

Tempest to Tangier

By John M. Roberts

The next day's papers mentioned that four people drowned that summer holiday on the Bay. From Cambridge, Maryland down to the Outer Banks off North Carolina, fierce and unexpected winds toppled signs and downed tree branches. Sailors were caught unexpectedly in boats that capsized as the sudden gusts of over 50 knot winds overtook them.

The four boaters in this story did not drown. But we were at risk as we paddled unknowingly into the worst of the day's winds during our crossing of the very middle of the very widest portion of Chesapeake Bay. Our craft were far smaller than those sailboats which capsized. Yet this story is not one of heroics, it is one of trial, errors and perseverance.

As Memorial Day Weekend approached, we planned to paddle our boats to an inhabited Chesapeake Bay island famous for its fishing fleet and Old English-speaking residents. This is Tangier. We would leave from a friend's home which bordered the Bay several miles south of Smith Point Lighthouse and not far from Reedville, Virginia where the Tangier Island ferry leaves each summer weekend for the good restaurants and tiny streets of Tangier. At this point the distance to Tangier in a straight line is about 17 miles.

The plan was to stay on an island owned by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. Permission was given to camp there overnight.

The crossing, as it was called, was to be a first for us, though we all enjoyed extensive whitewater and varying amounts of sea kayaking experience. Billy and I had talked about such a trip for almost a year, considering it to be a sort of rite of passage" to Chesapeake sea kayaking. The other two guys, Jeb and Joe, had also discussed the journey many times. We were competent Class III, and over, whitewater kayakers. The only problem was that one of us paddled C-1 and could not guarantee a roll in a kayak. This was to become more worrisome later in the day.

As the day began, we left our homes for the put-in and were a little late in meeting at the appointed site, a vacation home. An early start had been the plan, leaving by 9 a.m. or so. But time was eaten up and the launch did not occur until 10 or 10:30 a.m. I had a portable weather radio for use on shore. I listened to it as the other three made their way to the beach and I heard a thunderstorm warning for a line of possible thunderstorms from Cambridge, Maryland to Patuxent Naval Station. I did not know where Patuxent Naval Station was, and even though the report added that the possible storms were heading southeast, I was in a hurry to catch up with my friends.

We met on the beach, only a couple hundred yards from the vacation home, proceeded to check our provisions and set out. Billy paddled a well-outfitted Nordkapp, complete with compass. My kayak was a Sea Lion. Jeb paddled a borrowed kayak and Joe, his own. The day was by then quite warm, in the 80's (F), and it appeared the crossing would be hot and uneventful on the glassy bay. None of us wore a

wetsuit, it would have been stifling if not dangerous due to dehydration from over-perspiring. We packed light paddling jackets and plenty of sunscreen. The water temperature was about 70 degrees.

Billy said that we needed to make good time as the last thing we wanted was to be caught in the middle when a storm passes. To the north, several miles away, we could see the Smith Point Lighthouse with its rotating beacon. This beacon changes color as you enter the shipping lanes, three or four miles out. By watching this light, you can tell when you are in these lanes and watch out for fast-moving ships. At 20 knots they can be on top of you in no time!

A heading of approximately 15 degrees north of Tangier was chosen because of the light winds from the north and because Tangier might be difficult to see in the early summer haze. As we approached the shipping lanes, we rafted up and broke for lunch. The scenery is beautiful out in the Bay, far away from shore. Through the haze, we could see up and down the western side of the Bay, but could not yet make out Tangier, about 11 miles away.

Shortly after lunch the wind began to pick up and I lagged behind the other three. The winds were not threatening, however, and we quickly crossed the one to two mile wide shipping lane. Here we came upon a sailboat of 24 feet or so in length. The sailor and his wife were enjoying a relaxing day on the Bay. They were surprised at the sea kayaks and offered us a beer. Two beers were split among us plenty in the heat. The sail boaters parted and continued on their way.

