

A Sea Story

by Ted Robinson, MSPE



Ted Robinson at the tiller of *Crusader*, ca 1982

My lost-at-sea story began in the early 1980s when I began thinking of myself as a man of the sea, so I signed up to enter a single-handed race to Hawaii. To qualify for entry, though, one first had to sail a 650-mile trial run, alone. The trial-run course ran from Newport Beach, California, around Guadalupe Island off the west coast of Mexico, and back, which I decided to do on a 55-foot tiller-steered trimaran, the *Crusader*. To prepare for this, I enlisted the help of an old friend, Mike Kane, the owner of *Crusader*, who held all the one-man Trans-Pacific records at that time. Mike had recently been featured in a seven-page write-up in *Esquire Magazine* on his lone Pacific crossings, an article which affectionately referred to him as “Crazy Mike.”

Unfortunately, about 150 miles out at sea, I ran into a rather horrific storm, which at first appeared to be a Mexican *chubasco*, but which I later found out was a full-on nor’wester. It had come downcoast after raging through a race of two-handed sailboats off San Francisco around the Farallon Islands. Its waves killed five of the sailors in that race, as I recall; and despite my triple-reefing the

main, setting the storm jib, and fastening the spare halyards to the outer pamas on either side as additional shrouds, the storm initially made itself known by tearing the boom off my mast. I had to heave-to, tying the tiller handle to leeward, making the boat turn into the wind while backwinding the small storm jib to make it turn to leeward. The opposing forces counter-balanced each other and kept the boat heading in a straight line, more or less, while I climbed around tying things down.

At first, I thought it might just blow on by; but instead, the storm worsened, ripping the aerials off the stern. That loss eliminated my ability to reach anyone by radio for the next seven days in which the broken boat was adrift, for those were the days before cell phones or GPS indicators. Through the whole ordeal, though, I didn’t feel this was enough of an emergency to use the EPIRB, the Emergency Position Indicator Radio Beacon, even after the storm tore the wind indicator off the top of the mast and eventually broke both my auto pilots. Consequently, the heave-to direction was the only one I could set whenever I needed to make repairs, or sleep.

In a couple of days there was finally a short break in the clouds, and I was able to take a noon shot with my Plath sextant, which I had taught myself to use to chart positions. I calculated that the boat had drifted a good way south. I later learned that since I was not able to report in, the Coast Guard had begun a search after the second day I was out there. However, they didn't figure the boat's drift into their calculations, mainly because I wasn't enough of a sailor to get a boomless boat with ripped-up sails to tack north into weather. Somewhat scarily, my sextant-determined position indicated I was now down into the coastal traffic routes of the big freighters. In fact, one night I woke to heavy chugging noises that, when I got on deck, became a great dark mass passing alongside me. It was a tanker that apparently had not detected me down in front of it. Around 30 yards closer and it would have ground me into shark chum.

Meanwhile, during this time, my business partner, Brian Bertha, was doing his own 50-mile grid-pattern search over the water during daylight hours, in a single-engine plane, breaking a whole lot of FAA rules. Ironically, we would be searching for him in vain the following February, when his twin-engine Beechcraft Baron would go down in the Sierra Nevadas. His wreckage was not found until the snows melted four months later.

I ran out of real food a day after the main storm had let up, but my wife, for some reason, had put a carton of Ding Dongs aboard—those chocolate-covered creamy things, which I'd never eaten before and have never eaten since. But for four days I ate Ding Dongs for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So I felt pretty relieved when I limped into Mexico's Rosario Bay, maneuvering as best I could around the slightly submerged Sacramento Reef where the schooner *Goodwill* foundered and went

down in the sixties. All 12 crew members had mysteriously vanished. At this time, it was in the middle of the whale-mating season in Rosario Bay, with whales everywhere. Weirdly, they paid little attention to me—so little that a number of them did not seem inclined to change directions when heading my way. I had to scramble what little sail and rudder I had in order to avoid getting rammed. Finally, not realizing that there was a town right near the bay, I needed to heave-to my way back out to sea.

In all the preparatory books I had read about single-handed sailors, one thing they seemed to have in common was that when at sea alone, sooner or later, almost all of them experienced hallucinations. This is completely true. I woke up one night hearing an intense argument taking place outside, quite distinctly. Two women and a man, it sounded like. In my half-awake state, I was sure I had somehow drifted into shore; but when I got topside, the boat was still in the middle of the still-restless ocean. The swish and rattle of the water had become voices that I would have sworn were real. One book described a single-handed sailor's last log entry indicating that he was now on shore and was going to step off the boat and stretch his legs. The empty boat was found hundreds of miles out.

The stormy portion of this adventure produced a couple of new and different perspectives for me. First, when I played Beethoven cassettes as loudly as I could into the earphones of my Walkman, while hanging onto the tiller with all hell breaking loose, I found that produced a great high, non-medicated. And I kept remembering, while alone in the ocean and getting really gamy under the foul-weather gear, wearing clothes that I wouldn't be changing for six more days, that only four days earlier I was attending a quite civilized social event, wearing a tuxedo and holding an icy Sapphire martini.

Anyway, after seven days adrift, jury-rigging the boom and the sail as best I could, I was able, by constantly switching heave-to directions, to tack the *Crusader* to Cedros Island, a small refueling rock in the middle of nowhere. That occurrence became a strange experience in itself. For one thing, there were no directional lights in its small man-made harbor. An inefficient operating system in Mexico would certainly not be a first, but approaching the Cedros harbor at dusk, with no method of communication, I knew I would have to stay in the boat until dawn. When dawn came, I would be able to see how the entrance and anchoring area was laid out.

