

A SAILING FURY

By Joe Bradley Bennett

The old man carefully rigged the small sailboat on the beach. His young tow-headed grandson was by his side, pretending that he knew what he was doing. They drug the boat across the sand, and pushed it into the warm bay. As they jumped on the boat and kicked off, a good breeze was quartering behind them. The sail went up and the dagger board went down as the water deepened.

Boqueron (Big Mouth) Bay lies on the southwest corner of Puerto Rico. The bay alternates between being the calmest of waters with gentle sailing breezes to having fierce, gusty winds and at rare times, hurricanes. This was a rare time. All hurricanes start somewhere. God gets mad, and he roars and hollers in the form of hurricanes. This day, an unpredictable hurricane was born near Puerto Rico

The wind was fun. That was the fastest that the little boat could go. They would catch the wave crests and run. They cut back toward the wind and challenged that piece of pie that a sailboat cannot enter. The water splashed over the little boat, and the old man's glasses were blurry. He could still see well enough to tell that the bow was digging into the waves at times. A small boat cannot be steered when the bow is taking water. He knew better, but it was fun. They sang, "Sailing, sailing, over the bounding waves..." He had almost convinced himself that no other words existed, because he didn't know any other words. The wind whipped the words from their mouths.

On the beach, under that special tree, the shade was no longer needed because clouds had quickly rolled over the entire area. She looked up from the paperback and sensed that something was wrong. She could still see that red, white and blue sail, but it was far in the distance near the mouth of the bay. She tried to tell herself that this was just a passing shower. She had seen him run around them before and survive.

The world started to explode. She grabbed for the second chair as it blew away, and chased the lid to the ice chest into the surf. A lightning bolt hit entirely too close. She breathed easier for a moment as the wind subsided a bit. It immediately roared back stronger. Something was wrong!

The wide mouth of Boqueron Bay is blocked for the most part by a reef. He had sailed out there before and gone through the narrow channel. The water was churning now, and the channel could not be seen. The wind had grown so strong that it was impossible to turn upwind to return to the beach. The boat would only run with the wind, and only with the old man and little boy hanging completely out to balance it.

He finally got scared - really scared. After many years of sailing, and a few slight scares, it finally came through to him loud and clear that he was in trouble. The grandson was starting to think that maybe his grandfather was not all seeing and all knowing.

A driving rain started, driven almost horizontally by the wind. A sudden break in the dark sky showed the reef immediately in front of the fast moving sailboat. The old man pulled the

dagger board up quickly as he moved his body by instinct to compensate for the lack of stability of the dagger board. The little boat zipped over the rocks at the mouth of the bay, and was lost in a monstrous sea that had gone wild with the storm.

The boom line to the sail was ripped out of his gloved hand as he pulled the dagger board up. The sail was now loose and running in front of the boat. He still had the rudder under a firm grip, and was keeping the boat from overturning in the growing, pounding waves. The wind was too strong to ever control the sail again, and he knew that it had to come down. He reached for the mast line, and almost lost control of the rudder. The kid saw what the old man was trying to do, and attacked the line in the cleat. On the third try, it came loose and he looked back to the old man for instructions.

The old man nodded, and the kid released the mast line. As the sail started down, the old man cut the rudder sharply to the right. The boat turned about and faced the wind, barely topping a five-foot wave. The sail came down on top of the boat as it tossed violently on the waves. They scrambled to wrap the sail around the boom, and the boat was completely out of control in a sea gone mad.

Neither of the two had any fear of the water under normal conditions. The old man could not remember when he learned to swim, and he had made sure that the grandson could say the same. It was *time* to be afraid of the water. He carefully timed the ever-growing waves, then reached back and took the rudder off the boat. He put the rudder in the small cockpit, and the kid on top of it. Then he crouched over the cockpit with a death grip on both sides of the boat.

The swells reached twenty-five feet, but the little boat stayed on top, bobbing like a cork. Then a swell broke, and they were under water for almost a minute. The boat turned completely over, but they stuck with it. The dagger board was halfway out of its slot. The old man quickly pulled it back into the slot, and pulled the boat onto its side. Pushing against the dagger board with his feet and pulling on the side of the boat with his hands, the boat popped upright again between two huge swells. The kid was still clinging to the sides of the cockpit and holding his breath. The old man shook him, and he started to breathe again.

