

## **Tetra and the 2009 Texas 200....well, Texas 140!**

Let me start out by managing your reading expectations some. This isn't one of those inspiring survival stories that might land a book deal some day. It doesn't even have much of a happy or satisfying ending. I'll give away the ending right now. I sank my boat. And, sadly, I can't blame it on a hurricane, a midnight collision, or pirates. If you're still interested, keep reading.

### **The First Three Days**

On Monday, 6/8/09, I set off with about fifty other boats as part of the second annual Texas 200 cruise. This event is a challenging, adventure cruise for small boats. It's not a race, but sets small boat sailors against the high winds, challenging environment and stark remoteness of a 200-mile stretch of the Texas Gulf Coast. It's the perfect combination of challenge, camaraderie and remarkable beauty. Our port of departure was Port Mansfield, TX and our destination was way up the coast at Magnolia Beach. Spirits were high as I charged away from the marina and headed into the Laguna Madre.



The first three days of the event were a real challenge. The marine forecast called for clear skies and 10 – 15 knot winds, but each morning we were hit with

20 knot winds that steadily climbed all day. Seldom did we sail in anything but heavy winds. And, of course, those winds churned up the big bays for us. But, the sailing was exciting and everyone seemed to be having a great time. The seas and winds broke quite a few boats and sailors were regularly running to the aid of others. Some battered boats pulled out; others soldiered on.

## Day Four

Thursday morning found us beached on a pretty spit of land called Paul's Mott, just across Aransas Bay from Rockport. Thursday also brought a decision that each skipper needed to make. Boats were offered two primary route alternatives. One route enabled boats to spend about half the day in the ICW, but required a lengthy run across a large bay for the second half. I'd gone that way last year and knew it to be a miserable and dangerous place on windy days. The second option was to take "the back way". This was a shallow water route that provided more protected water, but required greater navigation and exposed sailors to areas of (extremely) shallow water. I opted for this route and it proved to be a poor choice for my boat. My plan was to just tiptoe through those tricky spots using small sails and my motor. As long as I got through those areas before the daily heavy winds started up, I should be fine.

There were five narrow, shallow passes that had to be located and negotiated. I'd carefully marked waypoints and bearings and had my plan in order. I made it through the first four passes and each one was difficult and very, very shallow. I grounded once near my friend Bobby's San Juan 21, but with some pushing and Bobby's help, I got back going again. Luckily, the wind hadn't really arrived yet.

The last shallow pass was at a pretty, remote place called Ayers Dugout. I just had to navigate Ayers and then I would reach the open, deep water of San Antonio Bay. I was following my rhumb line, but when I arrived there, everything looked confusing. Boats seemed to be scattered everywhere. I couldn't see any stakes or markers and every boat in sight seemed to be in a different place and taking a different course. To add to my confusion, one boat came right toward me and shouted that the path was blocked and that I needed to find another way through. I reversed course and after some radio communication with boats ahead, I learned where the needed channel lay--to windward. That's when the wind arrived.

I needed to work about 100 yards upwind and then pass windward of a PVC marker. There was very little water there. My sounder was alternating between 2 and 3 feet. Bobby had passed me by that time and I could tell that his boat was now badly aground in the shallows. I only had a little centerboard down and I

just uncleated a downhaul to save the rudder. I started the outboard to see if it would help me. I'd been sailing under a double-reefed main and tiny furled jib. Now, I had big winds on the nose and no water under the boat. I began trying to make tacks, but found it impossible to work to wind. I desperately needed centerboard and rudder, but didn't have depth for them. I was burning up the motor trying to help tack the boat and smelled it as it ran hot. I'd jibe around then pull off a lucky tack every now and then, but just couldn't make any ground. The outboard was just roaring, but seemed to do little good against the wind.

I knew that I needed more sail, if I were to have any chance at beating to wind. So, I shook out one reef and pulled out more headsail. I now had a fighting chance and I could feel her as she tried to power upwind. But, I still had nothing much under the boat—maybe a foot of centerboard and eight inches of rudder.

