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Sailboat crew rescued in Pacific after abandoning ship sunk by whale

Four people aboard the Rainbeaver were stranded in the Pacific Ocean for 33 hours

By Karen Schwartz
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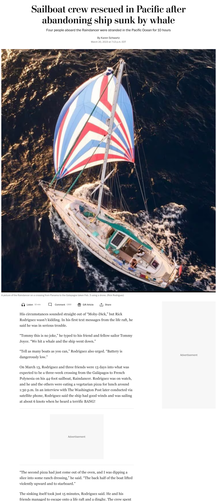

Footage of the Rainbeaver crew being lifted aboard the Bellingham Cold Air. (Courtesy of Bob Rodriguez)

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His circumnavigation sounded straight out of "Moby-Dick," but Bob Rodriguez wasn't kidding. In his first text messages from the life raft, he said he was in serious trouble.

"Tommy Dick is in play," he typed to his friend and fellow sailor Tommy Joyce. "We hit a whale and the ship went down."

"Tell as many boats as you can," Rodriguez also urged. "Battery is dangerously low."

On March 23, Rodriguez and three friends were 15 days into what was supposed to be a direct reach crossing from the Galapagos to French Polynesia on his 40-foot sailboat, Rainbeaver. Rodriguez was on watch, sitting in the cockpit, when the boat suddenly stopped dead at about 1:30 a.m. In an interview with The Washington Post last conducted via satellite phone, Rodriguez said the ship had good winds and was sailing at about 6 knots when he heard a terrible BANG!

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"The second pirate had just come out of the ovens, and I was dipping a slice into some ranch dressing," he said. "The back half of the boat lifted violently upward and to starboard."

The sinking itself took just 15 minutes, Rodriguez said. He and his friends managed to escape onto a life raft and a dingy. The crew spent just 10 hours adrift, floating about nine miles before a civilian ship rescued them. Today, they are back in their respective hometowns. A combination of experience, technology and luck contributed to a speedy rescue that separates the Rainbeaver from similar catastrophes.

"There was never really much fear that we were in danger," Rodriguez said. "Everything was in control as much as it could be for a boat adrift."

It wasn't just so Rodriguez that the story that inspired Herman Melville happened in the same region. The ship Essex was also heading out from the Galapagos when it was rammed by a sperm whale in 1820, leaving the captain and some crew to endure for roughly three months and to resort to cannibalism before being rescued.

Actual video of sailors on Rainbeaver being rescued. (Courtesy of Bob Rodriguez)

There have been about 1,200 reports of whales and boats colliding since a worldwide database launched a decade ago, and Kate Wilson, a marine biologist who has studied the phenomenon, said the collisions that cause significant damage are rare. The U.S. Coast Guard said, noting that the last rescue attributed to damage from a whale was the sinking of a pot boat 2 float in seven off Sao California, with that crew rescued by Coast Guard helicopter.

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Alexa Lily was the first to see what the new thinks was a Brick's whale as long as the boat. "I saw a massive whale off the port all side with its side fin up in the air," Lily said.

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Rodriguez looked to see it blending from the upper third of its body as it slipped below the water.

Bianca Brattesani was below cooking and got thrown in the collision. She rushed up to the deck while looking to the starboard and saw a whale with a small dorsal fin jo to ar fort off that side, leading the group to wonder whether at least two whales were present.

Within five seconds of impact, an alarm went off indicating the bottom of the boat was filling with water, and Rodriguez could see it rushing in from the aiwa.

Water was already above the floor within minutes. Rodriguez made a mayday call on the VHF radio and set off the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB). The distress signal was picked up by officials in Peiu, who alerted the U.S. Coast Guard District 11 in Alameda, Calif., which is in charge of U.S. vessels in the Pacific.

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The crew launched the inflatable life raft, as well as the dingy, then realized they needed to drop the sails, so that ties attaching the life raft didn't snag as it got dragged behind the still-moving Rainbeaver.

Rodriguez grabbed his snorkel gear and a tarp and jumped into the water to untangle the lines while holding his breath for dear life. The area near the propeller shaft was highly prescribed, he said.

Meanwhile, the others had gathered safety equipment, emergency gear and food. In addition to bottled water, they filled "water bottles, tea bottles and pots" before the safe water ran out when the crew left, Rodriguez said.

"There was no emotion," Rodriguez recalled. "While we were getting things done, we all had that feeling, I can't believe this is happening, but it didn't keep us from doing what we needed to do and prepare ourselves to abandon ship."

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Rodriguez said Bianca Tschirhart handed the tarps down to the women in the dingy, but in the turmoil, they left a bag with their passports behind. They stripped into the water themselves just as the deck went under.

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Rodriguez swam to the life raft, climbed in and looked back to see the last or tot of the mast sticking "at an unbelievable speed," he said. As the Rainbeaver slipped away, he pulled a Leatherman from his pocket and cut the line that tethered the life raft to the boat after Lily noticed it was being pulled back.

