

Don't Do What I Did!

By Captain Vincent Pica

For many years, I was a navigator/tactician in a sailboat racing crew out of Port Washington (also Newport, Rhode Island). One Thursday night in June 1983, the captain of our crew and the boat's owner (Martin Boorstein, S/V Isis) called me to say that a helmsman and a navigator were needed for a boat racing down to Bermuda. "They get underway on Saturday. I know the skipper. Wanna go?" In one New York second, I said, "Yeessssssss!!!!!"



When I showed up at the dock that fateful Saturday in June 1983, I remember looking at the hull and thinking to myself: *How 'beamy'...* I hope

we don't run into any foul weather... we'll be pushed around like a sausage on a plate. However, everyone was so busy getting ready and so excited about the passage that no one completed a checklist before leaving the dock. My own extensive 60-line-item checklist includes a weather report and the state of the medical kit, and is "SOP" whether racing or running a maritime observation mission.

As caught up in the exhilaration as everyone else, I failed to notice the oversight and was soon below at the nav-station, laying in a course. Within two days, my initial fleeting fears were realized: we sailed right into Hurricane Alberta, about 300nm east of Cape Hatteras, Virginia. A rogue wave hit us, sending me sailing like a catapult ball!

The blow nearly opened up the side of my head, which was the worst time to realize that the medical kit was woefully deficient. Employing a little duct tape and a lot of scotch (most of it into the cut), I recuperated enough to be back at the nav-station in about four hours. Knowing that the US Navy puts to sea in a hurricane, I raised them on our VHF radio (we were 300 miles out and VHF only reaches as far as line of sight -

so at last the sea gods were on our side) and asked for advice. Learning we were out of New York, the Navy operator counseled me to "Come about and let the storm blow you home. That's where it's going. You boys don't sound like you're ready for another 300nm to Bermuda."

We took the advice, and headed home, but the key to my story is that we should never have left the dock in the first place. If we had been diligent and followed protocol, we never would have thrown caution to hurricane force winds and jeopardized our wellbeing. Safety must always come first. ⚓

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