A few minutes later, a huge gust of wind just knocked the boat over. I had the washboards in and the hatch closed, but the cabin still began flooding. I was now in three to four feet of water. I hopped onto the centerboard and she came right back to her feet, but with the cabin awash and cockpit full, I couldn't keep her upright. I'd dance around and point her into the wind, hold her upright with one arm and bail with the other. But, she'd just go right back over and lay on her side. This is a solo sailor's worst nightmare.

I was losing my shoes in the soft bottom, so I pulled them off to save them. At some point in the fight, I ended up on top of an oyster bed and just shredded my bare feet. I righted the boat four or five times, but then gave up. She was well and truly on the bottom. I opened the cabin and began searching for my bag with my wallet, keys and cell phone. All of the boat's contents were now floating away. In the drama, my PFD inflated and I removed it (instead of simply deflating it). It was never seen again. Piece by piece, every obscure bag, bottle and container floated past me. My duffle bag full of clothes. My charts. My animal crackers.

Then, remarkably, my boat hook floated out of the cabin and past me. Before the trip, I'd searched for hours trying to find that boat hook. I knew it was in the cabin somewhere, but could never find it. Then, there it was, floating past me, heading north. "There's that stupid boat hook." I stopped all my fighting and struggling and just stood there in amazement watching that boat hook float away. My whole universe seemed to involve the miracle of the found boat hook and then it's puzzling choice to sail away without me. Maybe it hooked up with my PFD out there somewhere and they shared a laugh or two at my expense.

A fishing boat headed my direction and arrived just as I found the bag I'd been searching for. I had my wallet, keys and company-issued Blackberry. I asked

him if he could get to the stranded San Juan and he explained that it was just too shallow for him. Instead, he ran me to a little island, where other sailboats had beached. On this island, the Puddle Duck fleet stood and watched my plight.

If you've never seen one, there is a tiny, 8-ft-long, homebuilt sailboat called a PDR, or Puddle Duck Racer. The men who sail these small boats are a breed apart. I'd match their bravery, stamina and spirit against any sailors, in any boat, at any point in history and they'd come out quite well in comparison. These guys are awesome. They did not like the sight of Bobby's stuck San Juan or Tetra's hull sticking out of the water. After offering me water and checking on my condition, they wanted to understand what it would take to get Tetra back afloat. Now, understand the time issues here. The Puddle Duckers had a very, very long way to sail that afternoon and their short waterlines make them move slowly. They needed to be on their way, if they were going to reach their destination by dark. It was about noon now. I explained that Tetra was swamped and that water coming in through the centerboard trunk would make it very difficult for us to bail her out. Water would easily come in from underneath as fast as we emptied her. These guys would not take "no" for an answer and when the next fishing boat came by; we all jumped onboard and headed out to Tetra's location in a wide, shallow bay. As we motored out, I noticed that my feet were bleeding badly and I hoped no one noticed that. I didn't want to add a medical crisis to everyone's concern. That's foolish, I know. I wasn't thinking straight. So, I just hung my feet over the side so I'd not bloody up the boat and cause concern.

My real concern was with the San Juan. I didn't think it was possible to save Tetra, but knew that Bobby was going to need real help to get his big, heavy boat to safety. His young daughter was onboard with him and I was worried for her state of mind and her dad's frustrating predicament. When the boat reached Tetra, my plan was to recover the outboard and then just leave the boat there. I knew the Coast Guard would mark her soon and someone would get an interesting salvage project. I didn't think our group could get her afloat, without the help of a powerful motorboat to drag her to land.

Half of "Team Puddle Duck" headed over to the stuck San Juan and the other half stayed with Tetra. We popped her upright again, untangled sails and lines and did some bailing. But, she'd just refill herself. Remarkably, I'd found the key to the outboard padlock and managed to get the motor off. A crab boat came by and I loaded the motor and climbed onboard. At that point, I had made the decision to abandon the boat.