Fortunately, the harbor was on the island's lee side of the ongoing storm, allowing me to drift with the current in relative calm down the short length of the island before setting up this tiny outboard motor and chugging back up to the north tip, then turning it off, then letting it drift back down again. I couldn't use the outboard to get home, of course, because there was only about 15 miles' worth of gas in it. The problem was, if I fell asleep and didn't wake up in time to turn the motor back on, I'd go into the rocks or, what might be worse, drift past the island into the winds again. I would then need to somehow navigate through a group of shoals south of Cedros at night after floating back into the storm in a broken boat, without either a boom or enough sail to be able to turn back into the wind.

Consequently, that was one of the worst nights I've ever spent. For starters, it was freezing. I tried on a wetsuit, but that made me sweat, and then the evaporating sweat would bring on more freezing. And I had to stay on the tiller, not daring to lie down. Even so, I would still wake from a sitting sleep with a start, realizing that I'd nodded off and needed to stare around to see where I had drifted to before I could react, and that reaction could very well have been too late.

When dawn came on Sunday morning, I saw where the break in the reef was and motored in to anchor. I rowed the skiff to shore and walked through a canyon where people apparently were living in caves, some watching me from caves. Very spooky. I arrived at this tiny shanty town where the few people who worked on the island lived. Since I had no intention of stopping at any ports when I signed onto this trial sail, I had only \$5 with me, which I used to buy two tacos and a Coca Cola in someone's house that also served as the island's ersatz restaurant.

I inquired about a "telefono," and the townspeople told me there wasn't one on the island, but someone would be coming in on Monday who was in charge of the wireless for the company which did some kind of mining on the island. So I began heading back to the harbor when I came across a diminutive Catholic church that appeared to be abandoned. I used the opportunity to lie down a few minutes on one of the pews, on something that wasn't moving for a change, and fell into a pretty deep sleep. I woke up in the middle of a guitar mass. People were standing and singing all around me, in Spanish. None of the little congregation had disturbed me sleeping there. I left and continued back to the *Crusader*.

On the boat, as I awaited the passing of another day when the wireless man would arrive, a yacht pulled into Cedros to refuel, and I rowed over to talk with them. They said the Coast Guard had been out looking for me, and they would call in my location. My worried wife received the call from the Coast Guard just as she was returning from church. I had the yacht also call Mike Kane, who said he would fly down to the little Cedros airstrip with repair materials on Monday.

That night, I slept with the boat's flare gun across my chest because a number of people from the canyon had rowed out around me

asking if they could come on board. I shooed them away, remembering State Department warnings about letting people on board. Places like this were considered bandito country, even on the islands, mainly considering events like the disappearance of those 12 people aboard the *Goodwill*. In the morning, I rowed back in, walked through the canyon to town, and waited until Mike's plane, with its hired pilot, buzzed in low—so low it scared the townspeople on its way to the airstrip.

Someone in town had an old jalopy, and I talked him into driving me to the airstrip, although Mike, at the same time, had hired someone to take him to the boat. We must have taken separate roads because we didn't pass each other. So when I got to the plane, only the pilot was there. He had already given some locals their required copies of *Playboy Magazine*, the standard currency in those parts of Mexico in those days, and was waiting for whatever Mike wanted him to take back with him to the mainland. My meeting with the pilot was best described later by the pilot, in his words:

This skuzzy-looking guy who was either very drunk or mentally screwed up shuffled up to me and asked if I were looking for him. I said, no, I wasn't. Mike had told me that we were going after an executive-type person, and this guy was obviously an unshaven bum who looked like he ended up here at the bottom of a bottle. When I told him I wasn't looking for him he said, "Okay," then took about two minutes just to turn around and begin shuffling away. Out of curiosity I asked, "You wouldn't be Robinson, would you?" It took him about another two minutes for him to turn back around to me, and then he answered, "Yes."

At the time, I was just too dog-tired to think. Anyway, with the materials Mike had brought along, we were able to jury-rig the mast and boom back together, somewhat, and I wolfed down a few of the rock-hard Italian sausages he had brought down with him to eat for the three days it would take us to sail back, at least as far as San Diego. It reinforced one of the reasons for the *Esquire* article referring to him as "Crazy Mike"—that he took only hard Italian sausage with him on his two-week, single-handed Hawaiian races.

The pilot went on his way, and Mike and I began sailing north, finally. When we pulled the boat into San Diego, my wife and some of my staff were there to meet us with energetic embraces. My staff climbed aboard to sail the *Crusader* the rest of the way to my home dock in Newport Beach, and my wife and I left the boat. We went to the Chart House restaurant after I showered, shaved, and changed into the clothes she had bought me at the San Diego Yacht Club, then we had two large steaks and a bottle of 1978 Merlot at the restaurant.

I finally did sail the *Crusader* in the Transpac Race, incidentally, but it was with a crew of nine, certainly not single-handedly.

Postscript: Alas, the mighty *Crusader* finally did go down off the coast of Chile, while "Crazy Mike" was trying to beat the round-the-horn record set in the 1800s by *Flying Cloud*, from New York to San Francisco. She was accidentally rammed and sunk by a Chilean Coast Guard cutter that was trying to help her. Since that time, Mike has become a born-again Christian preacher, and we now refer to him as "Pious Mike." He was later featured in another magazine article, though, this time as the "Superman Preacher" who could bench press 350 pounds.