Sometime around 12:30 or 1 p.m. the winds became stiffer, and the seas grew to three feet. However, there was no sign of thunderstorms and we felt committed after having covered approximately 10 of the roughly 15 miles. Still, no sign of Tangier, though. During the next 30 to 40 minutes, the winds steadily increased to about 15 knots. Good progress was being made, even though an increasing "crab" angle was needed to maintain heading. We still headed north of Tangier, realizing that the winds would push us south of our heading and onto our true course to Tangier. At any rate, we did not wish to miss Tangier if the winds picked up even more, for to the south was the very widest portion of the Bay, 25 miles of open water. Tangier is the last in a string of islands leading south down the Bay from Maryland. Missing Tangier could make a long day.

The winds were growing strong now, gusting to 25 or 30 knots. The seas were growing too, passing 5 feet, 6 feet. Could we make it to Tangier? Still, no sign of the island. Stronger still, a storm was certain, only its intensity was in doubt. Time passed, perhaps only 10 more minutes, as the seas grew to 8 or 10 feet or so. The noise of the wind was becoming louder and we struggled to stay together. At least two of us sighted a rapidly moving line of very dark clouds, heading our way. It was only a matter of time before it would be upon us. Could we outpace the worst of it? Maybe, and the best chance seemed to be to turn around. Suddenly a decision was made. "We're turning back!" Billy shouted as he turned his craft from northeast to northwest. The others followed suit.

Up and down our small boats bobbed in the strengthening seas. Visibility was rapidly decreasing in the blowing mist and water droplets. The sound of the storm grew. Looking up, we could see a dark and menacing line of clouds racing towards us. It would be upon us soon. There would be no escape from its

grasp. I realized a wall of wind was almost there. I could see it coming as it beat against the water and stirred up even more mist. "Here it comes!!" I hollered in warning. We all turned to brace into the blast.

It must have been 50 knots or more. 52 knots were recorded at the landing field on Tangier that day. For a few moments, perhaps minutes, all we could do was to brace into the wind, cower down in our boats and furtively glance around to check the safety of each other. What would Aeolus hurl? One of his north winds. And how strong would it be? How high would the seas grow? We all knew that waves grow higher as a strong wind is prolonged. From a river bank, at least a paddler can see what it is with which he must contend, how difficult are the rapids. Being caught six to ten miles from the nearest shores in a sudden storm offers the paddler no such luxury. We knew only that we did not know. We did not know what this sudden gale was, how it formed, or how long it would take to pass. We did not know how long it would be before the winds would moderate or how high the seas could grow during this time. We did not know if we could paddle to shore in the building ten-foot seas. Fishing boats and sailing craft were being tossed almost out of the water. We did not know what would pass those next few hours. We did not know if we would live or, like other unfortunate sailors, we were seeing the end.

Very few words were exchanged; the roar of the storm and the dangers of collision prevented much communication. The horizontal spray quickly brought down the visibility to less than 100 meters. At this point, Joe and I were closer to each other than we were to Billy and Jeb. "Brace into it!" Joe shouted. For a few minutes it was all we could do. My god, I thought, will we be overturned, and will my paddle be blown away? Will we be able to make any progress in this condition? Then, slowly, we grew more accustomed to the winds and we turned farther towards the west and began paddling, or rather bracing, stroking, bracing, and clutching our paddles for dear life. (None of us had used paddle leashes though we did have spare paddles.)

How high would the waves grow? Time alone would tell. They grew to 15 feet and more. The top three feet were breaking now. Occasionally a slightly larger wave would break more forcefully, causing us to duck our heads so as not to take on the full force of the impact. If only they don't grow much higher.

It was then I realized that Joe was taking pictures, pictures of the storm! My god! "Yeegahhh!!!" he shouted. Visions of Slim Pickens riding an atomic bomb to destruction, feelings of defiance, of gathering confidence, and even maybe exuberance at being challenged even though it was a do-or-die situation, flooded my mind. We're going to make it! I prayed.

In the melee, Joe and I had, by default, sort of paired up and now Joe shouted, let's pair up! We made progress, crabbing across the wind, beginning our long ferry across the Bay.

