

Mutiny off Point Sur 2014  
A Tale of the Disperser  
by Michael Wolf

On July 1st, 2014, I began my life of freedom, at least, that's how I like to think of the beginning of my voyage to transport my ship from Bodega Bay to San Diego. My ship had been under threat of illegal seizure by a county-owned marina sick and tired of a disabled guy raising such a fuss about being treated fairly and all that other crap that makes governments and law enforcement so willing to drive a free American from his home - or to take it from him.

I set sail with two sets of crew, one of which soon departed. Pat and Jim, both 71 (which they informed me of after we set sail), wanted to fix up their ferro-cement double-ender and sit on the oceans using their \$1100/month Social Security to pay off their debts. The trouble is, their boat was on the hard, the engine the only thing in the boat - laying on its side, uninstalled - and Pat and Jim only had their mobile home, a \$22,000 value at most. And their debt of \$5,000 meant fully one third of their retirement was spent on credit card companies. Just the math meant their dreams were completely unrealistic. But just four days on the Disperser was enough to make them realize they were foolish in their pursuits and so they put off in Half Moon Bay.

The other two crew were a couple of street kids whose Craigslist ad I answered. They were looking for a free jet ski or sailboat; something to explore the California coast with. I thought that it would be a perfect opportunity to bring someone into the wonderful world of sailing as I had discovered it. So in Santa Cruz, when their two friends wanted to join the boat, I was open to the idea.

The sail to Monterrey was pleasant and uneventful, though the crew were a bit more interested in fun than sailing than I had expected them to be. I felt they were just getting settled in and that the following day's sail, my first overnight voyage, would be equally pleasant and uneventful. The only concern I had was the lack of wind. I do have a motorsailer, but I don't like burning the fuel when there is wind available.

There is an aspect to my ship that I forgot to consider when planning ahead for the overnight voyage. You see, having suffered brain damage 10 years ago, I cannot as easily think on my feet as I have difficulties recognizing all of the factors necessary to make a split-second decision. I discovered that sailing was perfect for me because my limitations do not affect my ability to handling sailing because of my understanding of the underlying physics, properties of water, wind, weather, and of course my abilities and those of my ship. And how I accomplish the art of sailing in that regard is to envision as many possibilities as possible. So when we set off, apart from one small thing, I had already envisioned the overnight voyage.

What I had forgotten to consider, unfortunately, was the fact that my ship's helm, lacking an autohelm and being hydraulic, was impossible to keep straight without a reference on the horizon. We were to sail through light fog, and that meant no stars to steer by. We had the compass and the sky was clear enough when I finally laid down for a nap at 1am and let someone else man the helm. I had us motoring, as we were heading straight into the wind. I left the main up and instructed the crew to keep the sail just full and to tack back and forth a few degrees now and then. I also instructed them to awaken me from my purchase behind the helm in the pilothouse, if anything changed or went wrong.

An hour later I was awakened by a feeling of going in circles. A glance around showed that the wind had picked up from 5 to 15 knots. The horizon and sky were obscured by light fog and the chart

recorder demonstrated we had been sailing in circles, likely for nearly the entire hour I slept. By the time I had this all figured out, the crew were already in their bunks. I asked them to help me strike the main, as we could not proceed with just the main. They refused initially until I quite firmly reminded them that if they wanted to survive, they would respect the orders of the captain of the vessel.

Apparently they were so upset to be reminded that they had to actually do what they were told that they reacted with equal irrationality to what happened next.

Soon after I retook the helm, I realized part of the reason we couldn't sail straight was the fact that the compass I had setup was backwards and too slow, and that there was nothing ahead on the horizon to steer by. The only thing I could see was the light on Point Sur; which we were by then about 6 miles off, due west. But the light was partially obscured by the light fog, and it was off my beam of course.

I glanced down at the chart recorder for the last time in 5 hours, noted my position, position of my plotted course, then glanced up at the GPS to find my speed. I then turned off all lights, set my course due west for the light, and proceeded to try to get back on and stay on course.

I informed the crew, one guy finally decided to stay up with me, that I intended to steer by the light. I would keep the light in my beam once I got back on course while I made the arc around the point to keep us about 4 miles off shore then would let it move back to my stern slowly. Their reaction was that what I was attempting was impossible and they informed me that from that moment, they were no longer my crew.

I did exactly what I said I would do. I estimated the time to my original track based on my speed, and then estimated the arc of the radius based on the speed and distance to the light and using compass readings could tell when I reached my intended track, which went straight off from the light south southeast towards Morro Bay. I had some difficulty as the light faded behind me, steering while looking backwards at a light visible, by then, only one second in five. So when a light ashore appeared a couple hours after making the arc, I was quite relieved; though nowhere near as relieved when the sun started to make details visible enough to afford me the chance to relax.

The arguments we had were quite disturbing. My crew revealed that their expectation was that they would do no work and simply enjoy a pleasant passage while I did all the hard work - oh they would lend a hand here or there, but their time was better spent smoking and drinking and partying. So it was no surprise when, several hours from Morro Bay, after destroying my galley and eating every last morsel of food; that they popped out of the forward compartment deck hatch, complaining to me that their belongings were getting wet from water coming out of the floor.

In my many distractions, including having to troubleshoot and repair a bad connection at the alternator for the main lead, I had forgotten about the leak at the bow where the lower support for the bow sprit comes through the hull. Every time the boat dipped into a wave, about a pint of water would come in. This continued for days due to my forgetting - having thought the repair was still okay from a year prior. So I immediately knew what was up. And before starting the sump pump to remove the 500 or so gallons of water in my forward bilges (none of which have pumps), I checked the water level, to find we were four inches from the hole being below the waterline and thus losing the ship.

So, my reservations were set fully aside and while the crew were distracted, I hailed the Coast Guard and called Morro Bay Police, and asked them to assist me by removing my crew from my ship,

by force if necessary.

I arrived at Morro Bay Yacht Club at midnight. My crew were surprised of course, and left without taking too many of my belongings, but among them were my debit card numbers which allowed them to remove \$200 from my account five days later. I would never recover my rigging knife however.

It wasn't just these kids that would rip me off however. While at the Yacht Club, I realized that their offering of reciprocal privileges was apparently an empty promise, as they charge the same rate for their dock to reciprocal club members as they do to non-yacht club members. But I did a bottom job for one of their officers, thinking that would pay my fees. Nope, the yacht club cashed my check anyway, four months later, while I was in La Paz, Mexico.

At least with these kids it was something that law enforcement couldn't tell me was a civil matter. Curious though that while these kids took a \$50 knife and \$200 cash - cash that I got back - and went to jail; that a yacht club commodore who took \$250 will get away with it and remain scott free. I guess the moral of the story is that if you want to be a crook, wear and suit and tie and get people to elect you to a position of power.