

The Burdens of Command

Written by Jack Northrup

I am fascinated by the dynamics taking place aboard my sailboat. I'm not talking about wind, water, and motion. I'm talking about human dynamics, the kind of behavior that cause fathers to swear at their sons, wives to threaten divorce, and friends to grimace when the skipper puts on the white captain's hat. The intimacy of the cockpit is a double-edged sword—great when you're sharing the day with people you like and who can handle close quarters—not so good when things start to fall apart. This is one of those "dynamic" stories.



I'll preface what follows with an admission. I am a student of deviant behavior-- someone who is more interested in what's wrong than what's right. If you're for it, chances are that I am against it. I raised my three sons playing games such as guess the IQ of the passerby by the way they swing their arms when they walk, or I can get this person to eat that food even though they are on a diet, and just how angry is she? You get the idea. Donald Crowhurst-the guy who allegedly went crazy after sailing circles in the Atlantic for months during the 1968 Golden Globe race, and then stepped into the ocean-is my hero.

This kind of behavior, or approach to life, works well when there is sufficient physical distance between the observed and the observer. However, the small confines of a sailboat cockpit tend to not only accelerate worst-case scenarios in human behavior, but also accentuate the streaks of deviant behavior that we all possess. And I am no different than anyone else when it comes to this issue. When the observing deviant becomes the observed deviant, things can get interesting on board.

A week after we had purchased our first ever sailboat, *Surprise*, a 1977 Pearson 323, I decided that what our family needed was an all-day Saturday sail on Lake Champlain. The Lake separates New York and Vermont and has something for every type of boater. The crew consisted of me, my wife Ronnie, and our three

sons, Brice, aged 27, Jamie, aged 21, and Joseph, aged 17. Unlike other people, whom I could convince that I knew what I was doing as a skipper, there was no fooling this crew. They had seen me destroy Volvo transmissions trying to reverse out of a snow bank, incinerate Oldsmobiles by ignoring flashing dashboard lights and black smoke pouring out from under the hood, and be ticketed by all known branches of law enforcement for driving uninspected Subarus on flat tires en route to the junkyard. My family figured sailing would be no different, although they had a bit of curiosity as to what method I would use to sink the boat, given my history with vehicles and lack of sailing experience. But, after all, this was my boat, although I kept telling everyone that once they learned to sail, they could use it. I never believed a word of that pronouncement.

On that particular summer's Saturday, Ronnie, Joseph and I arrived early. Brice and Jamie lived the closest to the boat, so they, of course, arrived late. We piled into the boat for the first family day cruise. No agenda, no worries, just fun.

It was a beautiful day, with the wind blowing at about 10 to 15 knots. Of course, I could not tell this because the instruments on the *Surprise* consisted of a broken wind speed indicator, a knot meter that did not work and an old-style LCD depth gauge. No matter. We cast off and headed out to the broad Lake.

In order to access the main body of water, it was first necessary to sail through a channel that cut through a very long rock causeway—an old railroad bed that used to carry passengers from Albany to Montreal in the late 1800s. The cut connects our home waters of Malletts Bay to the bigger lake. The width of the cut is about 100 feet. As we approached, the chart showed a mean minimum depth of nine feet. The channel through had been dredged to 25 feet in depth. Once through, the water shallowed out to about 10 feet and gradually got deeper as you entered the lake.

I pretended not to be nervous as we approached and started to sail through. The reading on the depth gauge was close enough to that of the chart that I had gripped in my hands, so I didn't have to turn away from my family to mop my brow in nervousness. We passed through into the Lake and I breathed a sigh of relief as the shallow water became deeper. We made it! Onto the lake and adventure!



At the time, all three of the boys were down below taking turns fooling around on the VHF radio. Joseph used the ship's mounted VHF to call Jamie on Channel 16. Jamie, using the head, held the handheld VHF and responded to the hail with those phrases from Joseph's past that were sure to torment him. His favorite phrase was "Calling Bo, calling Bo, Bo-dacious, bo-dacious." This greeting was a variation on Bobo the clown, Jamie's favorite name for his younger sibling. Eventually, the Coast Guard interrupted their conversation and read them the riot act for using the hailing frequency for family therapy. Ronnie meanwhile lounged in the cockpit, enjoying the scenery and reading the Lake Champlain cruising guide. Brice trimmed the sails and I dutifully played the role of Miles Smeeton.

