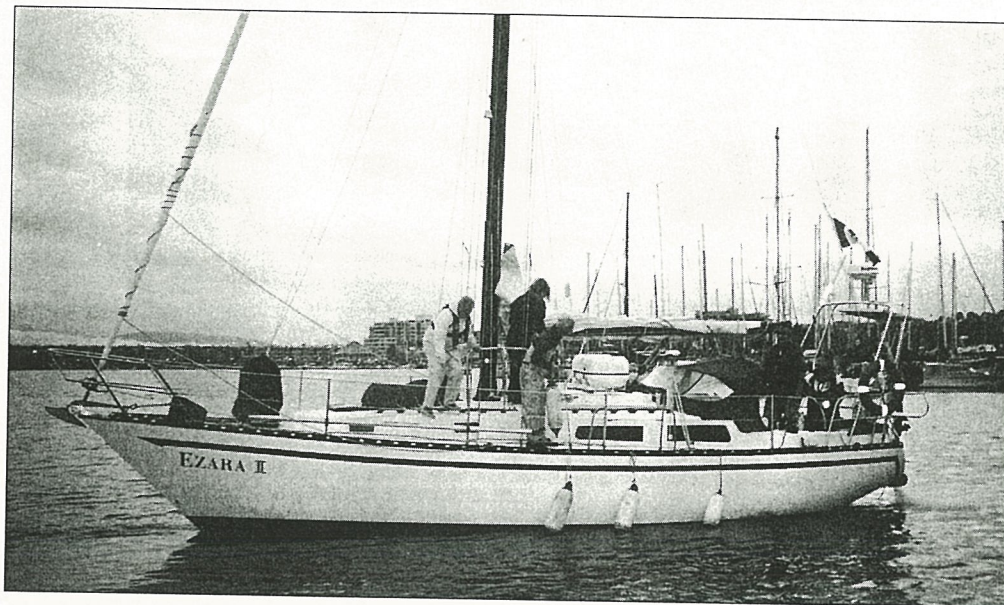


By Tonnae K. Hennigan

Rescue And Tragedy

When the crew of a southbound Vancouver sailboat abandoned ship off California, the U.S. Coast Guard came to the rescue—but lost four men of their own.



Ezara II begins her fateful voyage from Vancouver's False Creek.

THE WORST moment in Larry Murrell's losing battle with a brutal sea came after his boat had lost its sea anchor and was adrift and helpless. "You're just waiting for a knockdown. It's eerie...like being in a really seedy part of town...it's just a matter of time before you get mugged."

Four U.S. Coast Guardsmen lost their lives in early June while trying to rescue Murrell and four other crew who were forced to abandon Murrell's sailboat en route from Vancouver to Mexico.

The rough conditions they encountered—26' waves and 50kt winds—were not expected; Murrell and wife Shirley Minion had been advised by several experienced blue-water cruisers that June and July were the best times to go. In preparation, they had cutter-rigged *Ezara II*, a Banner 37, replaced lifelines, and made numerous other upgrades.

The vessel was very well equipped, according to Nigel Rennie, the professional skipper hired for the month-long voyage. An English yachtmaster examiner and adventure sail-training instructor, he was Cooper Boating Center's offshore cruising instructor last year. In hiring him, Murrell and Minion hoped to gain experience under instruction and their offshore certification at the same

time. Joining them were friends Murray Tildesley of Atlanta, Georgia, and Bill Logan of Edmonton.

KNOCKDOWNS The trip began June 2 and started to get rough four days later, with the wind building from 25 to 50kts over the next two days. Under progressively reefed sails and ultimately bare poles, *Ezara II* took two partial knockdowns, her instruments ceased functioning and a genoa halyard broke. Rennie then deployed the 9' diameter sea anchor with 250' of dedicated line, lashed the helm and prepared to sit out the storm. He notified U.S. Coast Guard who agreed with Rennie's assessment that no assistance was required.

However, on June 8, when the boat was 60 miles off Cape Mendocino in northern California, a wave broke over the boat, snapping the steering chain. A jury-rigged rudder failed and was slamming from end-stop to end-stop, battering the hull "like a sledgehammer," Rennie recalled. Deciding that a hull breach was imminent, he issued a Mayday. Damaged radios hampered communications with the USCG rescue helicopter, so a diver was lowered and hauled onto *Ezara II*. He assessed the situation, provided the crew with a hand-held radio and de-

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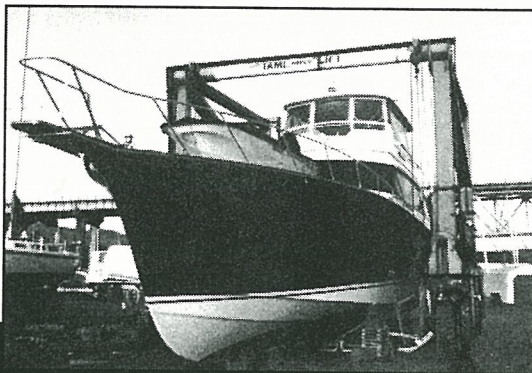
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terminated that it was too dangerous to attempt airlifting the crew to safety. Until a cutter arrived, a C-130 aircraft would circle overhead.

Over the next five hours, waves ripped away a series of jury-rigged sea anchors, finally leaving *Exara II* drifting beam-on to the seas.

