

Why I always carry a knife when I sail...

by Michael Burwell

In the very early 1970s I worked for the great multihull designer, Leonard Susman (Trikinis). During a big multihull symposium on Ft. Myers Beach, we had a 36' trimaran under construction. The boat wasn't rigged out, but we thought everyone would really like to see the hull if we could get it the 20 miles over to the event. We did have a 10 horse Johnson, and the ability to fabricate, so Lenny made a bracket to hang the motor off the stern.. We figured, being summer, it would be calm all morning and we'd arrive before the breeze cranked up. There were four of us aboard; Lenny, his wife, my future wife April, and me. The boat was empty inside except for some tools, a 300 foot spool of nylon and a nice new danforth.

Last minute details delayed departure, but we made the first 15 miles without incident and it looked like it was going to work out. After clearing the Sanibel causeway the wind started to pick up, on our nose of course, and the boat started to pitch. This part of the bay is shallow and it doesn't take much to kick up a steep, nasty chop. This put the engine in and out of the water, and threatened to flood it out. It looked like it was going to get worse before it got better. Then it did.

The engine got swamped, and we tried to restart it. To prevent us from being blown ashore onto the mangroves we dropped the anchor, which had to be reeved through a hoop on the forestay, as we didn't have any cleats on board yet. It was belayed to the mast step. Starting the engine proved impossible while pitching, but if we slipped the anchor rode, and worked while drifting downstream we made some headway. We were gaining on it, but it wasn't any fun.

The Coast Guard then appeared and offered assistance, which we initially declined. We weren't in danger, only uncomfortable. A tow into deeper water did have it's proponents onboard, and it was decided I would wade upwind to receive the towing hawser, the cutter having too much draft to approach us. So I waded on out to the edge of the bank and the cutter passed me a line which I remember to be about 2" in diameter. "Don't you have anything smaller?" I asked. "No, but we'll give you something lighter to tow this back with you." was the reply.

So I swam/walked back to the boat and we tied the hawser to a cross member and started to pull in our anchor. This was taking a bit of time and the Coasties were getting antsy. Whether out of frustration or a miscommunication, the cutter started moving ahead, first taking up the slack then forcefully pulling ahead. At first this was great, as we were able to reel in the anchor rode rapidly, but not too rapidly as it still had to pass through that ring on the forestay fitting. When we surged past the anchor without getting it off the bottom, our complexions changed slightly to worried anticipation, rapidly degenerating into frantic desperation. The cutter was happy with the way it was making, and showed no signs of responding to our desperate hand signals and shouts. Meanwhile, the rode was rapidly disappearing behind us. To better haul in the anchor rode, I had moved out and was straddling the skinny foredeck so it was running back out over my thigh, past the mast step. The cockpit crew was moving this out to the side to clear me, but when the end was reached they couldn't get to the mast step. Only I was positioned to get to it and I was pinned to the foredeck by the 1/2" anchor rode, which had a rapidly decreasing diameter as the tension increased. The cutter began applying even more power to the situation. By twisting slightly I could jam my leg in a hollow before the mast which kept the major line tension off my leg. My Swiss army knife was in my shorts in the cockpit. I called back for the knife, but my quick-thinking fiancé already had it out and stretched herself across the cabin top to reach her. I will never forget the way the rope exploded as soon as I touched it with the blade. A huge spiral of nylon burst out and through the bent-double forestay fitting as the boat lurched forward. I was able to hang on to both the knife and the boat, but it was a tense few minutes before I could reach the safety of the cockpit. April still carries that Swiss Army knife in her purse, and I never sail without a knife to this day.

What's Happening Next?

1. December 29th - January 1st - New Year's Cruise- St. John's River - Lake George - Silver Glen Spring! Launch at Astor Park on the St. John's River. Cruise to Blue Island on 12/29. Then on to Lake George and Silver Glen Spring on Dec 30. Dec 31 is New Year's Eve! Celebrate with the Squadron and then head home on January 1st, 2011! Call Phil Reed - AKA - RiverRunner 904-315-8951 - to reserve - no charge!

2. Jan 8th - 11th - 10,000 Island's Cruise. Launch at Port of the Islands on US 41 east of Naples and cruise the Fakahatchee Canal and River to Panther Key. Head toward Goodland, or down to Pavillion Key and Rabbit Key in the Everglades National Park depending on wind direction. Don't let last year's freezing temperatures keep you from exploring this area after the Holiday season. It's a must see in Florida. Remote and beautiful <http://www.portoftheislandsmarina.com/> to reserve a slip if you want one.

3. January 22nd - Daysail on Lake Tarpon! Launch at Anderson Co. Park off of US 19 in Tarpon Springs. Lunch at Jack Willie's Tarpon Turtle (to warm up?) Drive to lunch even if the weather's too bad to sail (let's HOPE not!)

Long term planning dates:

Everglades Challenge Start - March 5th, 2011

Crystal River Boat Bash - March 30 - April 1st

Gulf Coast Small Craft Festival - April 16 & 17

Apalachicola Antique and Classic Boat Show - April 16 ^ 17

Cedar Key Small Boat Meet - May 7th and 8th (Sat & Sun)



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