

It's Different at Night

By Peter Mann

Part I

This year's first junior Christmas Cruise was full of unexpected twists and turns. I didn't mean to write a novel when I started this, but it should be a very interesting and educational reading.

It all started at the PMYC clubhouse at 1600 Saturday, December 11th. The whole gang showed up for a chicken dinner and stocking up of the three boats that would cast off about 2 hours later. The two T-birds (Abishag, skippered by George Fleischfresser, Sisu (skippered by Andy Freeman) and a Grand Banks 36 named Galatea (skippered by myself) were all decorated in Christmas lights and were ready for the cruise. Crew aboard Abishag included Garrett Linrothe, Adrian Mason, Becca Feiten and Lauren Trageser. Aboard Sisu with Andy were Max Fleischfresser and Evan Walker. Onboard Galatea with me was Robbie Osterman, Carl Shorett, Levi Lowe, Sam Bice, Maddie Jackson, Kate Olanie and Brooke Shorett. All three vessels had working VHF radios and working running lights (except Abishag lacked a white stern light). Each of us also had a dinghy: Abishag was towing a 15hp Zodiac, Sisu a small rowable dinghy and Galatea a 40hp Zodiac. The plan was to go to the back of the inner harbor, cruise down and through Eagle Harbor and then spend the night at Blake Island. At this time, the weather forecast issued by the NWS was for NW winds 10-20 knots, wind waves 1-3 feet. The good news was no rain was forecasted for at least the next 24 hours and there was no small craft advisory issued at the time. After the hearty meal, the fleet cast off at 1815. Initial wind reports were 17kts at West Point and 15kts at Alki Point, both out of the north.

As we left PMYC, the first of many frustrations popped up. Andy, deciding for himself that it was too late to parade, started to head out towards the Sound instead of following the other two vessels to the back of the bay. He also, apparently, was not monitoring (or had switched off), his radio. After exiting the inner harbor, Abishag and Galatea made radio contact with Sisu and Galatea's radar showed her to be about 2nm east of Pt. Monroe, heading south. The winds were out of the NW at about 17kts and the waves were rolling at about 2-3 feet. Both Abishag and Sisu were holding at least 6kts, with Abishag even reaching 10kts over the ground. Andy decided to run Sisu well off the east shore of Bainbridge, almost jutting into the southbound traffic lane, but we were all keeping in good contact with each other. I overtook him off of Rolling Bay, while Abishag was cruising 2nm dead astern of us. As I approached Yeomalt, the crew on Sisu informed me that they were approaching Skiff Point, a mile and a half or so north of us. Abishag was closing quick, running downwind. As the Tye Shoal light came into view, I prepared to make the turn into Eagle Harbor. It was at about this time that the crew on Abishag expressed their desire to NOT follow me in. It seems as if they were having too much of a blast and didn't want to rig up the storm jib for the sail into Eagle Harbor. I insisted for them to follow me anyways, but (regrettably) decided to let them continue since they were a couple miles behind anyways. The original plan called for us to drop off the people in Eagle Harbor that needed to be dropped off, meet up with an Olson

911, Amicus, skippered by Derek Reijnen, and then all continue to Blake Island. Upon docking at the Star Marine float in Eagle Harbor and taking the dinghy over to the City Dock, we met up with Peter Shorett. He informed us that Derek was not going to be able to make the trip (I later learned from his son Kiel that they had run out of gas near Blakely Rock and turned back to and secured in Eagle Harbor). So, after assessing the situation, it was decided that Peter would join us on Galatea for the trip down. Meanwhile, I was maintaining radio contact with the other two boats. The latest reports I had gotten were that Abishag was just abeam of Wing Point and Sisu was a little bit ahead, off of Rockaway Beach. After getting Peter settled in, we departed the dock at 2130.

The first sign of trouble happened after I had cleared Tyee and again called the fleet for a checkup. I immediately got a response back from Abishag, who replied that he had lost sight of Sisu and they were not answering radio hails. Having the more powerful unit, I myself hailed for Sisu and still got no response. My initial thought was that all of the earlier chatter had rendered their handheld VHF dead on batteries, so we tried calling by cell phone, but couldn't get through. Abishag was now about a mile south of Restoration Point, heading SSW for the northwestern anchorage on Blake Island. Upon rounding Restoration about 30 minutes after Abishag, I noticed a large increase in the wave height, partially to blame on the ebbing current against with the strong NW winds, whipping around the point. I again called Sisu and Abishag and only got a response back from Abishag, still saying that they had lost visual contact with Sisu. Scanning my radar screen, I did see one target way off the port bow, by about 3 miles heading SW, but I couldn't visually confirm with all of the lights of Fauntleroy in the background. Traffic was relatively light in the area. There was a light tug to port running parallel to us in the southbound lanes, a northbound tug and tow on the far east side, the Seattle-Bremerton ferries and a log tow off the north side of Blake Island. My hope was that Sisu was actually well ahead of us and had already moored at the anchorage.

