



3 Against the Bay

by Mr. Stan Hardison, Kinston, N.C.



It was daybreak and an early summer sunrise on the Chesapeake Bay is something to see. On this particular morning, there was a slight north east wind changing the surf to low rolling swells and white caps before they rolled into the small marina on the south end of the Bay. Boats of all sizes were slowly rising and falling in their slips, quietly keeping perfect time with the rhythm created by the surface action. The wind was picking up salt spray from the crest of the swells and white caps and creating a light gray film on the windows of boats, buildings, and the few cars and trucks in the marina parking lot. To the north, clouds were building. If the wind stayed in this direction, it was near certain that this part of the Bay would soon be overcast with a strong possibility of rain. The marina's staff had already read the signs and posted a small craft warning. Judging from the time of year, temperature and wind direction, they had every reason to believe the situation would get worse.

It was now 7:15 in the morning and a light blue pickup, towing an almost new 20-foot fiberglass runabout, pulled into the marina parking lot. After lining the small craft up with the public launch ramp, the truck stopped and three men in their middle twenties got out and walked down to the water's edge. They stood without talking for a few moments, looking out over the water and up at the partially overcast sky.

"Whatta' you think, Chuck?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think it's gonna' get a little bumpy out there today. How do you see it, Stone?"

"It could be a little uncomfortable for a while, but I've seen worse. I think it will clear up in an hour or two."

Dan, after hearing the remarks of his two companions, turned his attention back to the rolling water and studied the situation a few more minutes before speaking.

"I know we've been planning this trip for a long time and we've driven a long way, but none of that is worth getting ourselves in trouble. It's your boat, Stone, you call the shot."

"Dan's right, Stone," Chuck spoke up. "We can put this bait on ice and wait for a better day."

"Now hold on you two," Stone interrupted. "I said we're going fishing today and we're going fishing. It'll be a cold day when a few white caps and dark clouds make me go home without wetting a line."

"That's our man Stone. Let's get this baby in the water and catch some big ones."

After launching the small boat, Stone moved the pick-up and empty boat trailer back up the ramp and parked them on the back side of the marina parking lot. He had no trouble at all finding a choice parking spot and he wondered why so few people were not taking advantage of the warm spring

weather. "Looks like we're gonna' be all alone out there today," Stone thought as he switched off the ignition. "But what th' heck. That just means more fish for us."

Stone locked his truck and hurried to join his fishing buddies, completely forgetting the brand new, handheld VHF radio, lying on the floor of the truck still in its original box.

In the meantime, Chuck and Dan made a quick check of the boat making sure they had everything needed for a day of fun on the water. The cooler with the beer and food was checked first; all the fishing tackle was accounted for as well as a second cooler of bait and ice. The extra gas can was in place plus anchor, chain, and line. Almost everything was checked except the northern sky. The clouds were getting darker and the wind was getting stronger.

When all three men were on board, Stone did a fast motor check while Dan and Chuck pushed the small boat from post-to-post along the boat slips toward the open water of the Chesapeake Bay. They joked about not being able to stand up because of rough water, saying that after a few beers, it wouldn't make any difference anyway. As they pushed free of the last slip post, Stone's second try brought the big motor to life accompanied by loud cheers and the whoosh of three beer cans being opened.

About 100 feet from the marina and heading almost due north, Stone

discovered the water was much rougher than he thought, so he decided to check with his companions to see if they had second thoughts and wished to call the trip off. By now there wasn't a hint of sun or clear sky anywhere on the northern horizon. White caps were on all the swells and the wind was getting stronger. With all these signs available to help them change their minds, the three young men had convinced themselves that this was a day to go fishing. Hearing this, Stone kicked the big motor into drive and turned toward the open bay. Two beers each and 40 minutes later, Stone had the small boat over one of his favorite fishing spots.

"This is the place," Stone yelled as he shut off the motor and gave it a fast check, making sure all switches were in the proper position and gas turned off.

Dan and Chuck had the poles ready and hooks baited. Their plans were to eat, drink, drift, and fish. At this point, there was no doubt in any of their minds that when this small craft arrived back at the marina, both coolers would be heavy with fish.

By now the men had gotten used to the boat's rocking and rolling. Not one of them in the past half hour had noticed the condition of the water gradually getting worse. Nor had they noticed the sky in the east was now also getting darker.

Dan was the first to catch a fish. It was a keeper, but nothing to brag about. In any case, this simple feat called for another round of beer. Stone hooked the second one, but it got away before he could get it on board. They drank to it anyway.

It was almost 9:00 in the morning when a light rain started. The cold drops peppered their head and shoulders like so many little wet fingers trying to get their attention and urging them to check the sky and take heed of its warning. Chuck was the first to suggest moving closer to the shore in case the rain got worse and they had to make a run for home.

"What do you think, Dan?" Stone asked concerning Chuck's suggestion. "Are we in for a real boat-bailer or not?"

