

Crossing the Sound

Soon after moving to our new home on Camano Island north of Seattle in 2006, Jeannette insisted we buy a motor boat for excursions and fishing on the water near our home on Puget Sound. My reaction initially was that we couldn't afford a boat and, we just weren't "boat owners." They were wealthier and higher class of people than us.

But, Jeannette insisted that I should really consider doing something a little more exotic at this point in our lives, because we had always been very frugal in our spending habits and, if we were ever going to splurge a little, now was the time to do it. We were now sixty-five and only had a few years left to "Kick up our heels."

Now, when I look back on our experience as members of the "boating set," I agree she was right. Some of the adventures we shared with our family and friends, and with just the two of us were some of my most cherished memories we had over the past few years. We weren't part of the jet set, nor did we spend a lot of time or money on or in the boat we purchased. And, we didn't sacrifice Sundays to lavish on excursions to the shore. But, we did average taking our boat, "out to sea," about five times each summer. We would probably have taken it out more often, but launching a mid-sized boat takes a lot more work than you might think. After each excursion, I was typically so beat, that I wasn't that eager to do it again for another few weeks.

The standing joke about a boat is, "A boat is a hole in the water in which you throw money!" Fortunately, our boat didn't suck much money or time from us. Instead, it contributed new adventures we had never experienced before. I suppose I should qualify the impression you may have gotten, that our family was all "land lubbers," because Jeannette's brothers had owned boats for fishing and duck hunting along the sloughs of the Mississippi River near St. Louis, and she had occasionally accompanied them. But, somehow, the ten-foot duck boats with ten-horse outboard motors they tooled around in didn't quite match the sixteen-foot runabout with a forty-eight horsepower Evinrude we purchased.

Jeannette had spotted the boat of her dreams parked in the yard of a neighbor with a "For Sale" sign on it before she began her sales pitch to me. Her approach to selling me on the idea of, " Becoming the captain of my own fate," was to suggest I needed some long-overdue recreation, and what better way to relax than boating and fishing. After all, I was already a fisherman and just needed a method to get closer to the fish. I discovered later that one of her motivations was more to her benefit than mine. She took to boating, "like a duck takes to water." She just needed a crew to launch her boat! She loved skimming across the water, when it was smooth; the snow-capped view of Mt. Baker or Mt. Rainer off the port bow or the starboard stern; and some unknown destination ahead.

We loved taking family and friends in our boat across the Sound from the Maple Grove boat launch on the north end of Camano Island to the little town of Coupeville about eight miles to the west of our home. Coupeville was a historic town where sea captains supposedly spent their winters in the 1800s. It had a public, floating dock where all sorts of interesting boats would tie up for hours. We liked to travel over to the little tourist town in nice weather, buy refreshments, and return during a three-hour cruise.

Over the seven years we owned our boat we probably made the trip over twenty times. For the first year or two, I was uncertain about my nautical skills and made several blunders which caused trepidation to me and my passengers. Although Puget Sound is an inland sea and doesn't experience the large waves of the open ocean, the swells produced by winds over about ten knots, frequently exceeded the capacity of my boat. And, the depth of the Sound was more than seven hundred feet in the Saratoga Passage between Camano Island and Whidbey Island where Coupeville was located. This was "Big water," and demanded respect.

A boating experience with one couple on a trip to Coupeville will characterize my nautical skills. We had numerous adventures, but this one should give you a sense of the drama. Our good friends, Al and Lin McNab, visited us from the East Coast not long after I was promoted to captain of the USS Vardiman. Jeannette and I had been over and back to Coupeville several times without incident until this journey. We launched from Maple Grove as usual and were about four miles out in the Sound when the motor began to sputter, and then died. This was a bit alarming because it had never happened before. I had occasionally

had difficulty getting the motor to run after launching from shore until it was warm, but never when it had been hot and running smoothly.

After attempting to restart the engine without success, I walked to the back of the boat and opened the five-gallon gas tank to check the fuel level. Possibly, I had not filled it completely. But, there was plenty of gas in the tank. That wasn't the problem. Maybe there was dirt in the system and the fuel line had clogged. But, I had no tools to dismantle the line, and I had never attempted to clear the line on my engine before. I was uncertain what to do but decided to just replace the cap on the gas tank, pump up the pressure with the priming pump, and try restarting the motor. I climbed back into the driver's seat and assured everyone things were fine. I turned the key and the engine started right up. Great! I pushed the throttle forward and off we went at full power. Fantastic!

We traveled about a half mile toward Coupeville and suddenly, the motor again started sputtering and died once more. This time, a palpable concern could be sensed coming from my passengers. We were about half way across Puget Sound, still three miles from Coupeville. I had my cell phone with me, but I had no idea who to call. I'd never been in this predicament before. I suppose I could have dialed 911 and they would have put me in touch with someone who could send a rescue boat, but I knew that would likely take hours. And, if they towed us to Coupeville, we would likely be stranded on the other side of the Sound from home overnight. What a crummy pleasure trip this was turning out to be.

