

ONE AMAZING DAY

STOKEY WOODALL

“**H**aving left the army in 1979, I set up Compass Yacht Delivery and was on my first delivery job with Alan Toone on 25 February 1980. I was 27 and the trip was aboard a 41-footer from Mombasa to Malta.

We basically knew nothing. We were soon to learn we were going the wrong way, at the wrong time of the year, on the wrong sort of boat. We spent 59 days doing the first 1,800 miles, ending up in Aden on a boat where nothing worked. The engine had no power, so with a two-knot current against us, we had to sail 48 miles every day to stay in the same place. We replaced the batteries in Port Sudan, but they were topped up with fresh water not distilled, so died. We ended up becalmed in the Red Sea 50 miles from land.

The water was glassy and there was no shipping around, so I went below to prepare an early meal. Before Alan came down below he scanned the horizon for ships. While we were enjoying a fine meal we heard a sudden rumbling. I leap on deck to find a ship looming down on us. Before we had time to think, it sailed straight through us, chopping the stern of the yacht clean off. We went down in less than eight seconds.

As the ship hit, our yacht spun round, sucking her down and along the side of the ship and the wash from the propeller filled our little boat with water. Alan was trying to

release the liferaft, but it was impossible because he was underwater at this stage. I was hanging onto the mizzen mast and as the boat went down I was climbing up the mast. As I got to the top the boat disappeared. Although it was a far from comical situation, we found ourselves laughing and Alan said if we ever survive this situation, the memory of me going up that mizzen mast will stay with him forever.

As an ex-paratrooper Alan was clued up on survival exercises. He told me to grab any debris I could find to keep us afloat. One was a bunk cushion. So sharks couldn't see our limbs dangling below the water, we unzipped this, took out the foam and we climbed inside. We then wrapped the foam around us to create a liferaft.

Sharks were our biggest issue, but we only saw one and it wasn't hungry. However, as night fell we realised how vulnerable we were. I was fairly positive, but Alan pointed out that if a ship didn't see us in daylight on a 40ft yacht, it was hardly going to spot our two heads in the dark. We argued for the first hour about whether we were dead – Alan said because he never expected a ship to stop, he would never be disappointed when it didn't, which in this sort of situation was the only way to survive – and made a pact. If one of us



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died, the other one would put his head under. That is quite an important point because there were a few times when I really felt I was going to die and he'd say: "No, no, if you go I have to end it too."

The next day, we saw some ships passing in the distance, but there was never any chance of them seeing us. All the debris around us from the yacht had disappeared and we felt totally alone. We knew we would never survive another night.

Suddenly we saw the sextant floating near us and managed to break off the mirror to use as a potential signalling device. Then, the Henri-Lloyd Consort jacket given to me by a former girlfriend floated to the surface, 21 hours after we had sunk.

It was fairly spooky because when I broke up I'd kissed her and said: "That's just in case I don't see you again." She'd replied: "Stokey, you're like a bad penny, you'll always come back." From the moment I saw the jacket I had a feeling we were going to be saved. Alan swam out, grabbed the jacket, turned it inside out to reveal the red lining, and within half an hour we had been picked up by a tug towing an oilrig.

When the crew of the tug saw us they launched a tender and pulled us from the sea. It was the most amazing moment of our lives. We gathered our wits, smiled at one another and shook hands. I then said: "Alan, I have to ask: would you really have put your head under if I'd died?"

"No, course I wouldn't, you fool," he said.

I wrote in the ship's logbook: "Thank you for the rest of my life."

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Stokey Woodall talked to Sue Pelling

SNAPSHOT



This picture shows me being filmed on board a square rigger in Ostend for a new BBC programme to be shown next year. The book is the first ever edition of the Nautical Almanac and I was talking about the influence that sailors had in getting the astronomers to map the position of the moon and stars