"There's been no sign of thunder or lightning. I think it'll blow over in a few minutes." He answered while putting on a fresh bait.

It was then that Chuck pointed out that the wind had changed directions slightly in the last half hour, causing them to drift further out into the Bay. The shoreline to the west was now a thin, blurry strip. Without a word, Stone reeled in his line and placed his pole on the deck. He was going to follow Chuck's suggestion and move the boat closer to shore.

The big motor started on the first try and Stone began a slow, wide turn in an attempt to point the small boat toward the marina. The powerful motor had no trouble pushing the open boat up the face of the next slow-rolling swell. It was the angle of the slide down the other

side and the next swell that started a tragic chain of events.

The forward motion and the angle of the turn brought the runabout broadside to the oncoming water and the boat instantly became a 20-foot fiberglass water scoop. It wasn't until they were on the crest of the next swell that they realized small objects were floating around inside the boat, banging against their shins and ankles. The motor was still running and Stone yelled to his very wet companions to grab something and start bailing. Dan quickly dumped the bait over the side and went to work with the empty bucket. Before Chuck could find anything to use, the next swell put every-



Photo by: SSgt Eric T. Sheler

- **Be Weather Wise.** Sudden wind shifts, lightning flashes and choppy water all can be indicators that a storm is approaching. Pay attention to local weather, heed warnings, and keep a portable radio to regularly check weather reports.

- **Bring extra gear you may need.** Keep on board a flashlight, extra batteries, matches, a map of where you are, flares, sun tan lotion, first aid kit and sunglasses. Put things that need to be protected in a watertight pouch or a container that floats.

- **Check:**

- Vessel Numbering
- Life Jackets – one for each individual on the boat
- Fire Extinguishers
- Navigation Lights
- Visual Distress Signals
- Fuel and Fuel System
- Anchor with Line
- Paddle or Oar
- Manual Pump or Bailer
- Electrical Installation
- Galley Installation

- **Tell someone:** where you're going, who is with you, and how long you'll be away. Then get in the habit of checking your boat, equipment, boat balance, engine, and fuel supply before leaving.

- **Ventilate after fueling.** Open hatches, run blower and most importantly, carefully sniff for gasoline fumes in the fuel and engine areas before starting your engine.

- Keep fishing and hunting gear clean and well-packed. A loose fish hook can cause a lot of pain and ruin a great outing. Bring an extra length of line to secure boat or equipment.

- When changing seats or moving about, stay low and near centerline of a small boat.

- Wear a personal flotation device (life jacket).

- **Don't drink alcohol if you are operating a boat.** A blood alcohol content between 0.08 and 0.10 (depending on your state) will put you in violation of this federal offense. About half of the 900 annual drowning deaths involve alcohol.

- Be ready for trouble when a powerboat passes you in a narrow channel. As the lead boat, which always has the right of way, stay on your side of the channel and maintain a steady speed so that the overtaking vessel can pass you safely. Use your radio to discuss this with the passing boat.

- **Anchor from bow, not stern.** Use anchor line length at least five times longer than water depth.

- **Take a boat safety class.** As an extra benefit, you may earn lower boat insurance costs. For information about boating classes, call 1-800-336-BOAT.

From <http://www.onwater.com/firstconcern.html>

thing Dan had bailed out, plus many additional gallons of salty bay water, back into the small boat. The cooler of food and beer slammed into the middle seat and spilled most of its contents onto the water soaked deck. Chuck grabbed the food tray from the overturned cooler and joined Dan who was now on his knees, braced against the front seat, bailing for all he was worth.

Stone finally got the boat turned, but not in time to avoid taking a hard hit directly in the motor. It sputtered, missed a couple of times and died. Fortunately, they were in a position to let

the next few waves go by without taking on much water. This allowed the frantic bailers to lower the water level inside the boat by a few inches.

"Do you have any life jackets?" Chuck yelled as he bailed.

"Yeah, they're either under the front seat or stuck up in the bow with the anchor."

Dan stopped bailing long enough to look under the seat and found two jackets still in their original plastic wrappers. He ripped the cover off the first one and put it on. While pulling the straps tight with one hand, he tossed the other jacket



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to Chuck. Dan then stretched out on his belly across the front seat to reach the small door of the bow storage compartment. He opened the door, but found no life jackets. Two jackets between three men on a powerless boat taking on water isn't even close to an ideal situation.

All this time, Stone had been frantically trying to restart the motor. But he only succeeded in running the battery down. The wind and rain was getting stronger by the minute and a few more gallons of water had been thrown into the small boat.

"Where's that new radio you were telling us about? Don't you think it's about time you started using it and get us some help?" yelled Chuck.

When Stone made no move to get the radio, Dan and Chuck stopped bailing at the same time.

"You do have the radio, don't you?" Dan inquired at the top of his voice.