Around 2215 when I was halfway between Restoration Point and Blake Island, I received a transmission from Abishag, telling me that they were on a mooring buoy, along with two other sailboats, neither of which was Sisu. They also informed me of the unusual location of the log tow, which was lit, and how they (not recognizing the orange and white stern lights of a tug towing) had almost crossed between the tug and tow. I rogered and told them I would arrive in about 15-20 minutes. After reaching the anchorage, I confirmed that Sisu was not there and repeatedly hailed them on multiple channels, with no response. After adding up the facts, it was clear that we needed to search for Sisu. Abishag, battered by the wind and seas, stayed put on the buoy while I turned Galatea about and set off to start the search by circumnavigating all of Blake Island. I figured that if I couldn't find them after that, it would be time to call the professionals in and put out a notice to all vessels. We were nearing the mouth of the north marina on Blake around 2300 when I noticed a weak but consistent target on the radar in an unusual location to the west of the harbor entrance. I could not get a visual fix and was squinting to find it when all of a sudden, a white spotlight came from that direction and lit up our whole starboard side. Flipping

on our own searchlight, we spotted the white hull of Sisu about 150 yards away grounded on the shoal-filled waters north of Blake Island, rolled on its side and crashing in the surf. Peter and Robbie immediately donned foul weather gear as I headed into the wind and my crew prepared to launch the Zodiac. As I sat there idling, and pitching up and down in the swells, the anemometer showed a steady 23 knots (gusting to 27), still out of the NW. Another larger trawler also idled alongside us. They, apparently, were the ones whose crew had shined the light on us from shore. As Peter and Robbie slowly pulled off the transom, I noticed the rotating red and white light of a Vessel Assist boat, coming in our direction. After I realized that there was not much more I could do by just sitting there, I guided Galatea towards the harbor entrance. During the whole demise, my remaining crew of Levi, Carl and Sam were working well and hard at securing the deck and preparing Galatea for tying up in the marina. The charted depth in the channel is 13ft deep by only 50ft wide. With the low tide and my relatively deep draft, I showed only 5ft underneath the keel, occasionally jumping down to 3 or 4 as the waves broke around us. Turning the 90* corner behind the break wall, we were out of the mercy of the waves, but the wind was still at us, blowing a steady 17kts. Stopping about 10 feet from the dock, the wind did the rest and after a gentle nudge, we were docked and secured. As we were tying up, Peter and Robbie entered the marina, drenched and told us the situation. Sisu was grounded in about 2 feet of water and they were able to get one anchor deployed to keep her from being swept farther up the beach. The crew of Abishag informed us that they were in their dinghy and were going to beach it and walk across the island to the marina, a wise choice, as the breaking waves and shallow water at the harbor entrance could have easily overpowered them, if they tried to bring Abishag all the way around. I then went on to quickly summarize to them what had happened, but I had to tend to securing Galatea and her decks for the moment being. The three crewmembers from Sisu had waded to shore. They were a little shaken, but after a change of clothes and some hot food, the attention shifted from rescue, to salvage. It was now just past midnight.

BREAK

Part II

A few minutes later, Adam Yates pulled his Vessel Assist boat up to the pier with all of Sisu's recovered gear and proceeded to question the crew. At around 0030, three officers in the Bainbridge Island Police boat arrived in the harbor and joined Adam in Galatea's main cabin, to also fill out a report - not that the Sisu crew was in legal trouble, but just to know what happened. Apparently, they were handling this case, since the King Co. Sheriff (who would normally have jurisdiction) was not going out in these conditions and somebody needed to file an accident report as required by State law, since the damage costs would likely exceed \$500. The rest of us got together as Peter explained the salvage plan. The basic idea was to progressively pull Sisu towards deeper water, while at the same time cinching up the anchor line to keep the waves from taking away any forward progress. Since the waters shoal too far out for Galatea to be of any

towing use, it was decided to use the 40hp Zodiac. Meanwhile, Adam and the Police offered to take anyone up to Eagle Harbor who did not want to spend the night and Sam decided to go along with them. They all were off the dock just after 0100.

