

MIRACLE: Defying The Odds, Fisherman Rescued From Sea

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ingenuity kicked in and probably saved his life: He decided to flip over his boots, empty them of water, and put the air-filled boots under his arms to use as flotation devices.

The boots gave him both rest and confidence, and he was able to swim toward nearby buoys and cut them from the lobster traps they were attached to, so he could better stay afloat and more easily flag down help.

"Without the boots, the whole deal would have been off," he said, sitting at the town dock in Montauk, where the Anna Mary is berthed, on Monday evening. "In the face of death, you think, 'I can't believe this is how I'm going to die.' But I thought, 'Not today.'"

As Darkness Lifts

Anna Mary Captain Anthony "Little Anthony" Sosinski was relieved from duty and went to sleep that Tuesday night, July 23, expecting Mr. Aldridge to wake him at 2 a.m.

But 2 a.m. came and went, and Mr. Sosinski, 45, continued to sleep. When he woke up at 5:30 a.m., he knew something was very wrong—and then he discovered that Mr. Aldridge wasn't on board. Sixty miles from land, the captain quickly assessed his boat: lobster tanks were filled with water, the cooler was at the stern, and its handle was on the floor.

Ms. Sosinski immediately called the U.S. Coast Guard and told them where he thought his longtime friend might have fallen overboard, given the speed the boat was going while on autopilot, what course it was on, and what duties Mr. Aldridge

had performed.

"I thought, 'He ain't losing me that easily,'" Mr. Sosinski said. "I didn't want to come home without him."

For eight hours, two MH-60T Jayhawk helicopters, one HC-144 Casa fixed-wing aircraft, small Coast Guard boats, and at least 25 commercial fishing boats and charter vessels intently scanned a 660-square-mile area—about the size of 378,000 American football fields, or roughly the size of the city of London, England—for signs of the lone lobsterman.

Mr. Sosinski was put in charge of creating a 12-boat search flotilla, 12 miles long, with boats a half mile apart. According to Mr. Sosinski, even musician Jimmy Buffett participated with his boat, the Last Mango.

While the search was under way, Mr. Aldridge, floating with the boots and buoys, saw the Anna Mary pass by twice, but was too far off to flag his buddy down.

Fear And Hope

Rescue seemed unlikely, but given the circumstances—clear weather, calm seas and warm water—it wasn't impossible, said Senior Chief Petty Officer Jason Walter of Station Montauk.

"There was such a large search area, because of the elapsed time from when he was last seen on the boat and when it was called into the Coast Guard at 6 a.m.," he said. "There was an eight- or nine-hour window we had, and we didn't know where he was."

According to the U.S. Search and Rescue Task Force website, cold water robs a person of body heat 32 times faster than cold air, and even faster with exertion, like swimming or treading water;

even in ocean waters as warm as 80 degrees, a person is expected to reach a point of exhaustion or unconsciousness in as little as three hours.

The Aldridge family flocked to Coast Guard Station Montauk as soon as they could on Wednesday morning. Senior Chief Petty Officer Walter met them back on land during the search: "I was on one of the smaller boats that ran out of fuel and came back... The family was at the station, and it was a pretty somber time. I didn't have any good news."

Mr. Aldridge's brother-in-law and good friend, Tom Patterson, said he was expecting the worst as he drove from the family's home in Oakdale. When asked if he thought Mr. Aldridge had a chance that day, Mr. Patterson said simply, "No."

"The whole drive out there, I couldn't believe it," he said, adding that his son, Jake, has an "unbelievable bond" with Mr. Aldridge. "I was mad at him, thinking, 'Johnny, you were supposed to go to Disney with Jake—you're just going to end it this way?'"

He said he was hoping for the best, however, and was comforted by the fact that the sky was clear and the water was calm and warm that day at 75 degrees.

The conditions and Mr. Aldridge's sea smarts reassured Mr. Aldridge's girlfriend, Teresa Yarusso of Holbrook. "I never doubted he was alive—I was just waiting for him to be picked up," she said at the town dock on Monday. "He has such knowledge of the ocean by just looking at the buoys, the current, and he knows the time of day. He's such a strong-willed person—and we couldn't have asked for a better freakin' day."

Mr. Sosinski said his friend, whom he has known since the second grade, knew how to handle the situation, and that he had high hopes for his survival.

"The condition we are in, in this job, has a lot to do with him surviving, and you play out many scenarios in your head when you're out in the ocean," the captain said. "The Coast Guard told me the end isn't always a happy scenario—that a lot of guys couldn't hold on long enough. They told me it was basically unprecedented to see that many people out searching. They hadn't seen that kind of support before."

Other fishermen who share the dock with the Anna Mary said they were concerned but confident.

