



Left to right: John Lowe, Gary Doodlesack (on board during return trip only), Luther Abel (captain) and Gerry Miller.

Rescue at Sea

by Luther C. Abel, N
Minute Man (MA) Squadron

Minute Man (MA) Squadron set an ambitious site for its annual rendezvous this year: Rogue Island, Maine — a remote and beautiful place only a few miles from the Canadian border. Six yachts from the squadron rose to the challenge and journeyed round trip distances of 300 to 700 miles to meet at Rogue and enjoy the beauties of "down East." This would be adventurous enough for most, but one boat would find something additional in store.

My CS36 sloop *Indulgence*, with Lt John Lowe, P, and Gerry Miller, P, as crew, departed the Jubilee Yacht Club, Beverly at 1200 Wednesday, 24 July. We cleared the sea buoy off Cape Ann at 1430 and set course 085 magnetic for Mantinicus Rock, 103 miles away.

It was a perfect sailing day — sunny, yet cool with unlimited visibility. Fifteen knots of southerly wind gave us a booming seven-plus knot beam reach. A pod of dolphins raced with us for awhile. Spouts from blowing whales (none close, fortunately) surrounded us. Clear skies and a first quarter moon gave me a

chance to practice my newly-minted Navigator skills at sea, as well as to give Gerry and John a crack at handling a sextant.

Gerry's superb boeuf bourguignon, washed down by a bit of fine Rioja, was shared amidst a magnificent, fiery sunset. At 2130 the dishes were washed, and I began breaking us down into watches (two hours on, two on-call, two off) and giving standing orders for the night (clipped-on safety harness to be worn at all times, no leaving the cockpit without waking the on-call man). I also re-estimated our ETA at Mantinicus Rock, since the winds had now built to 20-plus knots rather than dying off as predicted.

A distant fire

"What's that?" John suddenly cried as he pointed off our starboard beam. All heads swiveled to see a ball of bright orange on the water trailing a pall of black smoke into the deep twilight. "Looks like a fire!" said Gerry.

Fire? Out here? So suddenly? My

mind searches for alternatives and finds none. Fire it is — but what? Distance to the fireball is impossible to estimate, but it is dead to windward. A moment's hesitation about embarking on what will definitely be a very wet, uncomfortable ride to windward; then my seaman's conscience wrests control and leaves no choice. "Engine on, strike our sails, steer for the fire," I ordered.

Down below to flip on the radio (it had been turned off to silence the incessant, unseamanlike chatter that pervades Channel 16 around Boston). Conversation between the Coast Guard and a fishing trawler about a vessel on fire. Scan the horizon. A vessel's running lights about 45 degrees off our port bow. Wait for a lull in the conversation. "Coast Guard Southwest Harbor, this is sloop *Indulgence*. We are directly north of vessel on fire and are proceeding toward it. Cannot estimate distance. I think I see the fishing vessel southeast of us." "Roger *Indulgence*."

An aerial flare arcs up behind the fire; people are in the water! A Coast Guard

aircraft joins the conversation: "ETA to scene is 10 minutes." We are pitching violently as we slam into four- to six-foot head seas. Progress is agonizingly slow — four knots at best, even with the throttle wide open.

A bright search light appears in the sky — the Coast Guard plane. It's a fixed wing aircraft. I wonder if they can be any help. (We later discovered that the survivors had a handheld VHF and were talking to the plane. We never heard them on our VHF, even when we were nearly on top of them.) They fly over several times, say they see people in a raft and report the position of the fire — in Ioran TDs. (That's super frustrating: a L/Lo position of the fire would have given an instant range; going below to plot TDs is out of the question.)

The Coast Guard reports two of their boats, a 41-footer from Portsmouth, New Hampshire and a cutter out of Boston, are proceeding to the site. I crawl onto the heaving foredeck to plug in the quarter-million candlepower, quartz-iodize spotlight. The fireball is growing larger but still seems an eternity away.

Making the rescue

Time passes, distance shortens with an agonizing slowness. Finally, we close on the fire. The trawler arrives about the same time. The Coast Guard plane orders the fishing vessel to start a search pattern about a quarter mile east of the burning vessel. I hop on the radio: "Coast Guard Southwest Harbor, this is sloop *Indulgence*. We are at fire scene. We will pass just west of the vessel and commence a search pattern from there." "Roger, *Indulgence*."

