

When Reality Sets In



After a quick two-week cruise to Victoria, BC Canada from St Helens, OR, I am now sitting in my living room with a glass of Chardonnay in one hand, typing with a finger on the other hand. The Sunnyside share the sail, two weaker, has become an annual tradition for a few friends and myself. I have had a great time on each trip and the sharing the sail with good friends has been personally rewarding. This year Steve Brown crewed on the way to Victoria where Scott Johnson, who made the return trip, relieved him.

This year's event resulted in several realizations about my personal traits. It could not have happened had I flown to Rio or London for my vacation instead of the Sunnyside adventure.

The first realization was that I have some weird personal habits such as cleaning up after myself. This trait was driven into me during my time on submarines in the Navy. Shipmates on submarines get a bit testy if you don't learn to clean up after yourself immediately after reporting aboard. I assume this is a weird trait as I often get comments like "I have never seen anyone wipe up their mess after using the sink before". I do not see many other folks cleaning up after themselves in marina heads, for that matter at ball games or other social events. I guess most Americans know some one will come along later and clean up after them.



My second realization came when I went to an event in Victoria where over 40,000, mostly Canadian, people attended a symphony in the Inter Bay harbor as a part of the BC day celebration.

The day started off with the dance of the water taxis, Kewl and the event happens every Sunday morning.

At the onset of the symphony everyone stood and sang the Canadian National Anthem. I was really moved by the look on people's faces and that most of the people sang along with the orchestra. Kewl again. While I consider myself a strong supporter of the United States and what we all stand for, especially after 33 ½ years in the Navy, one would think I could stand up with conviction and sing the Star Spangled Banner at an event. But I can't.

I recently went to a ball game at the Mile High Stadium in Denver, CO. Interestingly enough, they played God bless America instead of our National Anthem. There seemed to be a lot of folks that knew you are suppose to stand at attention, put your right hand over your heart for the National Anthem, unfortunately it was the wrong song.

It also became clear that the folks at the Victoria celebration, (the 40,000 Canadians) must have all been on submarines, as they did not throw all their garbage on the grounds like the folks did

at the game in Denver. The bleachers at Mile high stadium needed to be cleaning with a fire hose after the ball game. Hope no one from Canada was there.



Just a side note, there are some great places to pull into on Vancouver Island but, that is another story.

My final realization was actually about sailing. Steve and I had rough seas on the way to Victoria, but Sunnyside, a 43' MKIII Irwin, faired well.

On the way back Scott and I made excellent time the first day. We made it out the Strait of Juan de Fuca and south on the Pacific to a little Indian fishing village called La Push.

Not much in La Push, but the family style restaurant that caters to large portions of highly adequate food. Warning: No booze in La Push or Neah Bay for that mater. So if you are headed north to Puget Sound and plan to stop at either place, plan on bring your own brewskis and drinking them on your boat. La Push is a kewl place to go though, if you can find it behind the rocks.....



Upon arrival in La Push, Scott and I found a salty fisherman from Seattle in the next slip. Scott and I had a quite the conversation with him on a variety of subjects. The fisherman also highly recommended the restaurant for Quantity Eating. As we headed to the restaurant a bit later, the fisherman said



“ Listening to the radio! Hear there may be a big Southeastern wind coming in. I suppose you boys can handle that though.” Mistake number one. We should have asked what he was not saying and assumed we knew.

After returning from the restaurant, we checked the Weather channel and then got the nightly weather faxes via Single Side Band radio. The forecast was for high winds and waves after midnight the next night for points south of Cape Shoalwater in Washington (North of Long Beach Peninsula) and to some place location in Oregon I did not have a chart for.

The weather condition was to start after midnight the next night. We did have concerns about the forecasted weather as it bounded the Columbia River Bar and we needed to cross that Bar. In case you are not aware, the Columbia River Bar is advertised as one of the most dangerous bars in the world. Hence real concern!