Let me explain that a little. This is the part that I still struggle with and I'm still

not convinced that I did the right thing. I was making decisions quickly and weighing pros and cons, chest deep in water. I remember thinking through what I'd be up against to sail her out of there. About a half mile ahead of Ayers Cut lay the opening to San Antonio Bay. As my mind raced through my dilemma, I realized that I had some real challenges ahead of me. I had a banged-up boat. The motor was trashed. The masthead had been torn off, along with my nav lights and wind indicator. I suspected that the centerboard was off the keel bolt—it didn't feel right. All my charts, GPS and navigation gear were gone. I'd lost my VHF radio and didn't know if my cell phone worked. All my washboards were gone. My rig had been banging around on the seafloor for a while and I didn't know what damage I'd done there. We had about four hours of light left and I was very worried about crossing San Antonio Bay. In last year's event, that big bay was a little bit of a nightmare and I knew that the winds had really wound it up over the afternoon. And, then there was my condition. My feet were killing me and I'd lost my first aid kit. Somehow, I'd burned my hands; either on the motor or on ropes. (They are still quite scarred as I write this ten days later.) I decided 'then and there' that I was only going to get out of there that evening on someone else's boat.

I pleaded with the Puddle Duckers to leave my boat and put their effort into saving Bobby and his daughter. But, that group just doesn't give up. From my place on the beach, I watched those guys fighting to recover Tetra for hours.

This filled me with frustration and shame. They were fighting for my boat harder than I was. This was not a great life experience. I was torn between the urge to just get out of there and complete the long sail ahead of us and the urge to get back out there and push on the boat. Eventually, remarkably, they got the boat afloat. They removed the headsail and draped it under the boat. This process, as they explained it, was called "fothering". By blocking off the centerboard slot under the boat and performing some maniacal bailing, they got her emptied and afloat. They then waded across the bay with her, threw a line across a deep section, and swam/towed her to my beach. This took them hours. I just couldn't believe that they'd actually done it.

As I stood there looking at her on the beach, I never once changed my mind about my ability to sail her out of there. While a challenge like that would be child's' play for a Puddle Ducker, I didn't think I could do it. They pleaded with me to try it and offered to escort me the entire way. And, they meant it. But, I knew that I'd just be putting others into constant rescue mode for the remaining sixty miles of the event. I decided to leave her on the beach and contact Sea Tow to discuss my options. At that time, Tetra's savior arrived.

One of the guys that worked so hard to rescue Tetra and Reflection II (the San

Juan 21) was a sailor named Andrew. He actually had a permanent camp building on that island. He was in the event, sailing a small trimaran. As he empathized with my situation, he indicated that he'd always wanted a Potter. (Oh really?) One handshake later, the boat was his. I've since learned that he's gotten her successfully to land and on her trailer. He also suffered from heat exhaustion soon after struggling with Tetra and had to be nursed back to health. In my book, Andrew paid a lot for that boat and did me a huge favor. He indicated that she'd be repaired, well cared for and renamed. He planned to name her "Duck" or some derivative of that word, in honor of the Puddle Duck sailors that saved her. I like that.

My good friend Chris took me on board his wonderful new Michalak Caroline "Easy Bake" and supplied me with water, sun block and band aids. Lots of band aids. We arrived at our destination, Army Hole, just before dark. The outpour of concern for us was enormous. I guess they'd heard bits and pieces of our struggles and everyone's spirits were raised when we arrived safely. I could carry all of my remaining possessions in my hands. I ate the best meal of my life—fig newtons and a can of fruit cocktail donated by my friend Kevin. That night, I slept in a lawn chair behind a tent, to get shelter from the howling winds. The mosquitoes ate on me and probably had the best meal of their nasty little lives as well. It was a long night. At 1:30am, I managed to catch the other Kevin (from the Proa) awake and begged some bug spray from him. That let me keep the tiny amount of blood that was now left in my body. The next day, good friend Stan took me on as crew and we made the last passage up the coast on his Baymaster without incident.

I was generally unsociable at the destination. There was much celebration and well-earned praises for the sailors that completed the trip. Once I got to my pickup, I dropped off the trailer for Andrew and headed to a pharmacy. Drug store staff "oohed" and "ahhed" at my feet and loaded up a bag full of bottles, bandages and creams. I checked into my hotel and finally got out of those clothes (picture Tom Hanks in Castaway). I intended to take a shower and a nap, and then head back to the beach for the celebratory party and shrimp boil. Instead, I got up from my nap and drove all night to get home. I can't explain why. I loved those people and owed them so much, but instead just went home. That was stupid and selfish of me.