A flare arcs up from behind and to the right of the fire. We set course toward it — with no deviating! We pass by the fire and near the 57' Chris Craft cabin cruiser, completely engulfed in flames from stem to stern and from waterline to superstructure. It's as if someone took a toy boat, soaked it in gasoline and lit it. It was a truly awesome, terrifying spectacle. There was no time to dwell on it though — we had to file away the image to ponder later and search for the people now!

There is a red light in the water directly ahead! We rush to it. It's just a burning piece of wood from the wreck. Where are those people? John and Gerry are on the bow with the searchlight. Finally, "There they are!" "Gerry, keep

the light on them! John, back to the cockpit and get ready to take them aboard." Drop the stern ladder. Ready the 50' polypropylene heaving line under the helmsman's seat. I desperately try to recall what I've read about windward- versus leeward-side pickups of people. Blank. Oh hell, I do what seems right.

They're alongside now. A heaving line is thrown, and we throw into reverse to stop our way. They're at the ladder now. The engine is in neutral; RPMs are dead slow. The prop is well under the boat, but I'm taking no chances. I'm running on reflexes with little conscious thought.

Amazing! Two people were onboard the lifeboat, and two were in the water holding onto the raft. "Boy, are we glad to see you," someone sobs. The fifth person is holding the line. I shout to him to tie it to the life raft before boarding — don't want to lose the raft with the last person in it! Five, six. I identify the

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skipper and ask him how many people were on his boat. "Just us six." "Coast Guard Southwest Harbor, this is sloop *Indulgence*. We have just taken six persons on board from the life raft. Skipper of burning vessel says these are all POBs." "Roger, *Indulgence*."

Taking care of the "guests"

My attention now turns to our "guests." They are frightened, soaking wet and *very* cold. There are four men in their 30's, a woman and a teenage boy. All have been in the water and are on the edge of hypothermia. I share our blankets and sleeping bags and suggest they shed some of their wet clothes, which they do.

Put a shivering, frightened person into the cabin of a boat heaving and wallowing in six foot seas and what do you get? A *sick*, shivering and frightened person. The head and galley sinks are in constant use; fortunately, everybody makes it to them.

I talk with them briefly about their circumstances. They were returning to

Quincy, Massachusetts after a trip to Maine. They have no idea about the cause of the fire. Like us, they were just settling down for the night when fire erupted belowdecks. It took a couple of minutes to get off a Mayday, don PFDs and get into their life raft with the fire at their heels. (My guess is a massive fuel leak, given the way their boat was so totally engulfed in flames.)

The Coast Guard asks for their skipper, who reports his name and home port. Then the Coast Guard asks me about our destination and plans, a delicate matter. I sense the Coast Guard would be just as happy if I delivered our guests to shore. I point out it would require 10 hours or more for us to reach land and suggest a Coast Guard craft might be able to do it more quickly. That might be better for six cold, wet and sick people. The Coast Guard quickly accepted. After a few minutes of internal negotiation, they decide that the 41-footer from Portsmouth will continue on to meet us, while the cutter will return to Boston.

The Coast Guard asks me to remain at the fire site and report if the vessel goes down. (Also it makes it easier for them to find us.) We are wallowing badly, and I order a reefed main put up to steady us. We reach slowly back and forth, watching the fiery cabin cruiser burn itself to the water. A strange square tower crowns the pyre. "The refrigerator," reports one of their crew. The fire finally reaches down to the water. With a hiss, all is silent and dark.

We continue to reach back and forth, trying to stay well away from the now unseen hulk. Gerry, who is at the helm, suddenly gives a cry, and a large piece of debris bumps down the side of the hull. (The refrigerator, Gerry believes.)

The Coast Guard arrives

We have heard that the Coast Guard boat is steering 135 degrees toward us. We set course on the reciprocal and notify the Coast Guard. Several of our guests have fallen into an exhausted sleep; others are still sick and shivering.

