

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Cubans nab them, but it's no cigar

Cristobal Panama was our next planned port of call. Just under 1,000 miles southwest it was our most ambitious passage to date.

The sailing directions describe the run to Panama as "a passage in which boisterous conditions can be predicted with near certainty during the months of January, February and March."

The first two days were short hops to Long Island and then to Acklins Island. At both islands we were able to anchor for the night. On Jan. 7, we sailed out of Jamaica Bay, Acklins Island with 870 miles of "boisterous" sailing ahead of us.

Our path would take us due south 130 miles to the Windward Passage between Hispaniola and Cuba, then southwest direct to Panama. When we left Acklins we were well provisioned for the eight-day sail, but had no idea of what was to come.

Immediately after rounding Castle Island we were treated to our first taste of the boisterous conditions. Keema buried her starboard rail and started to beat her way through the 10- to 12-foot seas that would be normal for the majority of the passage.

With winds of 30 knots our main problem was keeping her under control. A double reef in the main and a storm jib was all we needed to keep up maximum speed. It was not comfortable but we were making great time, once again peanut butter and jelly sandwiches would be the main fare.

As we raced south one problem started to concern me. The trade winds were more southerly than easterly, and we were having a difficult time holding our course of 172 degrees. Normally on a long passage a few degrees of variance rarely presents a problem, adjustments can be made on subsequent days. However, while sailing through the Windward Passage unfriendly shores are lurking on either side. We had no desire to stop in either Haiti or Cuba. Through the day and night I made every effort to keep Keema on course and safely away from Cuban waters.

Unfortunately, the sea gods don't always cooperate, and that night several violent squalls pushed us farther west.

Too close to Cuba

The morning of Jan. 8 dawned clear and gorgeous. Keema was making good time, a couple of flying fish were in the cockpit and Cuba was looming proudly eight miles to the west. Our problem was we were legally obligated to stay 12 miles offshore to remain in international waters. I wasn't overly concerned with Cuba's southeastern tip is sparsely populated, and if we kept our course and speed we could save a few miles and regain international waters by mid-afternoon. Once again the weather let me down, the only time in the entire passage to Panama that the wind died was that morning. I decided to motor until we were out of Cuban waters or until the winds returned.

During the morning we slipped by Cabo Maisi and saw few signs of activity. One fishing boat did pass us but the crew seemed indifferent to our presence. However, that afternoon after we had rounded the point and were quite close to being in international waters again I spotted a patrol boat, coming toward us.

Betsy and I were playing cribbage when I saw the boat and told her. At first she thought I was kidding, but quickly realized that I was quite serious. We put away the cards and waited.

It only took a few minutes before Cuban Patrol Boat No. 585 was circling us. I smiled, gave my best casual friendly American wave, but saw no smiles in return. The captain started asking questions over his loudspeaker, the only problem was we don't speak Spanish and apparently they didn't speak English. I understood stop! I dropped sails put the engine in neutral and waited. The time was 3:24 p.m. There were eight men aboard No. 585, none in uniform and all inspecting us closely.

We did our best to explain that we

were en route to Panama. After much discussion among themselves they motioned for us to follow them. We tried to play dumb and pointed south toward Panama. They made it quite clear we were going to make an escorted visit to Cuba.

Betsy and I looked at each other. "Is this really happening to us," we wondered. We had actually kidded about such an encounter a few days before, but it didn't seem the least bit humorous now. We proceeded to follow the patrol boat. They would run about a mile or so ahead, stop and wait for us to catch up and then repeat the process.

At first we assumed their base would be quite close but darkness set in, and they made no moves toward shore. We had been following for more than four hours, the entire time contemplating what they were going to do. The Soviets had shot down a Korean airliner for the equivalent air violation. Would we be arrested, our boat impounded? We'd heard stories of corrupt captains robbing pleasure boats, then sinking ship and crew. Our hidden shotgun would be no match for the heavily armed patrol boat. We continued to follow as our anxiety heightened.

Under tow

At about 8:10 p.m. we spotted the lights of another boat, and it became apparent that we were going to a rendezvous. The boat was a Cuban fishing trawler. The patrol boat halted and now all three boats were idling in the darkness. After much conversation between the two Cuban boats, they both turned spotlights on us. We had no idea why they needed another boat and, of course, our imaginations were leaping wildly toward the worst-case scenario. I was mentally admonishing myself for allowing us to be in this situation. Once again the captain of the patrol boat started speaking to us.