It seemed that Billy and Jeb were having some kind of trouble. "Joe!" I hollered. "Joe, let's get closer to Billy, Joe!!" But Joe could not hear me, and I was afraid to turn around and look at Billy because in the quartering winds I might be knocked over. Joe could, it seemed, turn around more confidently and could see better than I if Billy needed help. I turned. Billy was working with Jeb's boat. "Billy!" I called. "Billy!" No answer.

My kayak drew closer to Joe's. There were a few fishing craft around us. I wondered if we should try to board one, giving up our boats to the sea. We had only a little time to decide, for we were not getting closer to the fishing boats. We could set off a flare. "Joe!...Joe!...do you think we are going to make it?" I asked, considering the possibility of escape on a larger boat. Realizing my question seemed to engender languor and despondency, I added, do you think we should try to board a boat? repeating this over several times before he understood the idea. The answer--a shrug. We both looked around, saw a wildly tossing 20-foot fishing boat. It would be tough to even climb aboard, and once out of our kayaks we would be committed. We both realized this was not a good idea, not yet anyway. With that decision past, our spirits seemed to rise. We pressed on.

More time passed, I turned again. Billy did not seem to want any help. But shouldn't we all stick close together? This is what the books say. "Joe!" I shouted again. "It looks like they are doing something!" I doubted that many of these words reached Joe's ears. I wondered which ones did. Anyway, it seemed that Billy was okay.

Full steam ahead! I was not going to be the laggard this time. I was going to make some headway. Billy and Jeb would catch up later. Surging ahead, I passed Joe, 60 meters away. It was easy to not stick together in these seas. Joe hesitated, I later learned, wanting to stay closer to Billy. Our poor communications were beginning to hurt us. I turned back only occasionally now that I was trying to make headway. Anyway, Joe could keep better track of Billy than could I.

Occasionally, I turned back to see Billy farther away, but they were sticking together and maybe we would be better off as two teams of two. Around us in the melee were other craft, none closer than a quarter mile: a small fishing boat, a more distant but larger boat, and the sailboat with the friendly couple.

It appeared as though the sailboat we had passed an hour earlier was approaching Billy. At this point Joe said he felt as though we were beginning to pull away from the other paddlers and he felt obligated to stay with me and to remain with Billy and Jeb. Finally, Joe decided to stay with me. The next thing I realized was that we had lost Billy. That was easy. Waves were now 15 feet and more high. One paddler could be hidden from another only 25 meters away.

The air was clearing and the wind was moderating with gusts only infrequently to 45 knots or so. However, for the next four to six hours the winds would remain strong and steady above 30 to 35 knots. The seas seemed to still be building. "John!" Joe hollered. And then he said something indistinguishable. Joe repeated. Still I could not understand. After a minute or more we maneuvered our kayaks closer together, maybe 7 to 10 meters apart, as close as we dared. "There's Tangier!" Joe explained. I risked capsizing once again to turn around and look toward the direction Joe pointed. There it was, only 5 miles or so away. The opposite shore, our designated goal, seemed twice as far away. By now we knew we were totally separated from Billy and Jeb, yet hoped that we would be able to link up with them. We should go on. Billy would go on, even if he sighted Tangier since this was our last plan. "Come on!" Joe shouted. I hesitated, Billy said to go west! I looked at Tangier, it was so much closer, but if we missed it, if we were carried south by the ferocious winds, we would be in the widest portion of the Chesapeake

Bay and have at least another 10 or 15 miles of open water between us and land. "Okay!" I yelled. And with that we changed our angle of attack and began to ferry to the east.

Because the wind was out of the north northeast, we now headed more directly into it. More of our energy was expended in fighting the wind and less in making headway in our ferry. However, by now I had learned that my rudder could be very valuable in holding course, or in turning. With its assistance, no longer did I have to pull so hard on the right side of the kayak paddle. My hand, which was starting to fatigue and to ache, could do less work. I believed that we would intercept Billy and Jeb if we aimed back across the Bay. We could then all proceed to the closer shore as a complete group.

