

The Officers, Directors and Members of

US SAILING

are pleased to present the

ARTHUR B. HANSON RESCUE MEDAL

to the crew of

ZOT

FOR THE RESCUE AS FOLLOWS:

As Reported "In the Wake of the Fleet"

OVERBOARD... by Cindy Sims.

DROWNING IS A DEATH I NEVER FEARED until, following a freak incident in this year's Chicago-to-Waukegan race, I was swept overboard and hit by a wave whose impact filled my lungs with water. What happened? A rogue wave threw my helmsman off balance, causing the boat to crash tack. After 18 years of offshore sailing, under conditions sometimes worse than that Saturday's, I can count on two hands the times I wore a life jacket. This year's beat to Waukegan was not one of them.

The command for life jackets was given long before our start by George Petkovic, skipper and co-owner with John Zurawski of Zot, the Soverel 33 on which I sail. Since I was below charting our course, I was the one who secured them. It was my intention to put one on, not because catastrophe seemed imminent but because I knew it would be a helmsman's race and that I would be spending the day on the rail. I considered the life jacket an extra layer of insulation. Nonetheless, in the excitement of starting, I failed to slip one on.

Had I drowned, only I would be to blame. If you think I'm being hard on myself, as people have suggested, consider the facts. Most devastating to me is that once I was in the water, before George had completed his jibe and returned to retrieve me, another boat passed that was significantly closer to me than Zot. Given the seas and my anxiety, I may not have been a credible witness, but I felt certain that its crewmembers had seen me and that heads were turning in my direction as the boat sailed by. Fellow crewmember Ken Quast, who kept track of me while the Soverel was maneuvering, concurs that he had seen someone on the other boat pointing toward me.

Once this competitor sailed on, blithely it seemed, my euphoria at the prospect of rescue was replaced by the darkest despair. Treading water in saturated clothing and gear too cumbersome to remove, I became an anchor. The effort to keep my head above the water was the greatest challenge I have faced. My throat felt scorched by the water I was trying to expel. Eventually I stopped bobbing and began to sink. Clawing my way to the surface, I resigned myself to the one fact that I'd been fighting: that I was dying.

In wind and waves as treacherous as they were on that day, there was never a moment when I was free of danger. I want the competitor that could have helped - but didn't - to know this. I want readers who didn't wear life jackets to know that not every boat that plies this lake is prepared to save you. My ordeal

reminded me of something I long ago was taught: that I am responsible for my own safety. My omission not only jeopardized my life but the life of John Poast, the crewmember who dove feet first off Zot and who ultimately saved me. What is just as chilling is the ordeal I put the crew of Zot through. For a group of people who never sailed together until this year, their performance, under the severest stress, was admirable.

When tossed, the horseshoe landed within feet of me - but the wind claimed it. On Zot's second pass, when I was below the surface more than above it, John Poast, who was wearing flotation, asked to jump in. George granted permission, later saying that it was the most painful decision he has ever known since the last thing he wanted was to have two people in the lake. But had that decision not been made and had Poast's plunge been any less precise, I would have died. When Zot made its final successful pass, I was barely cognizant. At least four men fought to pull my waterlogged gear and body aboard. Adrenaline is a powerful drug, for when I felt their grip failing, I uttered, "Don't lose me," and locked my arms around a lifeline. That is when George left the helm and, using both hands, heaved me to safety. No-one is clear how John Poast lost his grip on Zot, but with both sails down, it is a conservative estimate that as I was being pulled aboard, the boat was sliding down the waves at five knots. From the moment of separation, a crewmember always had him in sight. The engine was started, but a safety line fouled the prop. The crew then went to hoist the sails while George hailed Spitfire, a Franklin 40, which acknowledged the hail and dropped its jib in preparation to assist. But before helmsman James Hellquist and Spitfire's crew could effect rescue, Voodoo, owned by Richard Grunsten and skippered that day by Dick Stearns, was in process of picking John up. When I called to thank Hellquist, he said, "From what I observed, and considering the conditions, Zot did everything right."

The epilogue? The Coast Guard was called, fully apprised and asked to stand by. I was stripped, dried and wrapped in blankets - my body heat restored by a crewmember who applied his weight to mine. Ken Quast was injured in the melee that saved me and later went to a hospital for a precautionary check-up at everyone's insistence. With John Poast aboard Voodoo, the Tripp 40 placed third in IMS section one and will likely take first following redress.

The fleet owes its utmost respect to the people aboard Voodoo and Spitfire. I owe my life to the skipper and crew of Zot. Let me now thank those I have mentioned and those crewmembers I have not yet had a chance to commend: John Florance, Jim Lynch, Ann Marie McManus, and Tim O'Donnell. Near drowning was the most sobering experience I have known, and I wish it on no one. In conditions like this year's Chicago-to-Waukegan Race, or at night under nearly any conditions, wear a life jacket. If not for yourself - for the crew.

Ed Note:

Cindy Sims is a professional writer based in Chicago. She has chosen to share here experience with her fellow sailors in the Chicago fleet out of concern for their safety.

The Arthur B. Hanson Rescue Medal was awarded to the crew of ZOT for the rescue of Cindy Sims.