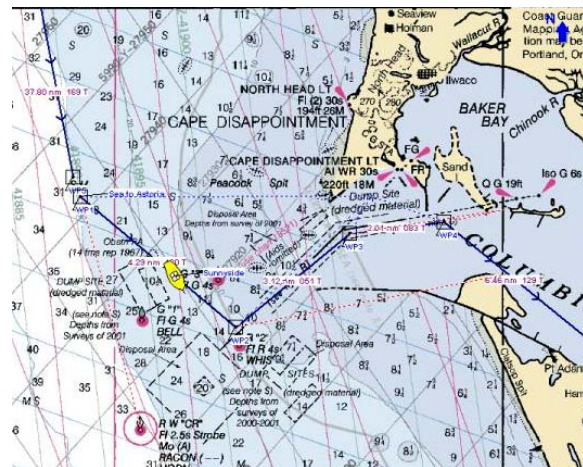
The next morning we did a late start back to sea at about 0900. Since the two week vacation was drawing to a close, Scott and I felt somewhat pressed to make at least as much progress as possible before any weather hit. This was the second mistake, being in a hurry on a sailboat.

We planned to move south to our potential crossing of that notorious Columbia River Bar (Latitude 46° 14'.72N / 124° 05'.44 W and 46° 15'.47 N / 124° 02'.15W). This would be my sixth crossing in the past three years. Our plan was to hit the Bar around high tide, 0621 if the weather held. My past experience in crossing the Bar went well for a sailboat. If you sail in at high tide and go out with low tide, the river throws you in and out over the bar with no problems. The first time I went over the bar, the currents swept us out to about twelve miles off shore at around fifteen knots SOG.

Our plan to move south seemed sound. If the wind kicked up prior to Grays Harbor that night, we would pull in and dock at West Port for the rest of the night. The second check would be at the north end of the Long Beach Peninsula. If it looked like the weather was going to be a reality, we could anchor behind the peninsula for shelter.

They day portion of the trip was a great sail down the coast of Washington followed by motoring in the afternoon to improve our ETA at the Bar. Even as the evening drew near, it was a great place to be, at sea. Calm seas, wind 10 to 15 knots, unfortunately dead ahead (as always), so we continued to motor to catch the right tide at the Columbia River Bar. We frequently check the weather broadcasts and eventually were within range to hear the Columbia River Bar reports provided by the US Coast Guard. Good news: the “Bar is Open” with 3-4 foot waves and variable winds. Scott and I were now running parallel to Long Beach Peninsula, approximately six miles off shore. The weather remained the same, clear, beautiful night with a slight wind and occasional gentle rain that started after midnight. At about 0130 Scott and I decided the 25 to 30 knot winds predicted for after midnight were not going to be a reality and pushed on to the Bar.

As we reached the end of Long Beach Peninsula, we could see the lighthouse at Cape “Disappointment”. Our buoy to turn onto the Columbia River Bar was just a few miles ahead. Then at around 0440, the wind came up and hit 25 knots. The ocean erupted with breaking waves from the stern, bow and port corners. Since it was pitch black out, we could only see the whitecaps coming over the top of Sunnyside. By 0500 the wind was exceeding 30 knots with frequent peaks over 35 Knots, and it was still so dark that the night seemed to absorb all light. Even the lighthouse and the vessels on the radar seemed to be absorbed by the night. (Could be we were not looking that hard to see the lighthouse at that time either.) The 10-20 foot waves continued to beat us from the three directions.



At some point the waves threw the autopilot (traditionally referred to as Seaman Auto on Sunnyside, now busted to Seaman Recruit) into a complete mental breakdown. We knew the

heading to the buoy was approximately 150, so that is what we tried to steer. The bow continued to dancing around the sea modifying the desired heading by 20 30, 40, even 50 degrees sometimes every time a wave hit. Unfortunately, the lighting on my new instruments, the GPS and Radar displays were overpowering the red light in the compass. As a result, Scott had to hold a small flashlight pointed into the compass for almost two hours while I wrestled with the wheel. What a team! (Probably not to anyone's surprise we did not get a chance to capture any of this on film) Not pulling in somewhere was clearly the third mistake of the evening, but it was too late to modify that decision.

The Columbia River Bar reports still sounded great, but we had several miles to go to get to the Bar. My knot meter was reading a boat speed of 6.29 knots. That looked great until we noticed the GPS showed us making only 1.97 Knots SOG. Not Good... Not Good at all! But, at least it was in the right direction.