The winds and seas were not dying down anytime soon, but the good news was that they grounded right around low tide and it was now coming back up. But because of the heavy seas grinding it on the rocky bottom, the vessel would have to be pulled off ASAP, or there was the possibility of a complete structural loss. This also required the use of a very large anchor, which I had. I pulled the 35lb Bruce anchor and spare rode out of the lazarette and rigged it up. Peter and Robbie donned their gear once again and this time, Garrett also suited up for the trip. They were off the dock at 0115 and battled through the waves to reach the galloping T-bird, a few hundred feet to the west. Some of us watched from the beach, no more than 80 feet away, but unable to help, as the salvage crew did their work. Up close, you could really hear the grinding of the wooden hull on the rocks and the occasional wave breaking over the sides and spraying the cockpit. The first anchor was holding, but time appeared to be running out, as each wave put more and more strain on the system. For the next hour, we sat, watched and waited. The only warm area was Galatea's cabins and most people congregated there, playing cards, listening to music, calling their parents or drying off their soaked clothes. The most recent forecast for overnight was still calling for N to NW winds at 15-25kts, but with wind waves building to 3-5ft because of the sustained winds. The last check of the anemometer still had it blowing close to 20kts. The salvage crew worked through the next hour, slowly making progress, but the weather was not letting up much.

At around 0230, Sisu was finally pulled off the shoal and into deeper water. The three guys towed it into the marina and we all helped to secure it to the dock. Andy seemed to be very excited and relieved as he went through the cabin and bilge, finding no visible damage. There was a bit of water inside, but it didn't appear to be rising. It most likely was just spray from the breaking waves. The only visible damage outside was a large patch of paint scuffed up near the port bow. Most everyone was now exhausted so we stowed all loose gear, checked all lines, figured out sleeping arrangements and hit the hay. There were 10 of us on Galatea and 3 on Abishag. My last time check was at about 0300, as I quickly fell asleep in the aft cabin.

The next morning (or technically, the same morning), had me up at 0745. The winds seemed a little calmer, but not by much. It appeared that it never died down during the night, since the waves lapping at the harbor entrance were pretty steep and white caps were cluttered as far as the eye could see. Flipping the VHF on to KHB-60 (WX 1), I listened for the weather report. There was a high wind warning for King, Pierce and Thurston counties, but the marine forecast on Puget Sound and Hood Canal was only calling for NW winds 15-25kts, shifting E 20-25kts in the early afternoon. A small craft advisory had been issued indefinitely. In the Cascade foothills, gusts up to 65-70mph were forecasted. I called Garrett on Abishag, explained the weather to him and they decided to come and meet us at the marina. It was suggested that I would have

to tow them all the way back to Port Madison, since they could barely make way by motor in the strong northerly winds. As life stirred back up again and people were waking up, we got going on rigging Galatea to tow both Abishag, Sisu, and the three dinghies.

After a quick breakfast, we got going. I moved Galatea to the next slip over, as we oriented all the boats astern of me for the transit out of the harbor. We used the anchor rodes of Sisu and Abishag to attach them to the aft quarter cleats of Galatea. We put the 40hp Zodiac on a bridle going down the middle, right off our stern. The two T-birds towed their respective dinghies. At around 0845, when all lines were set and every man was at his post, we slowly set off from the dock and proceeded steadily out of the harbor entrance. Once again, the high wind and waves were socking us right outside of the harbor, but the weather was unbelievably clear. I could even make out Gedney Island, all the way up in Possession Sound. As I increased the speed of the engines to 1600rpm, the towlines tightened up, but held. Both boats were pounding up and down through the waves, sending spray onto each other's foredecks. We were able to make around 6kts through the water and all was going well until we were a little bit north of Wing Point. The towing line on Sisu parted at the bow chock and they quickly fell behind. Luckily, Andy already had the motor running in the first place and quickly regained control of the vessel. We circled around and threw them the towline. It was retied and we were making way again. The wind never noticeably increased. In fact, it died down. As we approached the inner harbor at around 1100, the winds were a gentle 7kts, the waves small and negligible. At 1115, we were secured at the PMYC dock. Done!!!

Since there was a bunch of food we hadn't been able to eat yet, Peter built us a fire and we all stayed for a couple hours in the clubhouse to make pancakes, bacon and eggs, as well as the salad, chips and salsa from the night before. Quite the meal combo!

Andy and the crew of Sisu then told us how exactly it happened. Apparently, they were not all that much ahead of us, but rather, were way farther east. Andy was not aware of the moorage on the west side of Blake Island, and had assumed that we were to meet on the north side. Unable to find those buoys (they are pulled out in the winter), he proceeded to set a course for the marina. The channel is well marked in the daytime, but only the outermost green mark is lit at night. Andy approached from the west and first came across daymark #2. Mistaking the red triangle for a hazard mark, he left it well to port. The waters in that area shoal very quickly and before he realized his mistake, he was at the mercy of the wind and waves. Sisu turned broadside and before he knew it, they were pounding in the surf. This all took place about 15-20 minutes before I arrived on scene. The lack of communication since Eagle Harbor was due to them dropping the radio, it changing channels, and them not remembering which channel we were all on.

