

A Crabby Tale



I HAVE ONLY BEEN SICK ON A BOAT once. That was when my neighbor, Jack, asked me to help him drop crab traps off the back of his boat. What could be easier, I thought. Wrong. You get up before first light, way before, actually, and you load the boat up at Jug Creek. And that's the fun part. Don't let

anyone ever tell you a crabber's life is fun. I soon learned where the word "crabby" originated.

After loading the boat, we went out into the Gulf, and the sky went from sunny and clear to gray and grim. The sea went from sloppy to choppy, and I soon was doing the mariner's two-step from crab trap to stern side and back again.

The wooden traps were weighted with a good 80 or 90 pounds of cement, but that isn't all, because my mission included packing the bait hole with rotten pig's feet that had turned purple and black when they thawed out in the sun. Each time I grabbed a trotter, and the flesh fell off sort of mushy in my hand, and the sea kicked up, and I almost ended up eating the thing, I wondered what I, an avowed landsman, was doing out on the frolicsome sea. I'm helping my neighbor, I muttered under my breath. And off and over and down went another bomb ...

Naturally, we're talking stone crabs here, the kind that crawls all along the white sandy bottom of Southwest Florida's coast. Most of us

know them only as we eat them, but for the guys who go as far as 90 miles out and drop traps at 90 feet, that's a day's work, let me tell you.

We were out only eight miles and the water was shallow, no more than 15 feet deep. It's a humane sort of catching game, if you want to call it that. The crabber doesn't kill the crab when he catches it; he removes one claw, so the animal can defend itself, and hopefully make more crabs that can be de-clawed, one limb at a time.

De-clawing ought to be more dangerous than it is. Stone crabs, large ones, can exert as much as 19,000

pounds of pressure per square inch. Imagine that on your index finger; but my neighbor has all of his digits and he's been bitten by monkey wrenches more often than crabs. It only takes 12 to 24 months for that impaired bottom dweller to re-grow an arm and, maybe, get trapped again.

Is the one-armed crab vulnerable down there? Aside from falling prey to octopi, not much else will get him

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until neighbor Jack comes along with his delectations of the deep.

When I dropped my last crab trap overboard, it looked and felt and smelt like an old rotten pirate, and suddenly I was sick. Somehow my hand locked, and the rope that connected the trap to the buoy stayed fixed in my hand. Jack came to where I was vomiting and holding my dead pig pirate, and he said, "Leggo." And, just like that, my hand jerked open. The rope slid free, the trap sunk.

It was then, after cleansing myself with some salt spray, that I noticed we were taking on water. The stern of the boat was too loaded down with traps and I wasn't able to pitch them seawards fast enough, and to make matters worse, we were now in what Jack admitted was a "pretty rough sea."

"Go fore and I'll stay aft," he ordered as the boat went up a steep hill of green and slid down with a hard smack.

"What am I to do?" I asked.

"Grab the wheel," he commanded. "Just keep us heading straight."

I got hold of the wheel. I looked out at the expanse of seawater. It was a mess out there. The sky was black like pig's feet.

"How do I hold her on course?" I asked Jack.

I don't think he heard me, what

with the wind keening, so I yelled aft again, "What direction?"

"The loran," he barked. "Eyes on the loran."

I felt my knees buckling and a pig-heavy crab trap dropping in my stomach. "What loran?" A second later, he was up there in the wheelhouse, showing me the loran and making me aware that we were heading north and west, and that behind us was a huge freighter, so don't go that way.

I somehow managed to keep us on course. And, miraculously, Jack dumped the crab traps before we went glub-glub.

Easy? Sure. But that crabby, upcoming feeling kept popping up, and I kept pitching my insides as the sea banged us about. "How much are these things worth?" I asked him.

"In '63 they went for 30 cents a dozen, wholesale," he said.

"How much now?"

"Oh, they're better than that," he said evasively. Then added, "But you gotta live to sell 'em."

By then I was too sick to hear or to care if my life were truly in danger. When you get that sick, death seems livable. My mouth was talking, but I had no lip control at all. Fortunately, my eyes worked OK. They were locked grid-like on the screen of the loran, and with my white-knuckled grip on the wheel, I somehow managed to keep us on course. And, miraculously, Jack dumped the crab traps before we went glub-glub.

When he finally took over the wheel, though, I started throwing up every meal I'd ever had since I was five. What did it were those rancid purple pig's feet. I swear they danced a jig right in front of my face. Was I glad when we saw the mangrove canopies leading in to the creek and back to port. As we docked, my stomach moored itself to something, and

the dry heaves stopped. Jack thanked me—a little too often, I thought—and when I got home and collapsed into my favorite sofa, my wife turned on the Weather Channel. The news was dire. Twelve foot seas.

I swore I'd never eat crab again as long as I lived. This was scientific reasoning, I thought, since I now knew what crabs liked to eat.

I guess that vow lasted a week or more. Funny thing about a moment of truth—once the danger's past, so's the vow.

Anyway, the whole wretched experience of losing your sea legs does have some good consequences. For one thing, it opens up your mind. I

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can watch *Gilligan's Island* now and tell myself it's real footage. Anything far-fetched seems possible when you've whiffed the porcine rot in a high sea. But in the end, you came back alive; and you learned a valuable lesson that many boaters don't pick up until it's too late. That lesson is this—there's a lot of water out there.

And if you don't like boats, rough seas, crab-happy neighbors (just kidding, Jack) and rotten pork-trotters, then don't try to do something heroic the next time you have a day off work. Stay where you belong, behind the desk, if that's your calling; and it is mine. So I haven't gone dancing with pig's feet since Jack winked and said, "Give a fellow a hand, if you're feeling up to it."

Well, I haven't felt up to it, and I don't expect to feel up to it until another lifetime rolls around. †

"Pine Island Soundings" recently won a first-place Charlie for Best Column from the Florida Magazine Association.