The scene repeated itself many times until the old man was so exhausted that he could barely right the boat. The kid had long since ceased to speak, and only his white knuckles on the side of the boat showed that he was still alive. After many hours, the main storm was far enough ahead of them that the waves quit breaking, and only the huge swells remained. The rain became light, and the old man went into a half sleep from sheer exhaustion plus the rhythmic rising and falling of the swells.

He awoke to darkness. The swells were still high, but a couple of stars were visible near the horizon behind him, which he took to be the east. The kid was sound asleep, and had released the death grip on the boat. The old man joined the kid in sound sleep.

The hot sun woke the old man the next time. He had no idea how far they were from land. He focused tired eyes and checked the entire horizon. What appeared to be a low flat island could be seen in the distance to his right front when they were at the top of the swells. He shook the kid awake.

She burst into the Maritime Police Station like the storm that was raging outside. She went around the desk, and literally had the Sergeant up against the wall. The excited exchange was in poor Spanish and in poor English, but they were understanding each other in typical Puerto Rican fashion.

The Sergeant told her repeatedly that no boat would go out in that kind of weather. The Lieutenant came out to the uproar, and reinforced what the Sergeant was telling her. She insisted that the Lieutenant call the Coast Guard. He was only too glad to do so, because she had him up against the wall now.

The Coast Guard Duty Officer informed her politely that there was no cutter in the area west of Puerto Rico, but one would be dispatched as soon as the weather permitted. They would call her as soon as a cutter was on the way. The storm cut the phone line before she could restate her case. The Lieutenant had prudently disappeared back into his office, so she turned on the Sergeant again with renewed fury.

“The boat trailer is chained and locked to a tree near the beach. My husband always does that so we don’t have to worry about it being stolen while we sail. I don’t have the key. He has it pinned inside his pocket.” The Sergeant said that he didn’t know why she wanted the trailer if the boat was lost at sea. He immediately wished that he had not said that.

She drove back to the beach slowly, and cried while the wind rocked the car. She tried the radio, but only understood about half of the weather report in Spanish. Even after seven years in Puerto Rico, understanding Spanish on the radio was still very hard for her. She did understand that the storm was slowly moving out of the area.

Mona Island lies about fifty miles to the west of Puerto Rico. It measures about five miles by eight miles, and was a jest of God. One plate was shoved on top of another many years ago, and caused a flat island about 300 feet above sea level. The island was inhabited by wild pigs and goats. There were also prehistoric looking Iguanas as long as three feet with tails almost as long as they were. The little island looked like heaven to the old man.

The kid had adjusted to the roller coaster ride of the swells, and was back alert. “Gramps, why can’t we use the sail? It’s still here.” The old man came alive, and pulled the rudder from inside the cockpit. He balanced himself, lying full out to the rear of the small boat, and put the rudder back on. The boat stopped some of its wallowing in the heavy seas. They unrolled the sail, and hoisted it. The little boat surged toward Mona Island before the strong wind that was trailing

the hurricane.

They were extremely lucky in that neither had a tendency to get seasick. The highest swells in the world can be ridden as long as they are swells. When they break into waves, they can take out some big boats. The closer they came to the island, the more it looked like a three hundred foot wall.

“Gramps, you thirsty?”

“Like a horse”

“You think there’s water on the island?”

“I know there is. They keep a small group of policemen out here. All we’ve got to do is find them.”

They lapsed into silence again. It was apparent there was no way to get on the island from the east. He cut the rudder to go around to the south. It was still cloudy at times, making it difficult to see below the surface. He suspected rocks that he could not see. He had the kid pull the dagger board up half way just in case. The wind was still strong, and they were making good time. A little piece of sandy beach showed on the south side of the island. He headed for the sand.

The kid had never been much for talking. He hopped off onto the sand as the old man nudged the bow of the boat onto the beach. “Do you think anyone will believe what we did, Gramps?”

“I doubt it, Newt, I seriously doubt it.”

They pulled the boat securely up on the sand, and lowered the sail.

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The thirst was much worse than the hunger. The old man knew that there had to be water somewhere from all the rain that the hurricane had caused. They climbed up through the rocks until they found a large puddle. It was clear, and there was nothing swimming on the top. They lay prone, and drank long and hard. Then they drank again and again. They sat and looked out at the vast ocean that was still far from pretty. By the time they reached the boat on the beach again, hunger was calling as loud as the thirst had before.