About 0030 we see the Coast Guard boat's lights; by 0100 we are close. We have shifted to Channel 12 as a working frequency. "CG 41492, how are we going to transfer these people?" "We'll come up alongside you." "CG 41492, excuse me, but I don't think rafting in these seas is workable." "Let's give it a try." The white, flaring bow of the 41-footer,

continued

festooned with fenders, swings close. But it is bouncing up and down at least six feet in the seas, a giant rigging-ripping, fiberglass-crushing hulk. I fall off. The Coast Guard boat requests another try with the same results. "492 (we're on a first name basis by now), do you have a soft dinghy?" "Negative." "492, do you have an alternative way of transferring these people?" "We will inflate our life raft and tow it astern. You drop the people in, and we'll pull them in." "Roger 492."

I tell our visitors what is going to happen. They will board the raft in two groups of three. I tell them to don their PFDs — don't want any mishaps now. The Coast Guard crew skillfully wrestles their life raft canister over the side. It pops open quickly and inflates — on a 50' painter! "492, can you let the raft out further?" "Negative."

The Coast Guard boat states that she must go dead slow while towing the raft. (It is a heavily water-ballasted type). I must make at least three knots in this wind to keep steerage. This will be a tricky transfer! We run up to the raft, and I plunge *Indulgence* into reverse to quickly stop her. The raft bumps alongside. I am concerned about how our guests will manage to get into the raft, but it is steady alongside. With help from John and Gerry, they jump in with reasonable ease. "492, first load in the raft."

Indulgence has lost steerage and falls off wildly, passing within a foot of the Coast Guard boat's stern. In a few minutes, the people are on board 41492, and the raft is let out again. "OK, this is it for the rest of you." Again, up to the raft. Stop. One, two people in. "Thanks" says the skipper of the other boat. "Anytime" I reply inane as he steps into the raft. Again, our bow veers wildly and barely misses the Coast Guard boat. We bring *Indulgence* back under control and make way, slowly waiting for 41492 to release us. Soon, "*Indulgence*" this is 492. Everybody on board. Thank you, Cap, for helping them."

It is 0200. We are nearly back on our rhumb line, maybe five miles westward of our 2130 position. I am too tired to worry about our exact DR. I order resumption of our 085 rhumb line course and reset the "bouncing ball" on the loran.

None of us sleep that night.

Epilogue

Days later, as the rush of emotions from the experience faded, I started to also see it from an analytical point of view. In addition to making for an exciting sea story, our experience embeds a number of lessons in seamanship under adverse conditions: what was done right, and what might have been done better.

Indulgence: I think we handled the rescue well. I'm extremely proud of my crew and the way we instinctively worked together to handle a tough challenge.

Perhaps my biggest "what I'd do differently" concerns handling of our "guests" after they were aboard. Imagine a swimmer going below on your boat without drying off. Now think of six, fully-clothed adults doing it! Covering the settees with plastic garbage bags would have saved them a soaking. Additional bags could have served as "motion discomfort bags." I was also slow in recognizing our guests' near hypothermia. I should have insisted they immediately strip (blankets could have preserved modesty) and dry off (we had lots of beach towels). This would have helped them warm more quickly, as well as given us a chance to wring the water out of their clothes.

Finally, I should have asked the Coast Guard boat to run diagonally to the wind rather than directly into it. I could then have easily cleared it after dropping people into their raft by falling off

the opposite way (perhaps with some power assist), rather than suffering the near collisions we did.

The other boat: They were extremely well-equipped for coastal voyaging, with a life raft, Type I PFDs and even a handheld VHF. There's a lesson for us all in imagining what survival would have been like with no more than a bargain-basement Type II PFDs most of us carry — especially if two potential rescuers hadn't been within a few miles.

On the other hand, finding the survivors was extremely difficult because they had no handheld flares, no flashlight and not even a whistle! We were lucky to find them so easily; the pressure of knowing there are helpless people in the water nearby is indescribable. On *Indulgence* we keep flares, a foghorn and a flashlight all in a locker adjacent to the companionway. Crew are instructed to "grab everything if we have to abandon ship." Whistles are attached to each PFD, and freshly purchased inexpensive disposable penlites are given to crew on night voyages.

I learned later that the other boat was equipped with an automatic fire extinguisher in her engine room. It apparently didn't trigger in time, perhaps because the fire started in a back corner, rather than above the engines where the extinguisher heads were. I wonder if ordinary household smoke detectors in the back corners of the engine room would have given warning enough to permit the fire to be put out? □



"I TOLD YOU YOUR SMOKING COULD BE DANGEROUS TO OUR HEALTH!"