

Grounding Experience

Written by Mr. Jean Michel

Ever witness, from shore, a vessel in a state of immobility? I am referring to a private yacht, which has come into contact with the bottom of a channel, or shore. Have you thought of how that sailor, who might be a very well seasoned, or novice sailor, could let that happen to him or his crew, or even his family?

Such an experience occurred to me, while scrambling to bring back my vintage Ericson 35 MK II sailboat back to a marina, not fewer than 10 miles East from where I had it docked for the summer.

The early evening was just right to make the trip: plenty of wind and good weather helped me to have some confidence in taking my boat, Tristan, back to have it hauled out for the winter. You see, at the Pultneyville Yacht Club, along the shores of Up State New York, on Lake Ontario, hauling out your boat meant doing business with a 80-ton portable crane, and pulling the stick was performed by the boat owner, and a few helpful friends, if so available!

That summer had showed us an unusually low water mark, and for Lake Ontario, that meant for a high step from your deck to the dock, and deep draft boats were in constant danger of scraping the bottom. Worst yet, sucking in mud and silt into your engine's intake.

I had about one week left before the portable crane showed up, and moving my boat to the gin crane, late September, was a chore since the marina was already in dire need of some dredging and I spent almost 2 hours just trying to make my way, by forward and reversing the engine, to the hand gin crane, which only left me stuck mid way, so I once made my way back to the slip.

A few nights later, I made preparations to the exit the marina, through the channel, and out to the open lake. Towards Sodus Point, just east of my location. After some dinner, and R & R, the wind picked up, as so did the swells entering the channel. This event, I thought, would help me if I braced for bottom, in that the swells would gently rock my boat off of any ledges before I left for open water.

Feeling confident of my endeavor, I once again plowed my way to the direction of the channel, which was at somewhat north of the gin crane, by about a few hundred yards. By steering the boat to starboard, I aimed dead center of the channel, and increased the engine speed to about $\frac{3}{4}$ throttle, to attain a hull speed of approximately 6 knots.

I did not make it very far though; only half way out of the channel. I felt the boat raise itself a bit, and settle back down, only to come to a dead stop. I was comfortably grounded in what seemed to be a cradle of some sort, holding fast the keel of my boat, in a tight grip. I maneuvered the boat with the engine in forward and reverse, at high speeds, only to find myself immensely held into place without any reprieve. For a boat that only drew 4'10", I was in a terrible fix.

Night was falling fast, I was the only person on board, and no one was around to help since it was a Monday night in the Fall season, and most boaters were back home, preparing for another workweek. I tried rocking the boat back and for the, side to side. Nothing! The motor just revved in place, and of course overheated since the large water/sediment separator was plugged once again. An was an easy fix: unscrew the 2" cap, pull out the strainer, dump out the sediment and grass, and reinstall.

After about 1 ½ hour of trying to get the boat out on my own, someone from shore noticed a mast over the horizon from their location, and after realizing that it was not moving and seemed to be fixed in place. Coming over to investigate, and noticing a poor stranded sailor in the middle of a channel, he walked around and over large granite channel blocs, and called out to me: "Everything OK?" "Stuck!" I shouted back. He disappeared once again over the rocks, and came back a short time later, with what seemed a whole busload of people! Apparently having a late summer family reunion, he showed up with a full assortment of able-bodied men, women, and youngsters, to give me a hand. What luck!

My night was not over, though. Two of the men rowed over in a dingy, and we discussed options to get me out. The only possible way to free the boat, was to use the mast as a lever arm, and pry the boat out. That meant one person up in a bosom's chair, tie a rope to the upper mast, and a crew of people pulling the mast back towards them, on shore. My mast is 42' tall, and it would not take much "human power" to do the trick!

What was particularly innerving to me, was the wind, which was increasing, swells coming in the channel with a rapid repetition, and two very helpful men who would winch me up. But I was not sure of their experience, or their awareness of the importance of being responsible for a man aloft! They did an excellent job, though. One man tending the winch, the other being a lookout for the both of us; and pulling out the rope as it passed from the winch, to the exit of the power duty.

I must ad here that I am not light hearted. But being 30 feet off the water at night, with a mast which reflected the slightest movement of the hull against the incoming swells, and tended in a bosom's chair by two strangers was not my idea of fun! Once a rope tied below the uppermost spreader, down I came, and the crowd onshore gave it a Heave -Ho, pulled my boat to a 45-degree angle, and off came the boat from its resting place!

Max throttle reverse, back to the slip (did not seem like a good night to be about), and one week to await for the crane to pull me out for the winter! Again, back to the hand gin crane the next day, and removing the stick to then secure it in the mast rack, provided by the yacht club.

The only thing I had to do now, is build a substantial cradle for my boat in one week...Isn't sailing worth the effort?