Ross Michael, 36, whose boat neighbors the Anna Mary's slip, said Mr. Aldridge is tough. "He knows what to do, but it's every fisherman's worst nightmare—we don't wear life preservers," he said just feet away from the Anna Mary, back in its slip. "These guys aren't green—they know the ocean and know what they're doing. It just shows that it could happen to anyone."

The Rescue

Nearing eight hours on the job for the four crewmen aboard one of the Coast Guard's MH-60T Jayhawk helicopters, fatigue was setting in, according to Lieutenant Ray Jamros of Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod. Despite the odds stacked against Mr. Aldridge, the crew pushed forward in their search.

"Thinking that you wouldn't want to be the one down in the water gets you to look harder," Lt. Jamros said. "We wanted to search as long as we could, even though we were running low on fuel, and even though we were exhausted and had been up there all day. Flying around in a helicopter can be tiring. But we were ready to keep going."

"A lot of times in New England, survivability is very low," he added. "The water temperature is generally so cold at this time of year. But the water was nice and warm, and that dramatically improved his chance of surviving. I knew if he was a good swimmer and had some way to stay afloat, he'd have a good chance to stay alive."

The crew was 30 minutes from

heading back to the air station for more fuel and to switch shifts when they suddenly spotted Mr. Aldridge clinging to a fishing buoy about 3 feet in diameter, 43 miles south of Montauk. They immediately descended.

"He was in the water, holding on to [the buoy] in a T-shirt, shorts and rubber boots he was wearing on the deck of the boat," Lt. Jamros said.

The Coast Guard's rescue swimmer was quickly lowered to Mr. Aldridge and helped him get into a rescue basket, with which he was lifted to the helicopter. Once on board, he was given blankets, towels and bottles of water, Lt. Jamros said. On the way to Air Station Cape Cod, Mr. Aldridge explained how he had stayed afloat for all those hours—thanks to the boots.

Once on land, he was taken to Falmouth Hospital on Cape Cod by ambulance and treated for dehydration, exposure and hypothermia—his core body temperature had dropped to 94 degrees. He checked out of the hospital on Thursday morning, just a day after the rescue, and returned to Oakdale, his hometown, with family.

Mr. Aldridge has since been back to the Anna Mary in Montauk as he slowly returns to work.

A Tale of Survival

"Seeing the helicopter was a sigh of relief—it was the best feeling in the world," the fisherman recalled on a trip back to Montauk on Monday. "The Coast Guard was super-professional, and it's humbling to see how loved you really are. There are not a lot of communities like this."

His face, only slightly pink from sunburn, was serious as he described his experience. Just minutes earlier, he had finished



Coast Guard crews rescued John Aldridge after he survived 12 hours at sea off Montauk.

COURTESY U.S. COAST GUARD

loading up the Anna Mary for its next trip out to sea—a trip he'd reluctantly miss as he continues to recover.

When he was rescued, he was in "pretty good" shape, according to Lt. Jamros. Mr. Aldridge attributes his fortitude to how much "abuse" he "dished out" to his body over the years as a fisherman.

He also said he has read several books on survival, which ended up serving as a beacon while waiting for help.

"I thought if [the survivors in the books] can live, I can live," he said. "They're not used to working 20 hours a day and staying up for three days straight. You've got to be aware of all things in this job. You've got to be aware or it'll bite you."

Ultimately, however, in addition to the boots, it was the thoughts of his family members, including his nephew Jake, and other loved ones that really kept him afloat. He added that he was surprised at the magnitude of the fishing community's search effort.

"We are a family—it's us against the world," Mr. Aldridge said. "People who I didn't even know were looking for me. That's something else."

Three Injured When Convertible Flips

BY VIRGINIA GARRISON

Three people were injured and one of them was airlifted to Stony Brook University Medical Center Saturday night after a BMW convertible overturned and struck several trees on the south side of Cranberry Hole Road near Bendigo Road in Amagansett at approximately 10:05 p.m.

East Hampton Town Police said the driver, Richard D. For-

man, 49, of New York City, failed to negotiate a curve and lost control of the vehicle. He was arrested and charged with DWI after being treated for minor injuries at Southampton Hospital. Police said a male passenger in the back was thrown from the vehicle and is in stable condition after being taken by helicopter to Stony Brook. A male passenger in the front seat was injured as well; he was in stable condi-

tion at Southampton Hospital, according to police.

Amagansett fire and ambulance volunteers and Springs ambulance personnel responded to the accident. The vehicle was impounded and Mr. Forman was arraigned on Sunday, where he posted \$1,000 bail. He is due back in court on Thursday.

Police have asked any witnesses to contact them at 537-7575.

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Directions: In Amagansett - Bluff Road or Montauk Highway to Meeting House Lane - #86 on the west side.

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