“Man Overboard”

I worked out of Chincoteague, Virginia, for two summers, fishing for sea scallops. It was some of the hardest fishing I’ve ever done, but we had fun, and we made some pretty good money. But getting started was a little tricky.

I’d never fished for sea scallops before, but I had geared up for calico scallops a couple of times, so I was pretty sure I could figure it out without too much trouble. I was pretty broke at the time, and that was why I was heading up the coast from my homeport in north Florida to enter a new fishery. It had to be better than sitting at the dock with no income and watching my boat deteriorate.

The worst thing you can do to a workboat is not work it. A workboat works by virtue of the fact that hundreds of parts are moving. Sheaves are turning inside blocks, engines are turning, drums on winches are turning, propellers are turning, snatch blocks are opening and closing, chains are going round and round about sprockets; the list is endless. If the motion stops long enough for the salt environment to take hold, they all freeze up with corrosion. It’s truly the manifestation of the old adage, use it or lose it.

I had the first tricky part already taken care of. Over the telephone, I had convinced a fish house that we were sober, professional, hard-working fishermen, and they would make money by unloading us and handling our product. I don’t think I ever told them an outright lie, but it was one of the better lines of bullshit that I had delivered in my career. (This was an important piece of the puzzle laid in place, for without an arrangement to sell your product you couldn’t go fishing.)

I do know that I failed to mention that I didn’t even know what a sea scallop looked like. But really, what difference did that make? I’d catch one, sooner or later, and then I’d know.

The next tricky part, and one that took me a while to get worked out, was crew. None of the local crew around the house was willing to take a flyer and ride all the way to Virginia on a slow boat in hopes that they might eventually make a little money. But I did the best I could.

One thing was for sure, and that was that I knew I couldn’t pull into that dock not knowing what one of those critters looked like. I not only had to know what they looked like, but I also had to have some of them on ice to prove it. That meant I had to leave Florida with ice on the boat, drive three days to the fishing grounds, wherever that was, catch some scallops, and then find my way to the dock in Chincoteague. And I couldn’t do that without some kind of crew.

Here’s what I finally came up with: My good friend, Capt. Rolfe, and his girlfriend, Miriam, were getting ready to travel to New England in search of

their dream boat. The wanted a little wooden sailboat to live aboard back in Florida.

"Hey, Rolfe… Have I got a deal for you, old buddy. You can't drive your truck to New England and bring both it and a sailboat back. And you know how expensive those plane tickets are. And your mom only lives an hour's drive from Chincoteague… How 'bout a free ride to Chincoteague, and a paycheck for both you and Miriam when we get to the dock?"

And that's what we did. We blew 30,000 pounds of ice into the fish hold of the Vineyard Fox, topped off her fuel and water tanks, stuffed the galley with a couple weeks worth of groceries, and Rolfe called his cousin, Viktor. ("He's worked with me shrimping a couple of times. He'll be good crew for you.")

As soon as Viktor arrived, we pulled the Fox out into the river, dropped the 55-foot outriggers, ran out the St. Mary's Inlet, straddling the Georgia-Florida state line, and set a course for the Gulf Stream. The next three days were the easy part. Eat, sleep, take turns watching the auto pilot do the driving, and listen to that big yellow Cat down in the engine room push us toward the fishing grounds.

Oh, yeah… the fishing grounds. Rolfe took care of that one. The radios on commercial boats are like old time party lines, except all the people that would be listening in on the phone lines, join the conversation on the radios. I'm not a big talker on the radio, myself. But Rolfe's the original Mouth of the South, and he seems to know every fisherman on the east coast who ever keyed a microphone.

I'd gotten up a little before dawn, and as I was making my way to the coffee pot back in the galley, I realized that Rolfe was talking to someone on the radio. What in the hell? We'd rounded Cape Hatteras a long time before I'd crashed and we ought to be getting close to Virginia by now. Who did he know way up here?