Stone just looked at this two friends and his expression told them exactly what they didn't want to hear. Without another word, both men resumed bailing.

The wind was blowing in strong gusts now and what was once rolling swells were now breaking waves as far as the eye could see. The rain had stopped for the moment, but another shower could be seen in the northeast and was heading in their direction. Stone thought of the flares in a small starboard compartment.

"We're not that far from shore," he thought. "There's a good chance that someone at the marina will see us." Stone slid across the rear seat and opened the small compartment. The flares floated out, soaked and useless.

Chuck stopped bailing and, without a word, picked up the life jacket Dan tossed to him earlier, ripped off the plastic and put it on. It's human nature, regardless of the situation, to feel better if you have someone to blame for your troubles. In this case, it was Stone. He was the one who forgot the radio, had a motor that wouldn't start, faulty flares and was short on life jackets. It was very easy for Dan and Chuck to convince themselves that Stone was responsible for their predicament.

A big wave and a strong gust of wind hit the boat at the same time, causing Dan to fall forward, smashing his face against the empty food and drink cooler. It didn't knock him out, but he was stunned to the point of finding it difficult to straighten up and keep his face out of the water. In an effort to help Dan, Chuck stood up just in time for the next big wave to hit him in the center of the back and knock him overboard. Dan didn't see what happened because of the blood now running into his eyes from cuts on his forehead. He couldn't breathe through his nose, so he was sure he had bashed it up real good. Stone, panicked and helpless, with no life jacket, just sat in the rear of the boat, clutching the dead motor. It only took a few more waves, hitting hard and washing over the side to sink the small craft.

The sun was warm on Dan's face. It wasn't until he tried to open his eyes that the pain hit him. He had a concussion and couldn't remember why he was all alone, floating around the Chesapeake Bay in a life jacket. He slowly washed his face, feeling the sting of the salt water in the cuts across his forehead. Swelling had completely closed his right eye, but the left one seemed to be working fine. He turned slowly, scanning the horizon, hoping to see something besides water.

"Where am I?" he thought. "I don't own a life jacket or boat ... I think my nose is broken ... What or who did this to me?"

After spotting a shoreline approxi-

mately 100 yards behind him, he started pushing in that direction. Less than 20 minutes later, his feet touched bottom and he started a slow and painful walk toward the shore. Once on dry land, Dan unstrapped the life jacket and let it drop, still not remembering when or who had put it on him.

Dan had been walking south along the shoreline for a little over an hour when he started remembering bits and pieces of what happened. He knew now that there had been a small boat and other men, but he couldn't remember who or how many. The further he walked, the more his head hurt and his nose started to bleed. He tore off a piece of his shirt to wipe the blood away. But try as he may, he still couldn't remember his name or where he was from.

A young couple out for an evening ride, spotted Dan stumbling along the water's edge. After discovering just how bad his condition was, they took him to a local hospital. Chuck and Stone were never found.

Author's Comments: *Nearly 50 percent of all boating accidents are due to weather. Weather is one of the few killers that almost always forecasts its intentions. Those who listen, respect it and realize what it can do, rarely get into trouble. Those who choose to challenge it rarely win. In the case of Chuck, Dan and Stone, it would have taken so little on their part to make this an entirely different story.*

Fish are patient creatures. They really don't care when they get hooked; they'll wait for slick water and a sunny day. Bait is cheap and gas doesn't spoil. So when the weather turns bad, postpone that fishing trip. When a small craft warning is posted, believe it. Keep your boat on the trailer or in the slip and go bowling. The most you can lose is a few bucks or a round of drinks.



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Boating Do's:

- Observe the Rules of the Road
- Carry a life preserver for each person on board: keep life preservers handy and PUT THEM ON in adverse conditions.
- Instruct at least one of your crew in the rudiments of handling your craft in case you are injured or become incapacitated.
- See that all hands know what to do in an emergency and where to find the safety equipment.
- Check weather and tides before going out.
- Check the gasoline system, and make sure that the tanks are vented and that bilges are free of vapors, oil, waste, and grease.
- Be sure that you have enough fuel with plenty to spare.
- Check your battery, lights and other equipment.
- Reduce speed through all anchorage and moorage areas.
- Reduce speed at night and during periods of poor visibility.
- Maintain a proper lookout at all times.
- Take your time in buying a boat or equipment: a bad "bargain" could cost you your life.

Boating Don'ts:

- Overload your boat or allow passengers to move about in a way that may change its balance.
- Leave shore in a leaky, damaged, or poorly constructed boat.
- Venture into dangerous or restricted areas.
- Operate near swimmers or divers.
- Forget that your wake can endanger others.
- Use gasoline stoves.
- Lie at anchor with a short scope of line.
- Mix liquor or drugs with boating.

REMEMBER!

A boat operator is responsible for any damage to persons or property caused by his wake!!!

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