We had to get to the Bar soon. High tide was at 0621 and we were going to be late. We then heard earlier that the Bar would close at 0930 as a result of the ebb tied being severe. And no one wants to get to a Bar when it is closed.... The Bar had also been closed the night before for the same reason, but the Coast Guard reports on the present conditions at the Bar remain good giving us hope.

We could make out in the night that the larger waves were completely covering the foredeck with 6-12 inches of water and the waves were splashing against the canvas and finding every crack possible to leak into the cockpit. Fortunately, the drains in the cockpit were open and worked. At least the gallons and gallons of seawater entering the cockpit quickly disappeared into the deck drains. Something had to go right.. We pushed on toward the turning point at only 1.97 knots.

Then something scary happened. It got light! We could see the waves coming at us. They were real Biggg! It was like being in the surf with the wrong type of surfboard. Occasionally we would come out of a wave and fall about two feet. Initially it seemed like it might have been better not to know how bad a mess we were really in but with the light came the ability to use the buoy we could now see occasionally as an additional aid to steer toward.

After four hours of fighting the sea, we finally arrived at the Columbia River Bar, real late. The bar now looked like the Sea and the folks trying to head out were turned around by the new Coast Guard reports indicating the new poor conditions on the Bar. We had no place to turn. We had to push across the Bar as we knew it was not better out there at sea.

The knot meter remained the same, over 6 knots as did the GPS SOG less than 2 knots. That did not seem to be something that was going to change. We were only going to make less than 2 knots against the conditions so the push across the Bar to Astoria would be long and hard. We tried to maintain a course along the southern side of the Columbia River Bar shipping channel, but the wind and waves kept pushing us north to the wrong side of the track. Luckily, there was not much traffic out there (for some reason). There was a dredging ship that hailed us in the middle of all of this and told us he was planning to stay on the north side and would try to stay clear of us bouncing all over. He also reported the planned arrival and departures of several tanker size ships. Not sure I thanked him, so thanks who ever you were.

Several years back I had heard the story from an old salt about the Columbia River Bar. He had said, "it is amazing some times the sea will be running heavy and all of a sudden a 20+ foot wave will jump up and get you". I really assumed some exaggeration in his story but now I know. The Columbia River Bar is truly a nasty place on bad days. On the south shore you can see crashing waves on the shoreline that are ready to surf and yet it can be tough to see the land on the north side through fog, rain and waves. Oh, and if you get too far out of the channel the water can be less than 6 feet on the north side of the river just after the Bar.

And then! Pow! Slam! Bang! (Just like Dick Tracy) Right over the top of the cockpit, dodger and God only knows how high the wave really was as all we could see was a wall of water. (Actually you get used to it after about the first seven or eight slams.)

At 0930 we were past the bar, but the long trip to Astoria was similar without the walls of water. We reached Astoria about noon and after that it was just a bad weather day for cruising.

Scott and I pulled into Cathlamet late that afternoon. We had been up for 39 hours when we finally hit the sack that night. For some reason we got a real late start the next day to return to St Helens.

What I learned about Scott and myself this trip was of great personal value. My years on submarines and drilling for potential disasters, even going through a few, provided me with the ability to remain calm, keel, and focused in the face of high potential for a disaster. I am not sure where Scott got his calmness and focus. Maybe he will tell me someday.

Sunnyside received some damage this time. The wood on the bowsprit broke at the point where the bow pulpit attaches and the teak trim on the starboard side was removed for about four feet. Pulled the screws right out of the hull. We also received a few gallons of water through three hatches in spite of them being cranked down with a wrench. The sea can be real powerful when it wants to be.

At 57 years old I guess I will still find myself cleaning up after myself in marina restrooms and carrying my garbage to the trash receptacle even at a theater. I may however need to learn the words to the Star Spangled Banner to become as good American as the Canadians seem to be Canadians. I think staying calm, keel and focused when all hell breaks loose is a keeper.

While I readily admit it was a bit scary being in a boiling sea with 35-knot winds for the first time on Sunnyside, remaining calm, keel, and focus on the mission was the difference in our survival and the other option of meeting up with old friends that have gone before us. Remain Calm, keep Keel, and stay Focused Sailors!

By Terry L. Sparks
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