Turns out it was some guy from North Carolina he knew from shrimping, and this guy was now driving a scallop boat, and on the way to the fishing grounds. By the time Rolfe got off the radio, he had a whole page of the legal pad, which hung on a clipboard up in the pilothouse, slap filled with numbers. He not only had the Loran fixes of some places where there were a few scallops, but also the fixes of all the hangs, or bottom obstructions, in those areas that could tear up your nets, and must be avoided at all costs. We knew where the fishing grounds were.

(For those who are not familiar with the evolution of electronic navigation, Loran was the predecessor to GPS. Loran is an acronym for LOng Range Aid to Navigation. As it evolved, the receivers gained the ability to convert fixes to Latitude and Longitude. But that scheme was accomplished mathematically, and the accuracy of the conversions was wildly erratic. For this reason, fishermen used the raw data from the Loran receivers instead of

the conversions. This raw data wasn't much good for plotting your position on a chart, for the charts were all based on the theoretical or mathematical Loran solutions, and they were way out of whack with reality. But if you hit something on the bottom that tore up a net, and recorded the numbers displayed in raw data, you could go right back to that same spot with 50-foot accuracy. Or more accurately, you could avoid going right back to that same spot.

As time went on, fishermen started creating "hang lists" with the locations of these obstructions. Fishermen are very secretive, and regularly lie to one another without a second thought. It's just part of surviving in the business. But hang lists are different. They share this information freely.)

So, we got to the grounds and stumbled around for the better part of a week. We started out catching mostly sand and mud. But Rolfe was also an experienced trawler captain, and between the two of us, we got the nets fishing like we wanted after about a day and a half. But by the time we started to catch just scallops, without all the real estate, our ice was 4 ½ days old. We'd lost a pretty good bit to meltage, especially since we'd blown it into a hot hold, and we'd used the last of it by the time we had about 400 bushels of scallops iced down in the hold. But I was pretty darned happy with that. The hold was over half full, and the Fox was sitting low in the stern. I figured that was enough to prove we knew what the damned things looked like.

We found the dock in Chincoteague, and brother, was that ever a surprise. All that time on the phone, I'd thought I was BS'ing a fish house. By that, I mean a business on the waterfront that buys the catch from commercial fishing boats. They usually have unloading facilities, scales, a fuel pump, an attached icehouse, etc. That's their business. They weigh your catch, pump your fuel, blow your ice, make the required reductions, and hand you a check, along with directions to the bank. Why would I think otherwise? The number I called back then was listed as the Chincoteague Fish Co.

Yeah, well… that business was a phone at the end of a driveway that went from the parking lot of the Chincoteague Inn to the dock. The Chincoteague Inn was a restaurant, including its subsidiary – in the same building – The Waterman's Lounge, and its other subsidiary – in the driveway – The Chincoteague Fish Company.

Jesus Christ! We were tied up at a bar! And not any bar. Chincoteague is a summer vacation destination, and is full of bars catering to the vacationers. But not the Waterman's Lounge. Up there, they don't call us fishermen. We're called watermen. And we were living 12 feet from the front door of the local fisherman's bar. We couldn't go anyplace without walking past that door – two feet from our left shoulder as we passed by.

That situation caused some problems. At the end of each trip, we scheduled our departure from the grounds so that we could start unloading early in the morning. A truck would back down the driveway, stopping about

15 feet from the side of the Fox. Next, a conveyer belt was pulled out of the truck, which reached to the side of the boat. It had a big hopper at the boat end. And then we would start lifting big baskets of scallops and ice out of the hold with the winch, and dumping them into the hopper.

I mean, the bar, restaurant, and driveway were all the same outfit. Hell, yeah… the barmaids were serving my crew cocktails at 8 o'clock in the morning as the unloading began.

Well, not that first trip. Everybody was tiptoeing around with the new guys in town. We got our 400 bushels off by early afternoon, learning that they had gone to a shucking house on the other side of the island. Our check would be ready sometime the next day, once the scallops were shucked and packed in gallon containers.

