

Presentation

Roy Disney (left) and his crew from Pyewacket receiving the Arthur B. Hanson Award - Transpac 50

© Sharon Green / Ultimate Sailing



The awards ceremony of Transpac 50, emceed by Chuck Hawley, former chair of the US Sailing Safety at Sea Committee, included US Sailing's Arthur B. Hanson Rescue Medal awarded to Roy Disney and the crew of his Andrews 68 Pyewacket for their outstanding efforts in the rescue of John Sangmeister and his crew of the Santa Cruz 70 OEX. The rudder damage, fast sinking and subsequent safe and timely rescue of the OEX team made headlines around the world for the Pyewacket team's exemplary seamanship and sportsmanship to come quickly to the aid of a competitor in trouble at sea.

Having an auditorium full of peers who profoundly understand and appreciate the risk of offshore sailing, this dramatic story retold in detail by Sangmeister elicited tremendous emotion throughout the audience, and when Disney took the stage the entire room rose in ovation to salute him and his crew, who were subsequently joined by the crew of OEX as well.

The honor conveyed both in the Hanson award and that bestowed by the salute of the auditorium filled with the sailors, families, friends, organisers and sponsors of Transpac 50 will be remembered as one of the great moments in Transpac history.

Nomination

At approximately 0151 July 15, 2017 nearly 200 miles offshore the California coast, the sailing vessel OEX was competing in the 2019 Transpac Race to Honolulu. OEX was sailing with a full reef, jib and stay sail. At this moment, we experienced catastrophic rudder system failure tearing a large hole in the hull of the boat. We were rapidly taking on water. We tried to plug the hole with no success. Brendan Busch radioed a Mayday and the crew of Pyewacket diverted to us. The OEX crew of Erik Berzins, Ryan Breymaier, Brendan Busch, Mat Bryant, Chuck Clay, John Sangmeister, Randy Smith, John Turpin, Greg Weeger remained calm and made a heroic attempt to save the boat. With waves breaking over the transom into the cockpit and the Pyewacket in sight, I ordered the crew to enter the rafts and abandon ship at 0220.

We are grateful to the United States Coast Guard and the entire crew of Pyewacket for their efforts on our behalf. We have known Roy and his crew for over 35 years both as team mates and competitors. We hold them in the highest esteem both on and off the water. Their rescue of the OEX crew came at an extremely high personal price--their retirement from the Transpac race.

The rescue of the OEX crew was affected with the highest level of seamanship. Once aboard we were welcomed graciously and the Pyewacket crew made every effort to accommodate us.

On behalf of the OEX crew I would like to nominate Roy Disney and the entire crew of Pyewacket for US Sailing's Hanson award which recognizes significant accomplishments in seamanship and valor. I have included the names of the entire crew in hope that each will be acknowledged for their effort and sacrifice.

Here is the crew list of Pyewacket:

Tom Addis

Mark Callahan

Paul Cayard

Roy Disney

Scott Easom

Brad Jackson

Robbie Kane

Ben Mitchell

Mark Towill

Gary Weisman

Press



Crew members of the OEX and Pyewacket after their safe arrival back on land. Photo courtesy of Transpac Yacht Club.

JUL 18 2019 5:24 PM

High drama and heroic rescue in Transpac

Mike Guardabascio & JJ Fiddler



It was 1:51 a.m. Monday morning, almost 200 miles off the coast of Long Beach. Local restaurateur John Sangmeister's OEX boat was three days into the Transpac, the biennial sailing race from Long Beach to Honolulu that's been around for 113 years, drawing enough fame and attention to earn a reference in the movie "Jaws."

- ADVERTISEMENT -

The OEX is a Long Beach boat, owned and skippered by Sangmeister. It left local waters with a giant Gladstone's logo printed across its billowing black sail and a St. Anthony High School sticker as one of its many Long Beach adornments.

"We heard a loud bang and Chuck Clay, who was driving, said that he lost steering," said Sangmeister in a video interview posted that night by the TransPac organizers. "We realized that we were taking on water very quickly."