RESCUE When the 110' USCG cutter *Edisto* arrived, she stood off, intending to take the sailboat in tow come daylight. But a final, brutal 120° knockdown, "like being hit by a train," Rennie said, resulted in head injuries to two crew, portholes blown out, 4' of water below and the life raft ripped off its moorings. When the battered crew saw the raft begin to float away, Rennie decided to abandon ship.

The cutter then called for helicopter assistance. However, when the 'copter crashed, the *Edisto* went into action, coming alongside the raft and hoisting its occupants to safety. Rennie says the rescue was "a very quick, very professional and very focused operation."

Murrell and Minion lost everything except their lives, having sold their house and invested heavily in the uninsured vessel which contained all their possessions. But the greatest tragedy was the loss of the four helicopter crewmen.

HINDSIGHT So what went wrong and why? Like many experienced and not-so-experienced boaters, Murrell and Minion were drawn by the lure of long-range, long-term cruising, and committed themselves totally. They sold up, bought and outfitted a vessel and quit city jobs. Both had taken CYA basic sailing and power squadron navigation courses. Recognizing gaps in their own experience since purchasing *Exara II* in 1995—only local cruising in Howe Sound, the Strait of Georgia and Sunshine Coast—they hired Rennie as skipper/instructor.

Murrell says they'd read everything they could get their hands on dealing with blue-water sailing, something offshore solo sailor and *PY* contributor Colin Hemsall strongly advises. However, reading seldom takes the place of actual passage-making. Hemsall says the more experience you have with your boat on the open ocean the better, and recommends venturing out (say 200 miles offshore) at least once before committing "to get a sense of what it's like....It's not like sailing across the Strait of Georgia multiplied by a month." Rennie observed that when conditions became extreme, only a couple of

Ezara II's crew could take the helm due to inexperience and seasickness.

Their sea anchor did not perform as well as expected, even before it was lost. Murrell says the 250' of line recommended by the manufacturer did not position it out beyond the first wave, allowing it to twist and tumble. He'd now insist on a minimum of 500'.

It's a seagoing truism that a crew will fail long before their boat. In fact, *Ezara II* did not actually turn turtle until a few days after she was abandoned, nor finally sink until two weeks after that. But her crew took a severe beating in an unsteerable monohull rolling like a pendulum gone wild. In fact, they found the tiny Dunlop life raft which floated atop the waves safe and serene by comparison. "It gets personal after awhile...you think the sea is out to get you," Murrell observed.

For every tragedy at sea, there are dozens of rewarding, if challenging, adventures enjoyed by fledgling offshore sailors. All life has some degree of risk. Perhaps *Ezara II* was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Can any degree of planning and preparedness prevent that? **■**

USCG Mourns Heroes

Four crewmen from Air Station Humboldt Bay, California died June 8 when their HH-65A Dolphin helicopter crashed into the ocean during the rescue of the crew of *Ezara II*. Lost were Jeffrey F. Crane, 35, Charles W. Thigpen, 26, Richard L. Hughes, 33, and James G. Caines, 26.

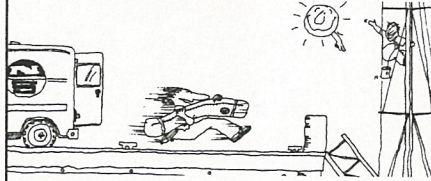
For rescue swimmer Caines, who reported to the air station less than a month earlier, this was his first and last mission. The crew of helicopter 6549 delivered a radio to *Ezara II* when skipper Nigel Rennie first reported their situation, and returned to scene at 2326hrs in response to the USCG cutter *Edisto's* call, radioing their intention to approach and attempt a hoist. The helicopter lights were last seen as they flew downwind for the approach to the life raft. Ten minutes later, 6549 missed a radio check and the search for helicopter and crew began.

Five coast guard cutters, including the *Edisto*, along with four helicopters, a C-130 and a U.S. Navy P-3 aircraft searched for four days, covering more than 27,000sq-mi of ocean. The search was called off June 12. Although wreckage was recovered, none of the crew were found.

The crew's families were presented with the Coast Guard Medal, the highest award to active duty personnel for heroism.

—Paul Rhynard & Jeff Murphy
USCG

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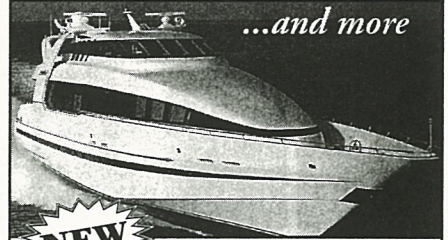
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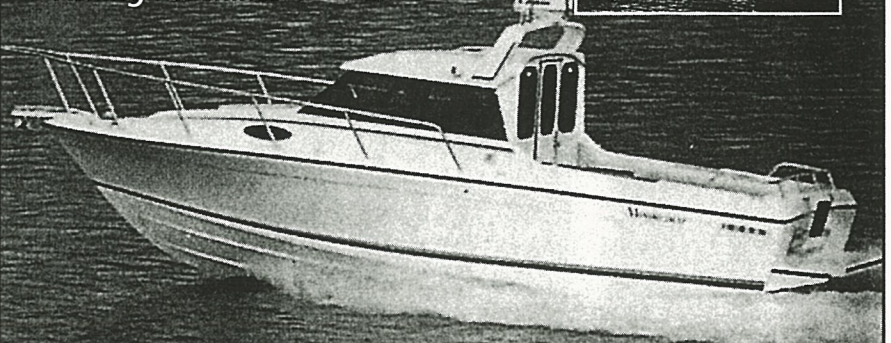
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