Come in.”

“This is the *Wanderer*.”

“We have you in sight and are ready to take you in tow. Please switch to channel 22 on your radio

for instructions.” This was another case where a man's lack of knowledge had put his family and the Coast Guard at risk.

I saw on the chart that we would soon be coming into in the lee of the land.

“It will be much easier in a while.”

“I'm getting sore arms from holding on,” Marian replied. Then as though trying to see through the deck to the stateroom below, “I'll bet it is a mess down there.”

It would be dangerous to try to go down below on the boat in these pitching seas. A person could be thrown off the boat, so Marian continued to cling to the handrail.

Very gradually, the sun began to brighten through the mist, and the waves become smaller and struck with less power. “Is that the outline of the coast I see?” Marian asked as she peered through the mist to the north. “I think I can make out a buoy on our port bow. Do you see it?”

I looked at the chart, then the radar and nodded. “That will be Red #6, off Duck Island. We made it!”

Valhalla followed the channel marker buoys into the port of Westbrook.

“Pilot Point Marina, this is the *Valhalla*. Do you have a slip for us?”

“*Valhalla*, come to the gas dock and we will direct you to your slip.”

“Roger, Pilot Point, we have you in sight. *Valhalla* out. Call Gayle and tell them we are here and it's time for happy hour!”

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