

Into the Fog

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Frank L. B. Koucky III

It is said that sailing is a sport that gives young men a chance to grow up quickly. It's also said that sailing offers all the comforts of prison, with the added chance of being drowned, but in prison the food and company are better.

I recently had the chance to see the effect of sailing on growing up in my 11 year old son Jordan and I treasure the memory.

Late in October I sold a 25 foot C&C sailboat I owned and kept on San Francisco Bay. Canadian built for the Great Lakes, the little sailboat was tough enough to sail anywhere.

I offered to deliver the boat south to Monterey, down the spectacular coast of California, a coastal passage of about 150 miles. I took my son, an experienced sailor, as crew, figuring the two of us could easily handle the excellent little cruiser-racer doublehanded.

Since sailboats rarely go in straight lines and a contrary current can slow boat speed to a crawl, we planned to make the trip over two days, sailing all night both nights and resting during the first morning at the only safe harbor on that stretch of coast, a breakwater sheltered port called "Half-Moon Bay".

There are numerous tricks to this passage, a trip I have made both ways before in other boats, but the two keys to success are timing the tides going out of San Francisco Bay properly and picking a lucky weather window that doesn't make you sail against either waves or wind. Also very important is that you don't turn south too quickly out of the Golden Gate, as otherwise you run into a treacherous pattern of shoals called "The Potato Patch". There dozens of boats have been rolled and torn apart by cresting waves where the big Pacific ground swell tears into shallow water and builds into dangerous breakers.

To catch the tide, we left our marina at about 10:00 PM and calmly motored up the smooth waters of San Francisco Bay for over two hours under a spectacular full moon. The forecast was for 10-15 knot breezes out of the north, clear visibility and 2-4 foot seas for the next two days, exactly the right conditions to sail down the coast in comfort and safety. Jordan had the good sense to go below and catch some sleep while we traveled up the Bay toward the lights of the Transamerica Pyramid and Ghiridelli Square.

Creeping under the lighted Bay Bridge we pushed against the 4 knot tidal current. As we passed the shining towers of the city, the piers and the Alcatraz light, the tide would turn toward slack and we could run out under the Golden Gate Bridge with no current to oppose us. We raised the sails near Sausalito's sheltered heights and turned out to leave the Bay. If we timed the tide wrong we risked heading out into a vicious chop as

the tidal current hits the Pacific swell and builds up to ten foot breaking seas. For a few minutes under the towers of the Golden Gate I thought I had read the tides wrong, but the slack came and we slipped out under the huge span, motors ailing into the immense Pacific almost alone in the dark.

As we passed the Marin headlines dark outline going west, trying to stay in the wide channel and find the next buoy, the seas began to build well above the forecast as the swell shoaled up against the mainland. It got very rough quickly and we took water over the bow with every wave. We were headed the wrong way for comfort and as we passed the shadow of land, the wind turned completely against us as well. Now the tide was pushing the waves up as it rushed from the narrow Golden Gate entrance. I was glad for the protection of the anti-seasickness scopolamine patch behind my ear (and the half patch behind Jordan's) as otherwise I would have been feeding the fishes soon in the pounding. Still the seas came up and I could no longer take the waves directly on the bow. I quartered away, making our way out longer but a bit smoother, ever mindful that I had to get clear of the Potato Patch which was probably running fifteen feet high in this swell and tide. Jordan and I watched the Golden Gate recede and were very glad for the full foul weather gear we had put on in the sheltered Bay, seaboots, layers of insulating fleece, sailing jackets, high waterproof pants, hoods, wool caps - a 40 degree night at sea in a twenty knot wind has a wind chill of below twenty degrees, so it gets cold fast.

Finally we cleared the last buoy and could turn south, but the wind had swung almost south as well, so we had to both roll in the trenches of the waves and take the wind on the nose if we were to stay on course, not a pleasant prospect in a small boat in the hours before dawn. Instead, we split the difference for comfort and sailing ability, heading out to sea more than hugging the coast as I had planned. The sails filled and we were making way, slowly but reliably, finally headed toward Monterey. Against a coastal current we slogged on, the night very dark and getting cold, jogging back and forth on long, wet tacks which took us far out and back again every hour or so, sacrificing distance for speed, as no one needs a hammering on the nose in cold darkness.

By grey dawn we still making a slow 4 knots against the current, the high cliffs of Northern California becoming clear as the light grew. I had steered much of the night, munching on granola bars and occasional Diet Cokes, while the wind was just where it shouldn't be. Already we were behind schedule, but that makes little difference on such a passage, except when it comes to the crew getting tired. Jordan held south while I got an hour's rest below and on we went together as the day became bright blue and the wind steadied.

