



Friday, September 11, 2009

Author's note: My wife and I are enjoying some time at the coast this week. The regular Brief will return next Friday. In its place, I'd like to share a story from my youth.

"The Shrimp Boat Incident"

Three of us met at the dock, one hot summer morning, ready for the day's adventure. Pete, Reid and I had been intrigued by news in town of the discovery of a sunken German U-Boat, completely intact and sitting upright on the bottom. Details of her location were closely guarded because of her salvage value.

As we loaded our diving gear aboard Pete's boat, Reid assured us that he was pretty sure he could find the sub with the information he had obtained. He also had it on 'pretty good authority' that the salvers left a temporary buoy on the wreck. We had just enough innocent, arrogant confidence to think we could find it and we were going to try.

We loaded our gear into Pete's near-antique 19 foot Boston Whaler. Were we crazy? We were taking an old boat, not much larger than a sofa, 20 miles to sea trying to find a proverbial needle in a haystack. Loaded and ready to go with a loud grumble, a huge cloud of blue smoke, we were on our way.

After about an hour's ride out to the approximate spot, we spent another hour or so taking bearings to come as close to the spot marked on the chart as we could. We never found a buoy, but we were pretty sure we were close. The depth meter's reading of 125 feet boosted our confidence.

Pete uncoiled his new 200 foot anchor line, attached it to the chain and began to lower away. We watched it descend, quickly at first into the crystal clear water for some 60 feet. It eventually disappeared into a rich violet darkness taking some time before finally hitting the bottom.

Excited beyond measure, we donned our gear, checked our oxygen, watches, depth gauges, flashlights, and recapped our diving plan. We would have no more than 10 minutes on the bottom at that depth without decompression and would not be able to try again that day.

We pulled down our masks, placed our mouthpieces, and rolled over the side into that warm clear water. Our descent was not quite as organized as we had planned; in fact it was more like a race. As we glided down the anchor line the light began to fade and the water grew cooler. Our tiny boat on the shining surface eventually disappeared. The water grew cold and eerily dark in contrast to the hot clear surface we just left. But the sea bottom was in sight.

The bottom was sandy and flat and visibility was surprisingly good once our eyes adjusted to the low light. Reaching the bottom, our disappointment was almost instantaneous. There was no wreck in sight. We each strained our eyes in vain trying to catch a glimpse of anything that might suggest the wreck. But it was of no use. There was nothing around us but sand and an occasional grouper. On Reid's thumbs up, we slowly began our ascent back to the surface. We climbed back into our boat disappointed, but glad to be back in the warm sun. After some lunch and conversation we agreed to try again another day and headed home.

The ride back was easy with the wind and seas behind us. When we entered the Beaufort channel I was relieved that old boat had gotten us back safely. Just then the motor abruptly shut down. There we sat, about a half mile from the Coast Guard Station at Fort Macon. Pete was the only one particularly bothered. As Pete kicked and cursed that old engine Reid and I slouched back to take in the clouds and scenery, comfortable that we could swim home if it came to that. Pete eventually joined us.

After a while, I noticed a lone shrimper returning home with her trawls completely extended. Even at some distance, it looked odd and even a little foreboding. My attention became fixed on the vessel as she grew closer. The inlet was large with plenty of room on either side yet she continued to bear down on us.

I straightened up to gain a better perspective and to my sheer terror saw that the towering wheelhouse absolutely empty! The huge trawler was on a collision course with us without a pilot to alter course.

My first warning to my boat mates was shrill as I couldn't believe it myself, but as the sound of the trawler's diesels driving her through the waves toward us grew ever louder, my next warning held nothing back. EVERYBODY OVER THE SIDE, he's going to hit us!

Jumping over the side, we swam with all of our might. Adrenalin raced through our veins as we swam away. Heads down in the water we could hear the thrashing of the trawler's propellers and her bow crashing through the waves. The thought of being dragged under that barnacle-bottomed pirate made us swim all the faster.

Reid and I pulled up just in time to see the collision. With a sickening shudder, the relentless trawler drove our Whaler underwater for a moment only to explode back to the surface as her bow was lifted violently along the trawler's side. She rose almost vertically, scraping with a horribly shrill sound along the side dumping all of our scuba gear into the ocean. Neither captain nor crew showed themselves as that phantom beast plowed ahead.

After hurling numerous unanswered insults at the shrimper, we swam toward our battered boat. Amazingly she was upright and showed few signs of the encounter. Glad to be alive, but shaken by the experience, we climbed aboard to survey the damage and gather any gear that remained afloat. Looking toward the Coast Guard station we realized that the entire incident had gone unnoticed by them. They would be no help to our case.

Surprisingly that old motor had received the kick it needed. As it fired up we headed for home, planning how we would seek our revenge on the negligent captain.

Early the next morning we set out for Beaufort where we knew the shrimper would be. We lingered at the dock to decide who would do the talking and what we would demand from the captain. Though Pete was the tallest, by a mile, Reid had the build and weight of a fire hydrant. He would voice our anger. With truth and righteous indignation on our side we made our way down the dock. To this day I can still see and hear that salt-shriveled wiry curmudgeon of a captain coming out the door of his wheelhouse to say to the three of us: "Boys, I know why you're here. You are messing with my livelihood and I will not let you do that. Don't take this any further."

We stopped in our tracks. No one said a word as we were each chilled by the piercing realization that this Harker's Islander meant every word he said. We had heard stories in our childhood and contemporary stories of the legendary wrath of Harker's Islanders crossed. At that moment we knew we were beyond our depth. We retreated, vowing to keep the incident to ourselves. And so we did, until now.

On May 9, 1942 at position 34.21N, 76.35W, German U-Boat 352 was sunk by depth charges from the US Coast Guard Cutter Icarus in response to torpedoes fired by the sub. Official records show 15 dead and 33 survivors. George Purefoy, the diver who discovered the U-352 recently invited the surviving members of the crew and their families to a memorial service for the crewmembers who perished.

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