

# NORFOLK TO LITTLE RIVER INLET, SC...A TRIP DOWN THE ICW FROM CANADA TO FLORIDA - PART III

by Gordon Butler

Leaving the Navy yards, the overwhelming military presence in Norfolk and the "roads" throughout the harbor, one can't be anything but proud of the way these young people do their jobs, and they play football the way they do their jobs: "balls to the wall." (I refer here, of course, to the position of



*Elizabeth River Rail Bridge*

the throttle handles toward the bulkhead.) We found ourselves surrounded by the Navy – and the odd cruise ship in to drydock for hauling or painting. It's a very impressive sight as we make our way south from Portsmouth to the Elizabeth River. The bridges, rail and road, are in profusion here, and *Joy IV* is called upon to time the bridges in southern Virginia and be mindful of the bridge openings and closings.

Then there's Great Bridge and the lock that makes it official: we're in the Federal Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, under the control of the United States Army Corps of Engineers – not an altogether harmful or dicey place to be. "Notices to Mariners" is officially published weekly, and those notices are maintained by the Corps and the United States Coast Guard. You're in good hands.



*Great Bridge*

The narrow waterway continues south in the Elizabeth River until the signs ask if you want to take an unfamiliar route – the one through Dismal Swamp. We eschewed that route, although it's always something I've wanted to try. We decided to err on caution's side and continue on the ICW route since that takes us across Albemarle Sound and through the shallows where the Wright Brothers transformed the never-before-seen apparition they had built in their Ohio bicycle shop into the thing that supported them on man's first flight. Overnighting at Midway in the Elizabeth River, we stayed for the steaks and cheap fuel at Coinjock, where a huge barge operated by the Corps of Engineers negotiated its way through the darkness to wake us up with its engines. The next day we crossed way out to sea in Pamlico Sound and then went inland into the Alligator-Pungo River and North Carolina. Through another cut we made it to Beaufort - the northern one - and the complex system of rivers and inlets that leads to Cape Fear.

It should be noted here that there are two Beauforts: one in North Carolina and the second one, the southern one, just north of Savannah, Georgia. They're pronounced differently, too. Beaufort, NC is pronounced "BO-fert" by the locals, and Beaufort, SC is "BEW-fert." If you want to sound like a regular on the ICW, you have to know the difference.

The dogs were quiet, apparently as inter-

ested as we were in sightseeing. Sammy had assumed the same relative posture as Joe – prone, quiet, interested but sufficiently incurious to keep everything pleasant for the trip. One thing that interested me at least, if not everyone on the crew, was the appearance of Knit Wits, the first Hatteras Yacht. She'd been lovingly restored by the factory and fished in tournaments up and down the east coast. Pretty boat. The story has it that when Knit Wits was ready to be shipped, the men who built her had to come up with a shipping weight for the railroad. Willis Slane, the original Hatteras founder, couldn't think of any other way to weigh her than suspend her above a hydraulic tube jack placed on a scale on the floor of the plant! They built 'em tough back then!

We passed the pretty little marina later where Hatteras yachts are prepped for delivery and a place where delivery captains pick up their owners' new boats to take them north or south to where they'll be enjoyed by their families. And incidentally, I made my homage to Willis Slane's shrine and his memory as a group of men meticulously commissioned a gleaming 60-footer for its new home somewhere in the world.

And the journey continued ... As adventures go, this one was just a journey. We'd stop every night, fill up with fuel and water, walk the dogs and eat out at a good restaurant in whatever town we visited, but we certainly didn't pay too much attention to the time – of the month or the day. Our next stop was Wrightsville Beach, where we encountered yet another one of the "vintage" automobiles that were kept for the exclusive use of boaters. Face it. Only a mechanically adept boater would dare to use some of these vehicles! But there was a grocery store within a short drive's distance into Wilmington. "Oh! Y'all must be from the marina," they'd say, knowing us by the borrowed car we drove.

Sammy and Joe would get used to a particular dog-walking area, and then it'd be time to strike out southward again. They kept to their body clocks, and they'd do their business at the appointed times each day – morning before leaving and in the afternoon before we'd settle the

boat for the night.

At about this time – just as we approached the state line between North and South Carolina, inlets became obstacle courses offering skinnier and skinner water, and the trip was about as idyllic as it could be, given the previous experience in Cape May, that things got a little dicier. As we'd approach the ICW side of such an inlet, tides were ebbing and flowing, and currents would be proportionately stronger. *Joy IV* would be buffeted and jounced like a subway commuter at rush hour, and given her turn of speed – with lots of power but not a great deal of speed – we'd suffer the commensurate consequences.