We set a course for one of the many islands dotting the lake. All of a sudden Ronnie said to me "Jack, look at the depth thing, is it really that shallow here? The chart says we are supposed to be in deep water."

I looked at the antique gauge. Every two seconds a new reading was displayed. It was reading, in feet, 11, 11, 10, 08, 09, 07, 09, 08, and so on. You get the idea. I did a quick mental calculation and added another two-and-a-half feet to the reading, given the placement of the transducer. I quickly grabbed the chart and attempted to locate where I thought the *Surprise* was. We were supposed to be in deep water, but the depth gauge was flashing, 07, 07, 06, 07, 06, 06. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that the NOAA was playing a trick on me, locked into a business alliance with SeaTow. I looked around. There were no other boats near my position. Obviously they knew something that I did not. What a moment ago looked like an endless expanse of deep water now felt like a shallow swamp.

I tried to stay calm. I yelled down below. "Boys, come on up on deck. We're in trouble." They rushed for the companionway, excited at the prospect of paternal emasculation, and fought to see who could get up the ladder first. As they exploded into the cockpit, Ronnie went below, to say her goodbyes to the

world. The depth gauge kept plummeting-06, 06, 05, 05, 05, 04. I thought that if I was that far off in my navigation skills, turning the *Surprise* around would be of little use. My stomach started to tense up. I had to admit to myself that not only did I not know what I was doing, out there on the lake with my family and this enormous boat, I had no clue what to do next.

What should I do? Tell the children to put on life jackets? Abandon ship to the dinghy we were towing behind? Issue a Mayday? Light a flare? I quickly explained the problem to the boys, and amidst their laughing at me for putting us (again) in complete life-threatening danger, all four of us became transfixed, staring at the flashing red numbers displayed on the gauge. 05, 05, 04, 04, 04....

I ripped my eyes from the gauge, and once again I looked at the chart. Something was wrong. We were supposed to be at a depth of over 100 feet, but the depth gauge said we were about to ground. What's the bottom like? Is it mud? Is it rock? I wondered what the noise would be like when we hit bottom. Would it be like driving into a fresh snow bank or hitting a brick wall? I told the boys to sit down and hold onto something. They were having a great time. Yelling would do no good. Who would I yell at? I could feel my knees begin to shake. Time slowed. I was having trouble talking. I started dividing the price I paid for the boat by the number of days I had owned it. The math was very simple and the answer was in the even thousands of dollars. The gauge read 04, 04, 03, 03, 02...here we go. Hang on!

The anticipation was to be worse than the impact. The boys suddenly got quiet, sensing the impending doom, but none would betray any fear to the other. I don't think they were so concerned with the boat sinking, as they were with the irrational behavior (mine) that would begin as soon as the water reached their knees.

The gauge read 02, 02, 02, 01, 01, 01. I braced for impact. No time for anything else. 01, 01, 01, 00, 00, 00, 99...99? Wait a minute. What does that mean? 99, 00, 00, 99, 98, 98, 97. What happened? Jamie yells out "You idiot. The depth gauge only has two digits. After 99 feet it reads 00 to tell you it's 100 feet deep. I can't believe you're my father." All three of them now were laughing at me. The swamp once again became a deep lake. My relief caused a temporary inability to provide a quick and witty comeback. They sensed this and went in for the kill.

"Why don't you learn how to read gauges before you learn to sail?" "How the heck are you going to get anywhere in this tub if your first instinct is to sink the boat?" "I bet you forgot to pay the insurance." "How many years of education do you have?" My children. I was almost reduced to a quivering, crying adult. Three on one. No fair.

Why hadn't Harry, the previous owner, told me about this feature of the gauge? All right, it was 25 years old, but someone should have mentioned this. Shouldn't

there have been a warning? I looked around and thought 'You know, it's only my wife and kids that know what happened out here, no one else. I can always deny that this ever happened.'

Ronnie emerged from below as the boys started fooling around with the flare guns. One of them, I don't remember which one, said "Dad, if I shoot this off, do you think I could hit the Coast Guard boat that's heading for us?"