

It Was the Best of Times; It Was the Worst of Times

by Capt. John P. Thompson

With all due respect to the well known 19th century author Charles Dickens and his opening lines of *Tale of Two Cities*, the words above rang all too true to me this past summer. My 2009 boating season, which was already suffering from the lack of a real spring, followed by weekend after weekend of cool and rainy weather, experienced a further major disruption when my house caught fire in the early morning hours of Friday, July 31.

I can honestly say that this was truly a traumatic and life-altering experience and one that I would not wish on anyone else. During those early morning hours, as four family members and I stood across the street watching the flames from our house light the dark, early morning, the fire chief told us that this situation (our watching the fire) was honestly the best case scenario since another 30 to 60 seconds in the house could have produced a much different and significantly less desirable outcome. His message was clear and he didn't need to elaborate.

I write this story not to lament the fire, loss of our house and most of our worldly possessions, or even the disruption of our daily lives, but rather to share what I learned about the unquantifiable value of having a boat and the almost magical calming influence afforded by the ocean, albeit even temporary.

After quickly settling into a local long-stay hotel on Friday morning after the fire was put out, we made several quick shopping trips to purchase some necessities such as underwear, toiletries, shorts and tees. Following several follow-up meetings with the fire department and the fire marshal to discuss probable cause and point of origin of the fire, the insurance adjusters and a disheartening walk-thru of our former home to actually see the devastation, it was a fairly easy decision that we really needed to get away from everything and go down to our boat.

So, bright and early Saturday morning, under clear skies and moderating temperatures and after loading up our few remaining possessions, we headed down to Pilot's Point in Westbrook, where our 30-foot Maxum, *CANDY KANE*, is docked.

We shared our tale of woe with our extended boating family and needless to say, everyone shared our feelings that we were indeed lucky and had a lot to be thankful for. No matter how many times we told the story about the fire, we kept coming back to the undeniable truth that everyone, including our three dogs, was safe...homeless, but safe. It was amazing that people we didn't even know stopped to express their best wishes and leave offers of help.

Our 30-footer doesn't provide an abundance of storage space, but since we spend most weekends on-board, we had a reasonable supply of bathing suits, spare underwear, clean shorts and shirts, so we were set for the weekend. Since the marine forecast called for "developing seas" later in the day (all too representative of this past summer), we elected to do some regularly scheduled cleaning, with ample time set aside for a swim at the pool and a walk along the beach. After a very relaxing day at the marina, we joined some fellow boaters for a cook-out at their home and some comforting conversation.

Typical of the summer of 2009, Sunday morning dawned cloudy and relatively cool for early August with a threat of rain later in the day. At church we thanked God for keeping us all safe and, with a myriad of problems waiting for us when we returned to the real world, spent the remainder of the day relaxing and, to the extent

possible, trying to push aside the issues that we were going to have to face when we left the relaxing environment of the marina.

The following week flew by in a whirlwind of post-fire questions, long-term temporary housing needs and the inescapable and continuing need for more clean clothes. My first mate (aka my wife) took command of dealing with the insurance company and the seemingly endless issues that had to be dealt with such as mail and newspaper delivery, phone service, public utilities, more clean clothes and a host of other "things" that you would never even think about unless the situation so dictated.

As a sidebar to this fire story, on the Monday morning after the fire, a man having breakfast at the next table in the lounge area of the hotel where we were staying leaned over and asked if I worked for Pilot's Point since I was wearing their tee shirt. I explained that I kept my boat there. I learned that he and his wife were staying at the hotel while their sailboat was being repaired at Pilot's Point following an on-board electrical fire while anchored off Fishers Island. I explained that we were at the hotel due to our house fire.

We met that week for breakfast and dinner each day to update each other on events. During the week our boating friendship grew. Since their departure, we have kept in touch via e-mail, and they shared with us regular updates on their continuing cruise to more temperate climes. Thus, while I would have preferred not to experience the house fire, I would never have met John and Pat as they sailed their boat, *Solitude*, to distant ports-of-call. This meeting and subsequent friendship was a by-product of separate but similar adversities.

During the next several weeks we spend a lot of time pursuing post-fire-related activities such as developing an inventory of items lost in the fire and working with our contractor to begin the process of estimating the demolition and rebuilding costs, along with a myriad of unforeseen activities. During that time, no matter how badly the week went, we somehow managed to get to our boat every Friday afternoon or evening for our "normal" on-board weekend, until it was finally hauled out on the Monday following Columbus Day weekend.

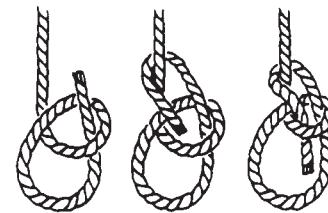
During those valuable weekends we were able to decompress, relax, and if only for a day or two, put the fire behind us and achieve some level of normalcy – brought about by being on our boat. We even managed a weekend cruise up the Connecticut River to Brewer's Dauntless Marina in Essex, along with the mandatory dinner at the "Gris" and several day trips along the north shore of Long Island Sound. In keeping with the overall weather pattern of the spring and summer, several other boating trips were cancelled due to forecasts for or actual bad weather.

With our boat now sitting under a canvas tarp in Pilot Point's parking lot, we need to adapt yet again to the upcoming long winter that lies ahead. As I pen these concluding thoughts, without any argument we relearned the importance of family and its safety and the fact that possessions are only possessions – things that can and will be replaced as we rebuild our home.

The diversion and relaxation that we found in our boat went well beyond the hours spent on a psychiatrist's couch would have achieved. Clearly, we are a lucky family. We made it through a truly traumatic experience and we're all much better for it. So, as Charles Dickens opened a *Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

KNOTS TO KNOW

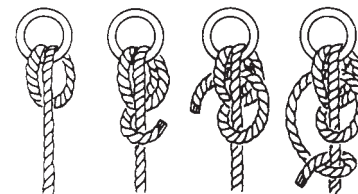
BOWLINE



To tie:

1. Make overhand loop with the end held toward you, then pass end through loop.
2. Now pass end up behind the standing part, then down through loop again.
3. Draw up tight.

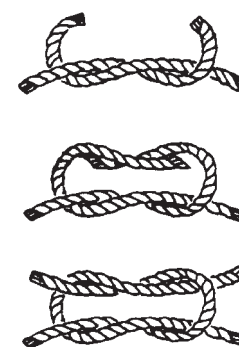
ANCHOR BEND



To tie:

1. Pass two loops through ring.
2. Place free end around standing line.
3. Place free end through loops.
4. Complete by making half hitch.

SQUARE KNOT



To tie:

1. Pass left end over and under right end. Curve what is now the left end toward the right. Cross what is now the right end over and under the left.
2. Draw up tight.