We made our way down the coast, motors ailing as the wind picked up, and finally made the turn into Half Moon Bay's quiet harbor before noon, picking our way past the rocky shoal at the entrance where waves were breaking ten feet high. Out of the ground swell and wind, we tied up to the quiet fuel dock for gas and cold drinks, wandered the docks briefly and anchored out inside the large breakwater on water as still as a millpond. After a few sandwiches for our lunch, we slept for two hours in the warm sun while the early afternoon breeze picked up, a sign of a hot day inland. We awoke to

fifteen knots of good sailing breeze, pulled up the hook and headed south again under the same small jib as the night before.

Once outside the shelter of the harbor we found steady six foot seas, ground swell from a distant storm, not dangerous but large enough to notice, all taking us exactly on the beam, a situation that would roll us like a cork if we held our course. Back we went to the long tacks in and out, making good speed if not distance with a breeze a bit more behind us. Hour by hour we drove south, taking turns steering, going out until land was almost invisible, then tacking back until the cliffs were close and we could see traffic on Highway One high above, as the breeze rose to about twenty knots or more from the southwest against us, a far cry from the gentle 2 to 4 foot seas and ten knot northerly following breeze that the Marine Forecast predicted. Our weather window was not what we expected, and we were in for more of a push.

As the day wore on and dusk approached, I needed sleep badly, so I set the boat's course clearly out from the shining Ano Nuevo light behind us and gave the helm to Jordan. "Call me if anything unusual happens" I said. "Anything unusual at all." "No problem, dad", he said and I went below to sleep.

I awoke about two hours later in total darkness and looked out to see Jordan happily holding his course in absolute whiteout fog as thick as any I had ever seen. I jumped up, checked the compass heading and, as quietly as I could, said "Why didn't you call me when the fog rolled in like this?" Jordan, ever the young lawyer with words, said, "Well, you said call you if anything unusual happened. Fog isn't unusual."

So there we were, fog and wind. On most of the East coast, fog and wind don't occur together very often, but on the Pacific they are common. We were barreling along with absolutely no visibility in total darkness ten miles off the coast with a long night ahead and a tough, rocky landfall at the end. My charts were up to date and I had the advantage of one more tool, my pocket GPS system, a little black case about the size of a TV controller that talks to satellites and gives navigational plots and directions to a preset waypoint, a buoy or lighthouse or other navigational mark. Jordan held steady while I plotted our position below, a bit tough as now we were bouncing into waves too hard for comfort and the little GPS numbers showing latitude and longitude were hard to read and plot onto the chart in the rough going below.

The plot comforted me immensely as we had broken out of the current and were approaching the headlands above Santa Cruz, last land before setting out to cross Monterey Bay. Jordan's steering in fog had been flawless and we would need more of the same as the night wore on.

Hour after hour the fog thickened, until everything was soaked in drizzle and icy water dripped off the rig. Our foul weather gear began to get really uncomfortable as the cold fog found new ways inside and the night got colder. It was now so thick that we could barely see our own running lights ahead on the bow and we were unable to see

anything else at all. With a stiff sea running and miles to go, there was nothing to do but push on into the dark.

We got out the flare gun and loaded with a white flare, good warning if we were going to be run down by a freighter or fishing boat in the dark as many others have been, but such a collision might come too quickly to warn the other vessel. I hooked up my most powerful spotlight -the standard method of showing your position is to flash it in the direction of any visible vessel and then shine it on your own sails, hopefully letting them know what we are and where we are going. I checked our radar reflector and running lights, invisible for more than a few feet. None of that works if you are in the path of a Taiwanese container ship on autopilot doing twenty knots blind, a fate that has left many small boat sailors to die alone in cold water as the ship that killed them steamed away, oblivious to the collision.

Now it was just a matter of keeping as good a lookout as we could and holding our southerly course across Monterey Bay as best we could in the fog, wind and breaking swell.

Hour after hour we took turns steering into a cold head sea that shifted more southwest as we crossed into Monterey Bay's outer waters, and I found in my fixes that Jordan was doing better than I was against wind, seas and a new tidal cross current. Holding his eye to the compass and steering like he was playing a video game, his concentration was superb. Cold, wet and sitting in a soaking cockpit in the dark, he did his work without complaint as we passed midnight and sailed on. I let him go below to sleep for a few hours, still in his rain gear to be ready to come up at my call.

Out in the dark for hours, my eyes began to play strange tricks. Weird glowing shapes occasionally appeared and drifted by, perhaps some form of glowing plankton and in the dark it was impossible to tell how far away they might be. Some people have said that scopolamine patches can produce hallucinations, hardly a pleasant thought in the sense-deprived environment of a fogbound boat wrapped in night. The sea grew choppier as the stiff breeze set wind waves across the rolling ground swell of the deep ocean.