## Lessons Learned

When choosing that route, I should have given more thought to how I might have to deal with heavy winds in those waters. My plan was to go with small sails and motor and just sneak through there. But, in high winds, that just proved

impossible. To beat into a real blow, I needed the power of my full mainsail and headsail and those require depth for my centerboard and rudder. This was poor planning and I've now learned that lesson. Plan for the very worst scenario. A 2hp Honda cannot compete against high winds (which I should have expected).

After the fact, helpful fellow sailors have suggested that I might have tried motoring with no sails up. That never once dawned on me and it might have worked. Even with my sails reefed down as they were, that baggy mess of mainsail on the boom was windage and was helping to drive me deeper into the shallows. Had I neatly furled and bungeed my mainsail, I might have been able to motor against the wind. But, I didn't have a mainsail downhaul and pulling down the main in those conditions would have been hard. I would have been standing up in a rocking boat and would probably have knocked her down sooner. But, in hindsight, had I thrown out an anchor, taken some time to bring in all sails, I might have successfully gotten out of that tricky spot. Had I had crew on board, I might have had a better shot at some of those options and ideas. I'll add that idea to my experience bucket for later use.

At no time was my life in jeopardy. I had friends nearby and they rendered assistance heroically and selflessly. The water was warm. I was using safety gear. I should have had better shoes that could not be pulled off by sticky mud and will only sail with those kinds of shoes in the future. My feet are still a mess, but are much less painful. I was battered and bruised, but those injuries healed quickly. My burned hands are looking better every day.

### The Good Parts of the Trip

Okay. All that stuff above was ridiculously melodramatic. Sorry about that. Let me tell you about the good parts of the trip. There are hundred times more good memories than bad ones.

I've never seen more friendly dolphins than those we encountered that week. Every day of the trip, dolphins came to visit. Many people commented on that. I remember a time on Day Two; somewhere between Baffin Bay and North Padre Island. A family of eight or ten decided to just hang out with me. They swam so close to me that I might have reached out and touched one. One big grey dolphin kept surfacing off my right elbow and spewing water on me as he vented. They probably swam next to me for a mile or so. I'll always remember that experience. Even as I stood in frustration next to my sunken boat, a dolphin swam up to say hello. Cool.

And, of course, there was the camaraderie of small boat captains and crew. As

with last year, our night at the Padre Island Yacht Club was hectic. Sitting in the club's meeting room, with charts scattered everywhere, were the crew of many boats. Everyone seemed to be trying to figure out what to do about the challenges of Day Three (PIYC to Paul's Mott). It was so much fun pouring over charts with other boaters, talking waypoints and bearings and options. Then, the next day, six of us stuck together and navigated some pretty challenging sailing—in rough conditions. Good memories.

Solitude was nice too. I remember another time on Day Two. I was all alone. For some reason this year, all of the boats were either faster or slower than Tetra. So, as the day sorted out, I tended to be between the big groups of boats. And, at times it was kind of nice. First of all, it's a beautiful place down there and only a tiny number of humans ever get to see it. I was sailing along, listening to Keith Green on the stereo. I could see God's handiwork all around me. Shore birds stopped working to watch me pass. Dolphins would come and go. Fish were jumping. Before it got too windy, it was just so peaceful and quiet; it was like sailing inside a cathedral.

Lastly, and most importantly, are sailing friends. That's the best part of the story. I cannot express the encouragement and help that I've received. A bunch of people saved my bacon. I don't need to name them all and probably couldn't anyway. People fed and bandaged me. People have since offered to give me boats. For some reason, sailors are a generous bunch. I won't dwell on this any more, but the small sailboat community is a good one that's full of wonderful people. You and I are fortunate to have friends like this.

John





One of the last photographs taken of Tetra. She is in full expedition mode rafted up to other boats, with fuel cans on the cabin top and weighed down with gear.”