They wanted us to take a line from the trawler, we were to be towed. At this point we were both very nervous. I told Betsy to get on the radio and try to contact the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo. I wanted someone to know our situation.

While Betsy sent out a mayday, I tried to stall and avoid the two boats. Twelve Cubans were shouting in Spanish, gesturing with their ropes and trying to maneuver their steel boats in close enough to snag Keema's fiberglass body. When it became obvious they were losing patience with me I accepted the tow line, secured it to our bow and resigned to being towed.

Our little convoy took off at 9 knots. Keema was straining as she was allowed well past hull speed. I was expecting the cleats to be ripped right out of her bow, but she held.

A total feeling of helplessness engulfed us as we realized we were totally at their mercy.

After about 30 minutes the patrol boat pulled ahead of us and disappeared into the darkness. Betsy was down below still trying to contact the U.S. base, and I was thinking of ways to escape. As foolish as it seems in retrospect I thought we had a chance against the trawler if we made a break. I crawled up to the bow and signalled to the trawler to slow down, signaling a problem with the cleat. When they slowed and the tow line went slack I uncanceled it and pitched it over and started our race to escape.

Nautical tag

When I told Betsy what I had done her months of tan left her face and a terrified look took its place.

We killed our lights, took down our radar reflector and headed south at full speed. For the next 45 minutes we engaged in a deadly game of nautical tag. We were not fast enough to clearly get away, but they were not nimble enough to lasso us. Every time they would pull alongside of us screaming and trying to cut us off, I would make a looping circle behind them and continue south. We couldn't shake them, but they couldn't stop us. My plan was to extend this stalemate into international waters, where hopefully they



PAUL MARTI

Things were a bit scary for Betsy Marti (pictured here) and her husband, Paul Marti, when they became involved in a chase with a Cuban patrol boat off the shores of Cuba.

CIRCUMNAVIGATION

-a journal

appeared satisfied. However, they would have to impound it until after the investigation.

Finally, when the chief officer satisfied himself that we were not smugglers or CIA agents, he sat down on our settee, signalled for his typewriter and began his interrogation. Frank interpreted.

Questioning

Why did we come to Cuba? Had we been here before? Did we have relatives in Cuba? What pictures were in our camera? The questions continued until he gave us a piece of paper each and told us to independently write our own versions of how it was we were in Cuban waters. We did so. We were given a receipt for our shotgun and the two rolls of film they took.

When it appeared they were wrapping things up, I asked when they thought we could leave. Three maybe four days, Frank said as soon as the investigation was completed. I started to protest and Frank, of course, said, "Don't be afraid, if you have nothing to hide."

At 5:40 p.m. the entire group said good night to us and left. Frank reminded us there was a guard stationed by the boat for our protection. A young Cuban sat next to Keema, his AK47 cradled in his arms.

Betsy and I surveyed our totally filthy boat and without a word started to clean up. She scrubbed inside while I worked outside. At 6:45 exhausted and frustrated we tried to sleep.

I didn't sleep for long. At 8:15 another officer was pounding on our deck. We were to move so the fishing boat could pull out. We were told to anchor about 100 yards offshore. He escorted us to the anchorage, then

left. At least now we would have a bit more privacy. At 10:30 another officer and a young man came aboard, they wanted to see my engine. Why, I have no idea. They inspected it, took serial numbers and horsepower, thanked me and left.

We made ourselves some breakfast and tried to accept the fact that we were stuck for at least three days.

It was hot and we were bored, but we tried not to complain to each other. "Make the best of it, get some sleep, do some chores," I thought.

No one came near us for the rest of the morning or early afternoon. Around 4 p.m. a smiling officer—we did not recognize rowed out to see us. At first we could not understand what he wanted, until he realized he was asking us if we wanted to go "out to sea."

It was elated. "Yes! Yes! Of course, come aboard!" He filled out a Zampoc for us, which is a clearance from a port and told us we could leave. Betsy and I were all smiles.

It was now dark and the winds were picking up pretty good. The officer asked us if we wanted to wait and leave in the morning. No, thanks, we were getting out before someone changed their mind. At 6:40 p.m. we were led out by another patrol boat through a narrow passage and into open water.

"They waved goodbye and I shouted 'Adios amigos!' Betsy gave me that will you please shut up look and we were off.

Although we didn't need to motor, we motored and sailed at top speed until we were at least 20 miles offshore. Finally I cut the engine, looked at Betsy, and we both started laughing. "Well you did tell me there would be some adventure on this trip," Betsy said.