All in all, everything worked out and ended fine. However, it was a very educational experience for everyone, including myself and hopefully, even to those who weren't even involved. Here is my own opinion on some key points about what happened:

1. Stick to the plan. It called for everyone to stop in Eagle Harbor and I expected everyone to follow that. While I can understand the reluctance to duck in while you are having a blast and don't feel like changing sails, it is very important for the fleet to remain as a group and as such, we can more closely be aware of each other and our intentions, especially if there is a loss of radio/cell phone communication. Not stopping was not an option, as there were three people on my boat that had to get off in Eagle Harbor. At the VERY LEAST, I would have expected them to wait off the harbor entrance until I departed. I have since been told that the Abishag didn't want to come in and leave Sisu by themselves. That was a wise decision, but it never should have come to that point. Both vessels should have followed into Eagle Harbor.

2. Communication is the key. When traveling at night, it is very difficult to spot the lights of a small sailboat, against all of the city lights. Therefore, we must keep tabs on each by another means, specifically a VHF radio. Cell phones work great on land, but are slower, cost money and aren't nearly as reliable as a good marine VHF. If contact is lost on a working channel, everyone should rendezvous at a central channel, such as 16 to re-establish communication.

While I was equipped with radar, it can still be difficult to determine who is who and without visual confirmation, can make it very frustrating to make sure we are all together. While I don't think it's necessary to be riding each other's stern, a reasonable distance should be allowed so that we are able to all change course or destination easily. I thought that we were packed appropriately for the transit between Port Madison and Eagle Harbor, but lost it after that. Also, since Galatea was fully equipped, and neither of the other vessels had even a depth sounder, it makes it much easier for me to point out hazards such as that log tow.

3. Know where you are and where you are going. This one is my fault. I knew that George and Garrett were clearly aware of where we were going since I had done that trip with them many times, but it appears that Andy was not clear. I now would have liked to have given each boat a detailed chart showing where exactly to go to and which hazards to avoid. Knowing where you are is the most important thing at all times, in any type of boat, going anywhere, ESPECIALLY at night. Sisu actually proceeded so far east that they passed the "Tango" buoy of the TSS to starboard, which meant they were traveling southbound in the northbound traffic lane - not the best idea in a wooden sailboat at night.

4. Know your boat, know your waters, know your rules. Abishag didn't have a stern light. The crew of Sisu wasn't familiar with the markers and lights. These are basic things that can affect so much, as displayed here. Not only did the lack of a stern light make it very difficult for me to keep visual track of Abishag, but after they hailed both Bremerton ferries, one of them turned a spotlight onto the boat. The Abishag crew then was informed by the ferry that they couldn't see a stern light. I can tell you that small, wooden sailboats don't return great radar echoes when approached from astern. Combine that with the sea clutter on a night like that, and one can expect an exceptionally weak target. In most cases, the survivors from a T-bird-ferry collision at 18kts . . . are on the ferry. On the other hand, I would like to say that they did have a radar reflector raised nice and high. Use them - they work. As for the lack of knowledge regarding the channel

markers, I hope that in the future, they learn what they all mean and how to safely pass them. I also can't emphasize enough the use of charts, charts and CHARTS! Even if you are unsure of the safe way to pass a mark or buoy, consulting a chart will usually show you the safest, deepest route through a channel or around a rock or shoal. That's why knowing your position at ALL times, as said above, is VERY IMPORTANT!

5. Be prepared for anything. While I do feel the forecast happened to be right on (well, since that morning anyways), we all know that the weather around here can be unpredictable and rapidly changing. There also was a lot of debris in the water, due to the heavy rain days during the previous days, evidenced by my collision with a large log off Blake Island. I was impressed with the fact that the crew of the Sisu was able to get an anchor down quickly. Not even 9 hours before, Greg Jackson had suggested to me (among other things) to have at least one or two anchors ready to be deployed at both the bow and stern, especially with the wind doing what it was. Not only was I ready on my own vessel, but apparently, the Sisu was too. They were also all wearing life jackets and warm clothes. That made a big difference in how they felt later.

Overall, the trip may not have happened exactly how it was planned to be, but it still was a worthwhile experience for all. We had some fun, some excitement and some down time (all 4.5 hours of it). We didn't panic – we all dealt with what was thrown at us. Each of us was capable in controlling the situation, even at times when an adult was not available. Everyone was in great spirits since no one was hurt, no property lost and in the end, it was actually a very fun time, in a different sort of way.

I would like to give thanks to the following people who attended or helped out in some way: Peter Shorett, Levi Lowe, Carl Shorett, Garrett Linrothe, George Fleischfresser, Robbie Osterman, Andy Freeman, Adrian Mason, Brooke Shorett, Maddie Jackson, Molly Jackson, Kate Olanie, Sam Bice, Max Fleischfresser, Evan Walker, Becca Feiten, Lauren Trageser . . . and everyone's helpful parents.