This was not to happen. While Joe and I were paddling west, Billy was desperately trying to assist Jeb. Jeb's kayak, because of excess windage, could not be held at a ferrying angle. He could only point upwind or downwind. They would be dead in the water, with a long, long ride to Norfolk, if Billy were not able to help. He did this, in tossing heavy seas by connecting his kayak to Jeb's by a tow line. Through their combined efforts, they were able to make slow progress. Then suddenly, as a wave crested, Jeb's boat yanked on the line and Billy went over. He rolled. They paddled some minutes more. And pop! The line broke loose. They drew close again and Billy reattached the rope. This time it held, though Billy would have to roll up several more times when he was yanked over.

As Billy and Jeb were continuing to hold a westward course, we approached the area where bombing practice is run on sunken warships just west of Tangier. It crossed our minds that perhaps these vessels would offer some shelter from the waves. In the clear skies we saw the ships were only a mile or two away. We could see the windows and anchor lines in the distance. However, they did not lie on a direct line to Tangier and we held our angle. There were, by now, no boats to be seen anywhere on the Bay. For a half-hour we paddled hard and during this time it seemed as though we made little progress. The ships were at the same angle to Tangier, or so it seemed. How could this be? We could only paddle on and hope that our strength would carry us to Tangier itself. We hoped that we would not be carried south of this last refuge.

Finally we could tell that our energies were bringing us east. The ships were now to the south and not southeast. On the other hand, the waves grew higher and as I looked down it seemed as though the water had changed color from blue-green to a lighter shade of green. We were entering a shallow area with higher and steeper waves. Changing our direction, we headed more northerly, more into the wind. This angle slowed our progress eastward. But it was our only apparent choice, 15-18 foot waves were high enough!

After another half hour to hour of paddling, it was apparent that we would likely intersect Tangier. Joe led the way. We were only 2 or 3 miles away now and we could see the northwest corner of Tangier clearly. The water tower guided us. Winds tossed the waves and boats were rocking in their harbors. We were approaching the beach near the Tangier runway. No one was in sight. We could see the Crisfield ferry leaving Tangier. Water splashed up higher than the ferry itself as it plowed its way to the east. In a few moments it disappeared behind some trees.

For such a perilous journey, our landing was ironically uneventful. No one witnessed the actual landing, though some people walking on the south portion of the island must have seen us pass by a point. Joe landed a full five minutes before I did. The beach was gently sloping for about 30 meters up to grassy ground. After resting for twenty minutes, and considering camping there, we elected to go on. We carried our kayaks up the entire length of the runway, several thousand feet, to the small office, passing by a returning aircraft. The people inside were very helpful, telling us of measured gusts to 52 knots. We tried to figure out what to do about Billy and Jeb. Should we call their homes? Should we call the Coast Guard? Should we rent a plane and go look for Billy? We were not familiar with the procedures and legalities of a search. We elected to wait, asking the men to watch our boats as we went to walk around the town and eat a leisurely and delicious seafood dinner.

On returning to the airport office, we decided to call Billy's parents and the Coast Guard to alert them of our problems and lack of knowledge of Billy and Jeb's whereabouts. We could not reach Billy's parents right away, and left a message with a mutual friend to call them.

The winds were still quite strong, perhaps 20 knots or more. But we decided to head on to the island owned by VIMS, only a mile or two to the east, where we planned to spend the night. On the way over, we ran into the island manager, a very friendly guy who was all too willing to assist us. On landing, we were welcomed into his home, and quickly too, for mosquitoes were plentiful even in the winds. Here we telephoned Billy's parents once again, and finally made contact. They were worried. We also talked to the Coast Guard a few minutes later and learned that they had just talked to Billy. It seems that the Coast Guard called the phone number of the cottage where we met in the morning and Billy and Jeb had just arrived and answered the phone. No search was necessary. They immediately called their relatives.

Note: All names with the exception of the author's name have been changed and are fictitious.

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