“I guess we sail on around. There’s sure nobody around here”

They kicked off easily. The sun was starting to break through at times, showing beautiful blues and browns beneath the surface. There was beach down much of the south shore of the island, but no sign of anyone or any man-made thing. As they sailed inside the reef along the

west side of the island, the kid pulled the dagger board up without being told when it appeared the rocks were shallow enough to hit it.

They pulled in near the little pier on the northwest corner. The camping area was deserted. One of the policemen had seen the sail, and was walking toward the little boat. He shook his head in disbelief.

“How did you get out here?”

“The hurricane brought us”

“In that little thing?”

The meal in the police mess shack was the best of their lives. It didn’t matter that it was reheated leftovers from the last meal. Red beans and juice over white rice went very well with the big hunks of pork in a thick brown sauce. The tropical punch of guava, passion fruit and papaya juices washed it down.

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The Coast Guard cutter pulled in near the reef and anchored. A small motorboat was sent in through the narrow channel. Many years ago, the U.S. military had blasted a hole in the reef. There were two orange, diamond shaped signs on the slope rising to the top of the island. Lining them up would get you through the channel. It was simple, but it worked.

The young enlisted man in charge of the small boat climbed up on the small pier, and addressed the policeman in English. The policeman did not understand. The old man stepped forward, and asked if he could translate. It went smoother after that.

The young man wanted to pick up the old man and the kid as he had been ordered. The old man was adamant that they were perfectly capable of sailing out to the cutter. After several exchanges with the cutter by walkie talkie, the Captain finally said, “Okay, let’s see if the old man can sail. What have we got to lose? The sea is finally calming down a bit.”

The old man and the kid rigged the sailboat quickly on the beach to one side of the pier. The wind direction was not all that favorable. The kid had the dagger board up more than down on the short trip out. The cut in the reef was narrow. Three tacks before the reef and two after proved beyond a doubt to the crew of the cutter that the old man could sail. They hoisted the sailboat aboard and then pulled the small boat up.

The young Captain received the old man on the bridge as the anchor was lifted from the bottom rocks. “Cap’n, we sure appreciate this. Course, we could have sailed back, but we’re a little weary. The little old lady is probably a bit worried. Y’all got communication with Puerto Rico? The police had a devil of a time getting through to you after they got the antenna back up.”

The Captain would have to add this one to his list of unusual experiences. He was still having trouble believing that an old man and a kid had survived fifty miles in the edge of a hurricane in a boat that small. "Radio contact this far out is difficult, but we'll get through before we've gone very far. Make yourselves at home. We had breakfast an hour or so back, but I'm sure the cook can find you something.

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She was a "people person", and it went against her grain to be alone. She had intentionally stayed by herself since she arrived home. There had been constant prayers interspersed with violent fits of anger and phone calls from friends. She had always thought that the sailboat was dangerous, and she had steadfastly refused to learn to sail. She had seen the boiling ocean that had swallowed her husband and only grandson, and she really had no hope. She thought of the many years they had waited for that grandson, and the prayers became anger again.

She jumped when the phone rang again. She didn't want yet another call consoling her. A somewhat cold and impersonal voice from the Coast Guard base in San Juan informed her that her husband and grandson were alive and well and on their way back to Puerto Rico. "Could she meet them again at Boqueron?" Her yes was hardly audible. Then she said it again and again until she was yelling into the phone.

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The old man went to the door of the Captain's office and knocked lightly. The old floppy white sailing hat that had somehow survived the storm in the very back of the small cockpit was in his hand. "Cap'n, I don't want to appear ungrateful, cause we are. Extremely grateful for y'all takin us back. He made a ball of the white hat as he talked. "Cap'n, you're a sailor, or you wouldn't be here. I'm a sailor, or I wouldn't be here. Drop us off outside Boqueron Bay and we'll sail back in the same way we sailed out." The Captain couldn't answer for a minute. Then his reply was the stock in trade line that all rescued people are taken to the nearest port.

"Cap'n, who docks this boat when you come in?"

"I do. Sometimes the XO does."

"Cap'n, I've always sailed my little boat onto the beach myself. I never had to ask anyone if I could before."

The Captain stewed. He thought about regulations, and he thought about calling the command center. Instead, he had the old man, the kid and the boat put off a half mile outside the bay.

The rudder went down, the dagger board went down and the sail went up. This time they could see the rocks and the channel in the brilliant blue water under a bright sun that would shine until the next storm.

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She stood on the beach and watched them tack against the wind as they made their way across the wide and beautiful bay to the sand by the favorite tree. She cursed them softly under her breath and cried as they came out of the water. And she loved them.