Sangmeister's crew is an experienced one, many of whom have been a part of his record-setting sails over the last three decades. They knew what to do. Brendan Busch radioed a Mayday that was picked up by the Coast Guard in San Diego, as well as the Pyewacket, another boat competing in the race.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew was working to keep the boat afloat.

“We experienced catastrophic rudder system failure, tearing a large hole in the hull of the boat,” Sangmeister wrote in an account of the harrowing evening. “We tried to plug the hole with no success.”

Crewmember Ryan Breymaier tried to stop the water from coming in through the hole by putting a bucket on top and sitting on it.

“He was blown off as if it was a geyser,” recalled Sangmeister.

Fortunately for the OEX crew, the Pyewacket was only a few miles away, and within a half an hour the OEXers saw its running lights approaching in the darkness. Skipped by Roy Disney, the grandnephew of Walt Disney, the crew of the Pyewacket didn’t hesitate in making the decision to retire from the race to come to the OEX’s aid.

“Rule number one in the race handbook is save lives,” said Disney dockside after the rescue. “There were no other choices for us, it was the obvious thing to do. I don’t think any of us could have lived with ourselves if we’d sailed on.”

“When we saw the Pyewacket’s running lights, we had four or five feet of water inside the boat,” said Sangmeister, who was sitting in the aft cockpit with waves breaking over the transom and onto his feet. “I said, ‘Okay boys, it’s time to go.’”

At 2:20 a.m., Sangmeister gave his crew the order to abandon the OEX and enter the life rafts that would take them to the Pyewacket. Because of the catastrophic damage to the OEX, it quickly went under.

“We came across the eerie sight of a mainsail up on a boat that was going under the waves,” said Disney. “It’s a pretty tragic thing to see, and these two lifeboats tied together with flashing lights on them.”

The OEX slipped into the Pacific. According to race organizers, it marked the first time a competing vessel had sunk in the 50 Transpacs that have been run over the last 113 years. The Pyewacket crew got the OEX members on board in darkness quickly and safely.

“We were really confident that Roy and his remarkable crew would look after us once we got on,” said Sangmeister.

Disney’s crew did just that, breaking into their food supplies for the trip back to San Diego.

“We had ribs and wine on the way in, all 19 of us,” Disney said with a smile.

Sangmeister and Disney have known each other as friends and rivals for three decades in the tight-knit sailing world, and both have sailed numerous Transpacs. Once they were all back on land, the gratitude on Sangmeister’s face was plain.

“I’ve had the privilege of sailing with the Disneys for 30 years, and I’m sincerely grateful,” said Sangmeister, whose sense of responsibility to bring his crew home safely was also apparent. In his statement about the incident he wrote, “Nine men—eight husbands and seven fathers—were aboard OEX that fateful morning.”

With the OEX and Pyewacket retired, the Transpac sails on. This year saw a record number of boats, with 90 crossing the start lines in three waves last week. A record-high seven boats have had to retire already, but the first multi-hull vessel has already sailed into Waikiki, as the Argo arrived late Wednesday night. The Comanche, a 100’ monohull out of Australia is expected to come in late Thursday to win the Barn Door Trophy for the fastest monohull; several other divisional winners will be determined over the next few days.

In Hawaii, interest in the race is high enough that reporter Mindy Pennybacker of the Honolulu Star-Advertiser said that locals were transfixed with the rescue story, with both of Hawaii’s news stations reporting extensively on the events.

“Everyone here loves Transpac, each boat gets an Aloha party at the yacht club,” said Pennybacker, who is covering the race and the rescue for the Star-Advertiser.

Meanwhile, Sangmeister and Disney won’t be in contention for the trophies they wanted to collect in Waikiki, but the Pyewacket and OEX crewmembers will be recognized nonetheless. Transpacific Yacht Club commodore Bo Wheeler said that something “special” would be planned to honor the sportsmanship and sacrifice of the late-night rescue.

In addition, Sangmeister nominated Disney and the entire Pyewacket crew for the US Sailing Hanson Award, an award given for significant accomplishments in seamanship and valor.

“We hold them in the highest esteem both on and off the water,” said Sangmeister.



The OEX, owned by Long Beach's John Sangmeister, sank in this years Transpac yacht race. Photo courtesy John Sangmeister.