Now, where I come from, when you take a boat of some size and put her on a rocky bottom, the consequences are severe. Usually there's a major haul-out and lift, a subsequent call to your insurance company, and the negotiations start over the repairs.

OK. Those are the consequent sad circumstances and thoughts running through my head as *Joy IV*, with her newly repaired blisters, paint, shiny running gear, crossed over what looked like a squall line in Shallotte Inlet in North Carolina and took us, surely and determinedly, aground!

Ohmigod! Well, sure enough, she's spinning on her keel, I thought. The port engine was free, but I couldn't be sure about the starboard one, and I wasn't going to add insult to injury and actually drive her!

I got in the water over the transom and came right up against bottom on the port side, but the sand and shell bottom fell away on the starboard side, sure enough! So, I could drive her with one side, but only because her deep, protective keel was in the sand at the center. I didn't want to chance any damage on the port side. I clambered back aboard and shifted the starboard reverse gear (the one that had been repaired by the highway robber in Cape May) and poured on the coal – to use a Casey Jones metaphor. She spun, right and left, and churned up the bottom mightily, but that's all she'd do. Forward, spin to the left. Aft, spin to the right with a little less alacrity, but she wouldn't move off that sandbar!

I called Towboat US, and their one-way charge was going to be monstrous! Then, they wanted to tow me back to Norfolk! Aaaargh! What to do?

It always seems that when you're in the most trouble, something occurs to make the decision easier, and so it happened at that moment. Small center-console go-fasts had come by and observed that the channel markers and day-beacons were in the right place but that the inlet had shifted in the previous twenty-four hours. The markers didn't correspond with the bottom's contours. *Joy IV* was the goat! Just then, a little 16-



*Wrightsville Beach, NC*

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footer approached with two young guys in it. It was all decked out in the garish cover of go-fast boats, and it had an outboard appropriate to the speed and size of the boat. The two hollered at us.

“Looks lak y’all got some trouble!”

I responded appropriately.

“We got a little yard with a lift, but it’s back a couple o’ mals. Yuh wanna see ‘fah kin getcha off?”

“Sure!”

So the young man threw us a piece of line. We made it fast on a bow cleat, the 16-footer took up the slack in the line, and between Joy IV’s mighty port engine and the 80-horsepower outboard on the go-fast, the young man pulled us off the sandbar! Now came the problem of lifting her and checking out the expensive and time-consuming bottom work that had been completed in Canada.

One of the young men was Ronnie Tripp. Remember that name! He is one of the fairest, most knowledgeable mechanics I’ve ever met, and he exists in a small boatyard that’s used mostly by the fishermen and shrimpers who ply the area. His yard is accessible at high tide only, when the 3-plus knot current is slackest, and the entrance – a direct shot across the river from the



Little River Inlet, SC

direction you travel – is a dicey one, to say the least! He asked us to anchor outside his entrance while the tide rose.

Up, a few scratches removed from Joy IV’s bottom, a little paint, applied personally, and Ronnie Tripp couldn’t find enough charges to add up to our deductible! Meanwhile, Ronnie’s “daddy” allowed as to how the “dawgs” should stay aboard through the inspection and repair process because the Tripp family had a passel of “pack dawgs fer huntin’,” and he “didn’t want no dawg fayts” to disrupt things.

So Sammy and Joe stayed aboard, whimpering uncomfortable noises, scenting that the “pack dawgs” were there, but not seeing them. Moreover, they’d had no bathroom facilities since the morning and the grounding. Things must

have been pretty desperate!

We splashed into the water, everything started properly, engine cooling water emerged from the exhausts and we started out again – this time in the dark! We swept past Shalotte Inlet and the site of our grounding to Little River Inlet, looking for marina facilities where we could eat and spend the night. It was sparse. The river meanders a bit through there, and eventually we found a commercial dock where we could stay. The current was moving at right angles to the entrance again, but we made it in, managing to ding a stanchion in the steel transom of a tour boat that was tied alongside. And that night saw an impromptu party at the marina store and shrimp restaurant where we couldn’t buy a drink or the food!

Welcome to South Carolina! The stanchion could be repaired and the cooling water lines cleaned out the next day. Delightful evening! Sammy and Joe left their marks all over the town, and then we ate, drank and danced for as long as we could stand, which wasn’t very long. We collapsed onto the bed and slept as if we’d been drugged.

*Next month:* The Conclusion: South Carolina, repairs in Myrtle Beach, Georgia and the onset of shingles – Herpes Zoster - in Jacksonville. We arrive in Florida. Where’s the dockmaster?

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