

The Officers, Directors and Members of
US SAILING
are pleased to present the
ARTHUR B. HANSON RESCUE MEDAL
to the crew of

VOYAGER

for the rescue as follows:

On June 17, 2001, the Melko family was out for a Father's Day cruise on San Francisco Bay, near the San Mateo Bridge in a 39-foot Mainship Trawler in 20-knot winds, and four to six-foot seas. Up ahead, John Melko spotted a small object in the water, disappearing in each passing wave. As they arrived, a sailboat was circling a man in the water. The sailboat did not appear to know how to handle a recovery, so Voyager stepped in.

John Melko was at the wheel, his children worked the communication line (like a bucket brigade), to John's son-in-law down at the swim platform, while John's wife continuously pointed at the victim, without a life jacket, in the water. With the strong wind, the Lifesling could only be towed downwind from Voyager. As they passed the victim, they shouted commands to him to follow the floating line to the harness on the end. The victim secured himself in the harness on the first pass.

John found that the windage, current and waves effected the Trawler in such a way that keeping the boat steady, without bringing the Lifesling line or victim into the propellers, was extremely challenging. By allowing the boat to stop in the water, the boat turned beam on to the waves. Additionally, they were in a busy channel, and sailboats were looking for the right-of-way, not knowing a rescue was in progress. If he gave five blasts of his horn, he believed the sailboats could have turned and run over the victim. With the boat rolling wildly from side to side, his son and son-in-law pulled the victim to the swim platform, the victim timed the roll of the swim platform well, and got one leg up on it. The rescuers pulled hard on the victim and Lifesling and got him on board.

They learned that he was not from the sailboat, that he was a sea kayaker and wished to be returned to his kayak. They went down wind and found his kayak one and one-half miles away. The victim insisted on boarding his kayak and jumped into the bay. John passed him one of their lifejackets, which the kayaker looked grateful for. John called the United States Coast Guard and notified them of this event, and they informed John that they were just about to launch a helicopter to make this rescue attempt and thanked John. John credits the training he received on board sailboats at a US SAILING certified keelboat schools.

Congratulations to John P. Melko, Karen A. Melko, Maria C. Melko, John R. Melko, and John Hetherton III for rescuing a mariner in distress, calling the United States Coast Guard to avert a wasted mission, eliminating a hazard from the waterways, and the safe return of the victim to his watercraft along with the proper safety device. US SAILING is pleased to present the Arthur B. Hanson Rescue Medal in recognition of this event.

Ralph Naranjo, Chair
Safety at Sea Committee

By Direction

The Arthur B. Hanson Rescue Medal was presented to the crew of VOYAGER during the San Francisco Sports and Boat Show at the Cow Palace on January 13, 2002 by US SAILING General Services Committee Chair Don Durant.

John Melko

L to R, John Heatherton,
Maria Heatherton, John Melko, Karen Melko, Don Durant

John Melko &
Karen Melko

Photos by David Forbes

DETAILS:

Nominators Name: David Forbes
Victims Name: Unknown
Victims Boat Make Model: Sea Kayak
Rescuing Skipper: John Melko
Rescuing Boat Make Model: Mainship 390 Trawler
Rescuing Boat Name: Voyager
Rescuing Boat Length: 39
What was the nature of this incident: Rescue
Did a Mayday call go out: No
Was any injury sustained by the victim: N
Was a PFD worn: N
What position was the victim working before they went in: Sea Kayaker
Was this day or night: Day
Wind speed: 20+
Wave height: 4'-6'
Was a Lifesling aboard: Y
Was it used: Y
How did the victim get hoisted onto the deck: Swim Platform
Rescuing Crews Names: John Melko's family

Names of my Crew:
John P. Melko - Skipper
Karen A. Melko - Upper deck voice relay
Maria C. Melko - Lower deck voice relay
John R. Melko - Lower deck line-handler and rescuer
John Hetherton III - Lower deck line-handler and rescuer

Victim's name is still unknown and he never did return my PFD.

What happened: Rescuer is a US SAILING Cruising Instructor. Below is his narrative:

GONE FISHIN'

On Father's Day, June 17, we were on "VOYAGER", the 390 Trawler out of CLUB NAUTIQUE Coyote Point. My daughter had asked if my son-in-law could fish off the boat...she didn't know he would catch a 210 pounder!

