

A Small Boat Tale

There is a saying up north,
“The fool killer is out there, waiting.”

It was January of 1984, I had been fishing for shrimp down below Wrangell, Alaska in my 29-foot boat, the J.R., built in 1929.

I had heard there was work in Juneau, since shrimp fishing was slow, I made the decision to travel; it would take me three days to get there.

I traveled north through Wrangell Narrows, past Petersburg, then up Stephens Passage, towards Juneau. I had my concerns; late January is not the best time of year to be boating.

I spent my second night anchored behind Fox Island, there was another boat anchored up as well. I spoke with the skipper of the large 58-foot rig, (I will call him Cap). He was doing the same thing, heading north to Juneau.

For safety, we agreed to keep track of each other on the CB radio for the trip. I made the long run up Stephens Passage with no problems. When I pulled into Taku Harbor for a break, there was Cap's boat, tied up at the small floating dock. We had a visit, and then Cap left to run on into Juneau.

I stayed awhile at the small dock for a meal, enjoying the peace and calm of the harbor; then I headed for town.

Looking back, I should have stayed tied up to that dock. The weather was clear, but the wind was blowing off the Taku Glacier with gusts up to 50 miles per hour. It was strange, the wind would blow hard and then stop for short periods of time.

There was still a stretch of water I needed to cross just outside of Juneau, unfortunately, this is where the wind was blowing the worst.

The wind was blowing so hard I decided to pull in behind Point Arden. To my surprise, there was Cap doing the same thing. He said he was having a tough time setting his anchor (poor bottom).

I set my anchor out but was blown off the shore almost immediately. I added another anchor to my chain, which did nothing at all.

Cap and I were dragging our anchors about every 15 minutes. An hour later the lull came, the wind just quit. I pulled up to Cap's boat, and we agreed to try and make it to town.

I set out first into the waves while Cap pulled his anchor. I was a half mile ahead of him when he called me on the radio. Cap was saying, “It looks pretty good up there.”, just then, the J.R. slammed into a wave and was buried in spray.

Seeing this, Cap came back again on the radio, “I spoke too soon.”

The wind came back fast, we were committed now and it was getting dark. I could see the lights of Juneau but we still had to make it across that short inlet. We came up on Point Arden (the closest point of land) then, the worst happened.

The cable broke on my starboard rudder control, and the wheel went slack in my hands. I was only 150 yards off the shore, I had to find the problem and fix it quick.

The wind was blowing me off course, away from Juneau, back towards the rocky beach. Since I still had port steering, I turned the wheel hard over, now I was making a large circle in front of the rocks. This gave me some time to find the broken cable.

Cap called on the radio, "Ah, where are you going?" I could not respond. I was too busy searching the inside of the cabin trying to locate the broken cable.

I made one full turn in front of the rocks and was coming up on my second turn. I had to get the boat away from the beach. I remember looking out the wheelhouse window for one second, I could see the waves breaking on the rocks. Fortunately for me, the cable had broken off at the first pulley just inside the wheelhouse.

I found the loose end of the cable, and I wrapped it around my arm, I braced my feet against the inside wall of the cabin and pulled as hard as I could. The rudder slowly came back to starboard and the J.R. turned away from the rocks. I found a short piece of pipe to wrap the cable around for the rest of the trip, and we ran our boats on into Juneau. When I told Cap what had happened, he joked that I had "Armstrong" steering.

The next morning, I inspected my boat. After that pounding, I discovered there was a bad leak in the stern, and the middle shaft bearing was torn loose from its mounts. I would not be going anywhere for some time. That afternoon I walked over to the main ocean dock and found Cap on his boat. As we shook hands, he said: "I thought for sure they were going to be scraping you off the rocks."