And that's the way it worked. One dollar was deducted from the check for every bushel that went across the dock, and paid to the phone in the driveway. The rest was mine. It was around $10,000. I sent Rolfe and Miriam to New England with a grand each in one of their pockets, and gave Viktor his share. Everybody was happy, except I was short two crew. But I wasn't worried. I knew I could go back on the next trip and bring 600 bushels to the dock, and for that kind of money, I could find people who wanted to work.

I still had a lot to learn.

And thus began the search for crew. I started working through a long list of total dropshots. I discovered that anyone on the island who needed a little money could make $100 a day picking oysters. Who needed a job? It got so bad that I called a captain friend named Richard back home, and pleaded for him to round me up a serious crew. But when I told him how much money we were making, he said screw that; he'd be on the plane the next day and he would run my back deck for me.

I picked Richard up the next day, and we went to war. He hired, fired, cajoled, and drove the hell out of a bunch of locals until we found a couple that were willing to work as hard as we wanted to. From the second the first bushel of scallops went on ice, the clock started ticking. We had 5 ½ days to fish, and then we had to steam for the dock. If we stayed any longer, the scallop meat would fall off the shell when the shuckers cut them open, and the meat would be discarded with the guts and shells.

We set a self-imposed quota of 650 bushels for every trip, and we never missed it, with our record trip being over 750, every last scallop the Fox could carry. At $25 a bushel, we were bringing over $16,000 to the dock every trip.

But we worked hard for our money. It was bop 'til you drop fishing. The workload for the guys on the back deck was staggering. 75% of what we were catching was under the legal size and had to be discarded. We'd trip the purse strings of the nets, and 100 bushels of scallops would fall to the deck. That's about three tons worth, and they made a pile the crew couldn't

see one another over as they sat on little stools around the perimeter, and started culling out the legal scallops. When they got through, 25 baskets would be full to the brim, and then the other 4500 pounds worth had to be shoveled overboard, to be caught another day.

One man then climbed down into the hold and another handed down four or five bushels before he picked up his shovel to help his partner clear the deck. The man in the hold emptied the baskets into one of the bins, shoveled ice on top of the scallops, and then mixed the two together with a special rake. And then he hollered for another four or five baskets.

My job was to drive the boat, and keep her in the meat. If I'd located a good spot, we could catch those 100 baskets in as little as 20 minutes. That wasn't nearly enough time for the crew to clear the deck, but it didn't matter. If I pulled the nets another ten minutes, we'd have a problem: too much of a good thing.

I'd step out the pilothouse door, give a shout toward the back deck to get the crew's attention, and make a circular motion with one raised hand, the signal that it was time to haul the gear. The guys would abandon their stools and take their places at the winch, giving a shout when they were ready. And then, I'd bring the engine back to a fast idle, and hear the power takeoff engage and the deck winch start winding in the cable. I'd set the autopilot, and join them on the deck.

We'd haul the nets up to the outriggers, and dog the winch off. And the crew would go back to their stools. Meanwhile, I'd bring the engine back up to full power and drag the loaded nets through the surface water, washing them until there was no more evidence of any sand or mud trailing behind. That was standard procedure every time we hauled the gear. But that was as far as we went. I'd bring her back to an idle with the pilot engaged, pulling the full nets lazily through the water. And then I'd join the work on the back deck until it was cleared.

As soon as that was accomplished, we'd dump another three tons on the deck and I'd re-set the nets. Using the Loran as my guide, I'd move about 100 feet from the previous set and make a parallel tow. And so it would go until we had cleaned out that patch. It might get to the point were I'd have to drag for 45 minutes, and maybe only catch ten of fifteen baskets of keepers. The crew might get a ten-minute break between tows.

Or maybe I'd find a spot where we'd catch 25 baskets in 30 minutes, but they'd all be legal sized. All they'd have to do on the deck was to shovel them into baskets, pick out a little trash like old dead clam shells, or a couple of lobsters, and ice them down in the hold. That would leave enough time to come into the galley for a cup of coffee, a sandwich, and maybe a smoke.

But if my crew were sitting around in the galley, I wasn't doing my job. We were supposed to be in the meat, and I was supposed to be running back

and forth from the pilothouse to the galley, making grilled cheese sandwiches, and then delivering them to the guys sitting on their stools.