We were northbound, South of the San Mateo Bridge. Seas were 4-6 feet and the wind was blowing over 20 knots. I had noticed a reflection in the water about halfway between us and the bridge, but lost sight of it. We slowed down and kept a sharp lookout to avoid running over something. Then we noticed a sailboat doing strange maneuvers and realized there was a person in the water. We assumed he was off the sailboat, but could see the sailboat had no idea how to recover him. So we turned around and moved in. My wife was pointing at the victim; my daughter was communicating my instructions from the upper deck to my son and son-in-law on the lower deck.

After we got downwind of the victim, we deployed our Life Sling and trailed it behind us. There was no way to launch it downwind or even on a beam reach because the wind currents around our vessel kept blowing the Life Sling back aboard. The wind was so strong; we did not throw the Life Ring because it would have landed in Palo Alto. The victim was NOT wearing a PFD, so we had to get him on the first pass. We told him to grab the yellow line and work his way down to the horseshoe. Then he waved at us that he was secure and we began to haul him in.

Several problems arose at this juncture:

1. The trawler has a lot of windage and there was a lot of wind. This meant I had to use the engine to keep control of the vessel – which made hauling him in and keeping him out of the prop more difficult.
2. We were right in the middle of the high traffic area for southbound boats passing under the bridge. Three sailboats (including one under spinnaker) were roaring down on top of us – barely under control in the heavy wind - and expecting us to give right-of-way. I had no way to signal what we were doing and, if we sounded five horn blasts, I was afraid they would instinctively go behind us – hitting the floating polypropylene line trailing behind us and killing our victim.
3. Stopping our vessel entirely caused our vessel to wallow beam-on to the waves, rolling violently and making the recovery slower and even more difficult.

I chose instead to turn sharply back to the victim and protect him with our bulk. We hauled him to the swim platform and I let the boat wallow beam-on to the waves again. This gave him the ability to grab onto the swim platform (although there are no grab rails) without getting crushed by the rising and falling transom. Timing the wave action, then, my son (held onto tightly by my son-in-law) braced himself inside the stern rail and reached through the open gate, and helped the victim get a leg aboard as a wave lifted him up. They then pulled him in with the Life Sling and line.

He was quite willing to go with us to Coyote Point, but when he realized we were taking him back to Redwood City, he wanted to look for his missing outrigger-Kayak. We found it about a mile and a half away. He then decided he wanted to re-board it and paddle his way back in. I didn't want to do that, but I let him talk me into it. We got within three feet of his outrigger-kayak, and he jumped in and boarded it. He was paddling furiously and seemed to be okay, so we headed for Coyote Point. Then I thought better of it and turned around again. We used the boathook to give him one of our own PFD's (not VOYAGER'S) and sent him on his way. My crew reported that he didn't argue – just grabbed it, put it on, and that he cinched it down very tight! He seemed grateful for the extra safety measure.

I then headed again for Coyote Point. I also realized someone else may have noted him missing or reported him in the water, so I called the Coast Guard and reported the incident. They said they had received a call and were just launching a Search and Rescue helicopter. They thanked me for saving them the trouble and saving the bird for another emergency. They said many skippers fail to report having recovered a victim and leave them looking for something that isn't there.

In retrospect, I realize that if we had not been there, he would not be alive today. All the U.S. SAILING training and techniques and repeated drills at CLUB NAUTIQUE on sailboats, really paid off – even on a two-story powerboat! Here I was with a boat I'd never been on before that handled so differently from the sailboats I'm used to. We were in heavy seas, in heavy traffic, with a possibly hypothermic victim in the water, and we had to get him on the first try. He had no PFD on and his head was barely visible in the water. The wave action made him disappear frequently. Yet we snapped into MOB mode, followed the drills exactly with no panic, no exaggerated rush, no mistakes, and got him on the first try.

Thanks to CLUB NAUTIQUE's training practices with real people in the water we knew exactly how to use the Life Sling – what it would do or not do...it's not as easy as it looks on paper. Also, we knew in advance the difficulties we would face trying to get him aboard - and keeping him from getting crushed under the rising and falling hull. It was a classic, by-the-book recovery, while all the other boats around us were helpless. Thank God for CLUB NAUTIQUE and U.S. SAILING!