I noticed a lighter area ahead and called up Jordan. He was almost instantly on deck, alert and looking for what I was asking about. Searching the darkness, we spotted a dim light that seemed far away and as we approached we saw the lights of a moving commercial fishing boat, indistinct in the fog perhaps a quarter mile away. I flashed my big spotlight and saw nothing but nightblindness for moments afterwards, but the boat seemed to get closer still. Jordan carefully veered away and we passed by as wide a margin as we could, worried that lines or nets might be in the water, a real danger with a sea running. Passing in fog is always strange as the usual reference points of horizon and sky are gone, but the dim lights of the boat faded away quickly and were gone. Jordan went below to sleep again.

I had been on deck for about seven hours straight. Now I began to get really tired and terribly cold, even with all my gear on. My hands felt like they were stiff and sore

and the fog and drizzle had gotten inside even my sailing pants and boots. I had sat too long in one spot and a contrary current slowed us to a crawl, while steep waves broke around us.

Another boat crossed us, not quite so close, but moving very fast through the fog, here and gone in seconds without a sound and I wished I had the radar from my other sailboat, able to see through night and measure distances. I felt the cold creeping in more, but the steering took great attention as each cold wave rolled the boat and often broke over me, a miserable experience. I called up Jordan again as we had to refill the fuel tank, spilling gas all over the cockpit as we rolled. Now another problem came up. Two nights at sea had run down the batteries to the point where the lights began to dim, and the compass light went out.

I did what I have done before in electrical failures, took a green emergency glow stick and broke it to start the cold light and with duct tape stuck it as a compass light. Red and green glow sticks became our running lights, not exactly up to Coast Guard specs, but better than nothing on a dark night. I still had the flaregun and the bright spotlight on its own battery pack worked fine.

Now the compass really looked like a video game. Jordan steered while I went below for a much needed break. I slept for about an hour and awoke to steer again. By our last fix we should have had an hour or more before we came anywhere close enough to land to need another GPS plot on the chart. In the cold haze of the tired hours before dawn, I looked at the GPS and it read "Turn left 90 degrees". We had sailed by the wind the whole trip to avoid head seas, and steering straight for Monterey would have been slow and miserable, so the GPS unit had generally said "turn left 40 degrees" as we crossed the Bay.

Something was wrong. Jordan steered calmly while I went below and put another plot on the chart. My heart missed a beat as I saw what had happened. A freak tidal current had added about five knots to our boat speed, sweeping us forward and around the northern point of the Monterey Peninsula in the darkness and fog. Had I obeyed the GPS instruction to turn left, we would have been on the rocks in minutes as the whole Peninsula stood between us and the harbor entrance waypoint, a fact lost on the faithful GPS.

The mistake was entirely mine, of course. Approaching my familiar Monterey harbor with no visibility, too tired and cold to think correctly, I had lost track of time and position while relying on my compass and dead reckoning to bring us close. The current was the wild card I had not considered and like hundreds of ships before me, we nearly ended on the granite coastline. There is a standard sailing procedure of not approaching a lee shore or unfamiliar harbor in night and poor visibility, much less dense fog, but I had stretched the rules to get out of the cold wind and rolling seas, thinking that I could treat an approach to my own home port a bit more lightly than I ever would have treated a strange harbor.

Now it was a classic navigator's game in zero visibility, sailing the same boxes we had practiced in heavy fog in daylight for fun - Jordan obeyed commands like a professional helmsman: "Turn left 180 degrees until you are headed due North. ""I'm there, Dad." "Hold your North until I tell you to turn right". I counted off exactly ten minutes to clear the rocks and took another GPS fix, plotted it and gave him the bearings for the next turn. We were now well off the lee shore and headed toward home, checking our position all the way at short intervals to get us past Pacific Grove and Cannery Row in the fog. Finally we were at the next turn and Jordan took us in while I called the bearings, with no harbor lights visible and the fog so thick that we could not hear the foghorn until we were on top of it or see the bow of our own boat. With the wind still strong, we dropped our sails and motored to an anchorage in good deep sand, all in no visibility and fog so thick it blocked even the channel buoy lights.

We approached slowly until I could hear the waves on the familiar beach and Jordan took us in as I set the anchor safe and deep. We turned in to sleep until noon.

As long as I live I will remember Jordan's intent face in the fog, his hands on the tiller, hood pulled over his cheeks, eyes fixed on the green-lit compass as he steered through fog and night. That is what sailing is meant to be, not the fun moments, but the real ones. I've kept the plots of my close encounter with the Monterey Peninsula to remind me to stay awake on watch, and Jordan is now ready for some bigger passages still to come. Some warm blue water in the Virgin Islands sounds just right.