Well, as captain of my vessel, my first duty was to reassure my passengers. "Okay, everybody," I said. "Don't worry. I'll get to the bottom of this." I could see fear beginning to well up in the eyes of my friends. Even my wife, who has been through many life-threatening experiences with me, was beginning to grow concerned. I wasn't happy myself! It's a little different when you're bobbing around miles from shore with a dead motor and only one four-foot paddle.

I decided to take another look at the fuel tank. There was still plenty of gas, so that couldn't be the problem. But, when I removed the gas cap this time, I noticed there wasn't any pressure in the tank. No pressure was released, as there should have been, if the engine was drawing fluid out of the tank properly. Why was that? Then I noticed that there was a pressure release valve on the cap that was being

forced open and releasing the seal on the gas tank by rubbing against the bulkhead. Maybe that was the problem. It appeared that I had inadvertently turned the fuel cans backwards when filling them earlier in the day.

So, I reversed the cans, closed the lid once again, pumped the pressure up, and returned to my seat. I turned the key, the engine started, and off we went. We traveled the remainder of the way to Coupeville without further difficulty.

We briefly toured the town and enjoyed the giant ice cream cones Coupeville is famous for and prepared to reload the USS Vardiman for the return journey home. However, I faced a mild mutiny. My friends were reluctant to risk their lives on what seemed to them a somewhat risky venture. They weren't convinced the problem we experienced on the way over had been fully solved.

I had to use my best arguments to coerce my friends back in the boat. My ace-in-the-hole was my wife. She's been through so many narrow escapes with me, that she's grown somewhat immune to the dangers she's been exposed to. Her willingness to re-embark was convincing enough to at least get them on board. When the motor started up and we got underway, I could feel the tension slowly begin to subside. However, once a captain has lost the confidence of his passengers, he's not likely to ever be held in full esteem again. I suspect, if I were to ever invite Al and Lin to join me again on another trip to Coupeville by motor boat, they would probably find some other activity they would prefer to do for the day.

The longer we owned our boat, the less enthusiasm I could muster to pull it out of storage and take it for an excursion. I eventually gave the boat to our youngest daughter and son-in-law to have their own adventures with, which I heard they had a few. After several years they "beached" the family yacht in their front yard, where it remains yet today.

I found that I could have almost as much fun as taking the boat out for the day, by simply sitting near a boat ramp and watching newbie boat owners attempt to launch and recover their water craft. It's fascinating to watch the interplay between a husband and wife attempting to communicate by hand gestures, shouts, and occasional words of obscenity, the intricate maneuvering of an obstinate hulk-on-wheels into and out of the water. The complexity of directing one's spouse to turn

the boat on a trailer this way and that, from thirty feet away, through the reverse image of a mirror, can lead to ludicrous extremes of entertainment.

One of my favorite stories was told to me by a friend as we sat on a breakwater one day observing the activity at Maple Grove. He claims this story is true, but I have my suspicions that he may have embellished it for my enjoyment.

He claimed that while watching a family launch a new boat they had purchased one day, the "Captain" was having difficulty getting his boat to "come up onto Plane." This is a condition of the boat, under which, it's orientation relative to the water changes from angling upward, to a horizontal position, that allows it to skim more easily through the water. When initially accelerating to about thirty knots, the motor tends to push the rear end of the boat down in back, adding drag and preventing the boat from reaching full speed. The new boat owner had tried everything he could think of to get it to level out. He had jiggled with the throttle, he had tried turning to port and then starboard, and even had his "crew" move to the front of his boat to redistribute their weight. All to no avail!

Finally, with great frustration, he pulled back to the pier, got out, and went looking for a mechanic at the marina where he had bought the boat the previous week. When the mechanic arrived, the owner rehearsed all the steps he had gone through to launch his new boat and the difficulty he was having getting it to come up on plane. The mechanic said, "Well let's all get back in and take it for a spin. There shouldn't be any great problem getting your party started!"

So, the mechanic, the owner, and his family and friends headed back out to deeper water. After they passed the "No wake zone," he pushed the throttle all the way forward, but the boat remained in the "tail down" position, the motor roaring loudly, trying to push it to a level attitude. The mechanic expressed shock that the boat wasn't responding properly and exclaimed, "This is crazy. There's got to be something seriously wrong, but we'll have to go back to the pier where I can check the boat out more fully." In the meantime, all the "Lokey Loo's" were watching these proceedings from shore with baited breath.

The boat pulled back to the pier and the mechanic striped down to his trunks and jumped into the water to look under the boat. He resurfaced almost immediately, laughing hysterically, splashing the water with both hands, and

almost drowning as he tried to regain his composure. He was finally able to shout out an explanation for the problem, between bursts of laughter. He yelled, "When you launch a boat from the ramp, you need to release the tiedowns and leave the trailer connected to your truck! It just won't have any speed pulling your trailer beneath the water!"

As I said before, it's sometimes more fun to just sit on the beach and watch the activity from the boat launch!

(Story originally told by my friend, Eddy Miller, former President of Christian Heritage College and owner of a 55-foot cabin cruiser)