But this little story isn't about that part of it. It's about the time before I called Richard, and one of the one-trippers that I'd hired. You can get most of 'em to work for that first trip. There are lots of ways to keep 'em going, depending on their personalities. (That means you don't try intimidation on a guy who can whip your ass.) But mostly, the "quitters don't get paid" rule works pretty well. Only one time, I paid a man a half share, he was so sorry. He never quit. He just stayed in first gear the whole trip.

But this is about a guy who made one trip, and thought he was going to make another. It was just a matter if I could find a replacement. I don't even remember his name, but I'll call him Mutt. You'll see why in a minute.

The Chincoteague Conglomerate had enough dock frontage for two draggers to tie up end to end, maybe 150 feet or so. And then they had another little narrow finger dock that stuck out into the river from the bank, and I could tie up to one side of that with about 30 feet of the <u>Fox</u> sticking out beyond its end. When we finished unloading, I had moved her over to that finger dock, and tied her up, bow toward the bank.

It was well after dark, and I had come back to the boat after having dinner and a couple of drinks at the Inn. I had just climbed aboard, and was still standing on the deck when I saw Mutt start down the dock from the bank. It was obvious that he was free sheets to the wind.

Ah, ha! You think that was a typo? You think I meant <u>three</u> sheets to the wind? Nope. That's an old sailing term that's commonly misused. A sheet is a line, or rope, attached to a sail. It's the one used to trim the sail, and by trim, I mean to pull one corner of the sail until it is the proper shape to draw power, or lift, from the wind. It is named for the sail that it adjusts. For example, if it adjusts the main sail, it's called the main sheet. The captain might call out, "Ease the main sheet," if he wants the main sail let out a little bit. Or, if he wants the main sail to just flap in the wind, he would call out, "Free the main sheet."

And thus, the term "free sheets to the wind" refers to a sailing vessel whose sails are all flapping in the wind, under no control.

So, here comes Mutt staggering down the narrow dock free sheets to the wind, heading for the boat. My first thought, and this is from long experience, is that he has already blown his paycheck and wants to borrow some money. The way he is wobbling on the narrow dock makes me pause for a moment to see what this is going to turn into.

He spots me standing on the deck, as the boat's generator is continuous duty, and her 6 kw of deck lights burn all night long.

"Hey, Captain Pete," he calls out in a loud slur. *Oh, boy*, I think. *Here we go.*

His wobble is turning into an unstable oscillation, and by that I mean that his oscillations from one side of the dock to the other are ever increasing. I know about unstable oscillations from flying. They have to be corrected, or something bad will eventually happen. But I guess that depends on your point of view with dock oscillations.

The muddy river bottom drops gradually from the bank, which is why the bow of the Fox isn't tied any closer to the bank, and why Mutt is having to navigate twenty feet or so of dock before reaching her. And the oscillations are still increasing. If graphed, they would be a straight-line progression, and it becomes clear when Mutt is going to run out of graph paper.

Ka-sploosh, and he's in the drink. I just can't help it. I've watched it coming for too long, and all that time it has been building up inside me. I bust out laughing. I climb back down onto the dock, and start slowly walking toward him.

But then it gets a little strange. He is trying to swim, but he doesn't know how. And he is starting to panic, thrashing around and screaming at me.

"Captain Pete. Save me. I'm drowning."

I am losing control of my laughter. It's getting hard to stand up and get a full breath.

"Captain Pete. Please. I can't swim. I'm going to drown."

I'm starting to double over. Gasping for breath, the same as Mutt.

"Stop laughing. Save me. I'm drowning."

I finally get enough breath in my lungs to operate my vocal chords. "Mutt! Stand up. The water's only three feet deep."

He stops thrashing, and his feet touch bottom. And now he's pissed. "You almost let me drown."

"I know. I should have."

"Help me back up on the dock."

"No. You're too stupid to be on a dock. Walk back to the bank."

"Can I sleep on the boat?"

"What, and try the dock again? Go home."

One man overboard drill is enough for one night.