

Rough-Water Boating

by Capt. John P. Thompson

By coincidence, happenstance, or just plain random printing schedules, it seems that a number of the monthly boating magazines, including *Long Island Boating World*, have recently published articles about rough-water boating. Reading those stories made me think back to a recent boating trip which involved a series of unanticipated events and, fortunately for everyone, a happy ending.

Following a relatively smooth and uneventful three-hour cruise to Jamestown and Newport from our home in Westbrook, CT on the preceding Thursday morning and a very enjoyable three day stay, my crew (my first mate aka my wife and two longtime friends, Peter and Gayle) and I prepared to depart Conanicut Marina (pictured below) on Sunday morning for our 70-mile/three-hour trip back to our home port, Pilots Point.

As careful boaters, we had monitored the NOAA weather forecasts and were obviously pleased to hear that we were going to get clear blue skies, light 4- to 6-knot breezes from the south with seas running two to three feet in the open waters of Rhode Island and Block Island Sounds, and from Brenton Point west to Watch Hill and Fishers Island, all-in-all, a very favorable boating forecast for our cruise home and a pleasant way to end a nice weekend.

After topping off *CANDY KANE*'s fuel tank at Conanicut's fuel dock, we cast off and headed east toward Rose Island before turning SSW and into the open and less protected waters of Narragansett Bay. While the skies were indeed clear as forecasted, the wind from the south had already picked up to eight or twelve knots, with some 18-knot gusts sending 2- to 4-footers directly at our bow. When we were only 20 minutes or so into our return trip, we realized that the ride back to Westbrook was going to be a little bumpier than originally hoped for.

Continuing our southerly course, we passed Brenton Point to our port and Beaver Tail Light to our starboard and were soon encountering 3- to 5-foot windblown seas. At this point in the trip, we basically had two choices: return to Conanicut and wait for more favorable sea conditions or simply strap ourselves in and continue the trip home. While sea conditions were certainly less than ideal, the boat was running well, visibility was nearly unrestricted, we were well rested and, the bouncing aside, we were all committed to continuing the trip.

As we rounded Point Judith, we decided, without much debate, to take a short breather from the pounding waves, which had continued to grow in size and were now in the 4- to 6-foot range, with

some 8-footers thrown in, and go into the aptly named Harbor of Refuge. While conditions inside the harbor were substantially better, due in no small part to the three massive rock windbreakers, we were still being buffeted by confused 2- to 3-foot seas. Anchoring in those conditions to wait out weather didn't seem to make a lot of sense.

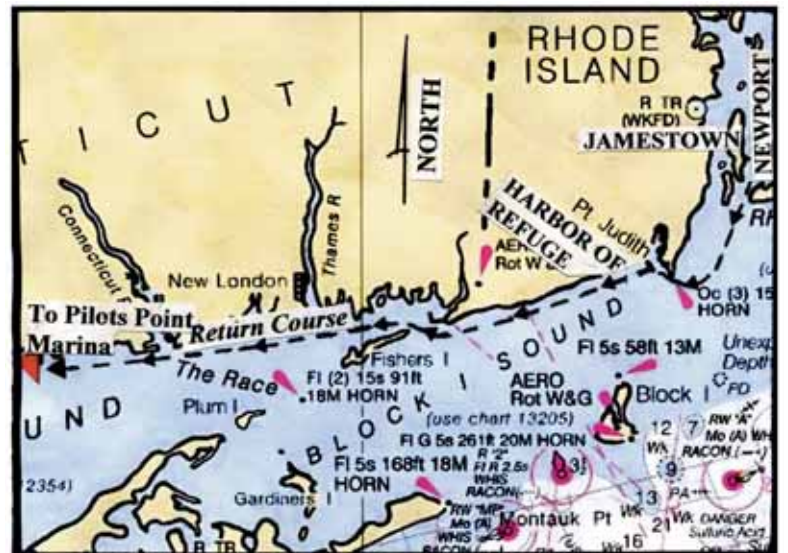
Recognizing that we still had the better part of two hours ahead of us, we discussed heading up into Point Judith Pond to tie up at a friend's dock on Long Pond in Wakefield and wait for the weather and sea conditions to improve. Believing that the conditions would improve as we continued west and perhaps getting some protection from Long Island (to the south), we jointly agreed to press on.

About 10 minutes after leaving the Harbor of Refuge, I was hit with a sudden, severe and debilitating case of seasickness. While every boater has at one time or another experienced varying degrees of seasickness and even though most of us "old salts" don't want to admit it, I can't recall ever being so suddenly and seriously sickened. Without unnecessarily traumatizing the reader with graphic details, suffice it to say that I gave new meaning to the phrase "hanging over the side." Fortunately for all of us, my friend Peter was a competent seaman and captain, even though most of his experience was gained on sailboats.

Forced from the helm to the stern, I was, for all intents and purposes, no help to Peter, who had to take over the helm. His wife, Gayle, was on the bridge watching for other boat traffic. My wife joined me in the stern, simply to ensure that I didn't fall overboard in the still-rough waters.

The remaining four hours to the channel into Pilots Point was not one of our more enjoyable boating experiences. The seas never really subsided, even on the lee side of Fishers Island, where we were still encountering good 4-foot waves. Finally, once inside the channel and the Patchogue River and away from the pounding seas, I regained my sea legs (and stomach) and was able to take over from Peter and safely back the boat into our slip.

Back safely at the dock, I thanked Peter and Gayle for stepping in to assist their fallen captain.



After a five-hour-plus trip home, I sent my crew on its way and went about the unpleasant, but absolutely essential task of cleaning the boat.

While seasickness can hit anyone, including an old salt like me, I learned some valuable lessons about rough-water boating. First, if the sea conditions are really bad (or forecasted to be bad) and the NOAA forecast doesn't call for significantly improved conditions, simply don't leave the dock. I was lucky; I had a friend that could take over and get us home safely. What would have happened if it were only my wife and me? Would she have been able to take over? Would she have known what to do, especially with my being out of commission?

Second, as soon as we encountered the worsening sea conditions, we should have closed up all the canvas to minimize water intrusion and, perhaps more importantly, donned our life jackets. As unattractive and uncomfortable as they can be, I'm just not sure what we would have done if someone (including me) had actually gone into the water in such rough seas. Thankfully that didn't happen and other than my flip-flopping stomach, we all got home safe and sound.

And third, whether you're boating alone or with others, when sea conditions turn bad, don't wait, seek refuge as quickly as possible and stay until conditions improve. Use your VHF radio or cell phone and call your marina, some friends or family and let them know that you're O.K. and that you're waiting for the weather and sea conditions to improve. Don't be foolhardy with your vessel or your crew.



Conanicut Marina