They escaped with enough water for about a week and with a device for catching rain, Rodriguez said. They had roughly three weeks worth of food, and a fishing pole.

The Rainbeaver "was well equipped with safety equipment and multiple communication devices and had a trained crew to handle the unknown, so an emergency until a rescue vessel arrived," said Douglas Sang, U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area spokesman. Sang said investigators will be cautioned that new technology should not replace the use of AIS/VHS, which has its own batteries.

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Indeed, the one issue the crew faced was battery power. Their Iridium 9575, a satellite VHF hotspot, was charged to only 50 percent (dropping to 18 percent before the rescue). The phone that pairs with it was at 40 percent, and the external power bank was at 42 percent.

Rodriguez sent his first message to Joyce, who was sailing a boat on the same route about ahn miles behind. His second was to his brother, Roger, in Miami. He reported most of what he had messaged to Joyce, adding: "Still mom & g ping to be okay."

Rodriguez's confidence was earned. A 32-year-old from Trevorton, Pa., he had spent about six years working as a professional yacht captain, mate and engineer. He bought the Rainbeaver in 2020 and lived on her, plotting round-rapity into getting the boat, built in 1976, ready for his dream trip.

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Both he and Brattesani, 25, from Newcastle, England, have marine survival training. Lily, 34, from Comox, British Columbia, was formerly a firefighter in the Canadian military. Fischer, 45, of Marburg, Germany, had the least experience, but "is a very levelheaded guy," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez gave detailed information on their location and asked his brother to send a message via WhatsApp to Joyce, who has a Starlink internet connection that he checks more frequently than his Iridium (in. Joyce relayed the news back to his brother that he was turning the port off and would check in in half hour.

Rodriguez also activated a Globalstar SPOT tracker, which transmitted the position of the life raft every few minutes, and he broadcast a mayday call every hour using his VHF radio.

When he turned the Iridium (in back on at the scheduled time, there was a reply from Joyce: "We got you boat."

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At 5o'clock would have it, the Rainbeaver was sailing the same route as about two dozen boats participating in a round-the-world yachting rally called the Arc Rally. Joyce said he had been in communication with ships that searches for people lost at sea, was also notified, and the engine broadcast issued by the Coast Guard was answered by a commercial ship, Doug 3 Maia, which said it was an miles to the south of Rainbeaver and was changing course.

"We have a bunch of boats coming. We got you brothers," Joyce typed.

"Can't wait to see you guys," Rodriguez replied.

Joyce told Rodriguez that the closest boat was "one day maximum."

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In fact, the closest boat was a 40-foot catamaran not in the rally. The Rolling Stones was only about 30 miles away. The captain, Geoff Stone, 40, of Hoolaya, Wis., had the mayday relayed to him by a friend sailing about ahn miles away. He communicated with Joyce via WhatsApp and with the Peruvian coast guard using a satellite phone to say they were heading to the last known coordinates.

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In the nine hours it took to reach the life raft, Stone told The Post, he and the other three men on his boat were apprehensive about how the rescue was going to work.

"The seas weren't terrible, but we've never done a search and rescue," he said. He wasn't sure whether they would be able to find the life raft without tracking back and forth.

He was surprised when Fischer spotted the Rolling Stones' lights from about five miles away and made contact on the VHF radio.

Once it got closer, Rodriguez set off a parachute flare, then activated a personal beacon that transmits both GPS location and AIS (Automatic Identification System) to assist in the approach. Although the then-first Doug 4 Maia, a Panamanian-flagged tanker, was standing by, it made more sense to be rescued by the smaller ship.

To board the Rolling Stones, the crew from the Rainbeaver transferred to the dingly with a few essentials, then detached the life raft as it wouldn't get caught in the boat's propeller.

"We were go ar fort away when we started to make out each other's figures. There was dead silence," Rodriguez said. "They were curious what kind of emotional state we were in. We were curious who they were."

"I yelled and howdy" to break the ice, he explained.

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One by one, they jumped onto the transom. "All of a sudden, no fear! were sitting in this new boat with four strangers," Rodriguez said.

The hungry sailors were given fresh bread, they were offered showers, and Stone, who had lost his parents years earlier, contributed clothes and shoes. Some even had shave

Rodriguez said he had tried not to think about losing his boat while the crisis was ongoing. But, the first morning he woke up on Rolling Stones, it hit him. Not only had he lost his home and belongings but he also left a Pa'ti'ma's "good friend."

"I'm worked so hard to be here, and have been dreaming of sailing tandful of the Bay of Virginia to the Marquesas on my own boat for about ten years. And I miss nautical miles short, my boat miles," Rodriguez said.

The Rolling Stones is expected to arrive in French Polynesia on Wednesday, and Rodriguez's plan that he's unheard.

"I feel very lucky and grateful that we were rescued so quickly," he said. "We were in the right place at the right time to go down."

Karen Schwartz is a writer based in Fort Collins, Colo. Follow her on Twitter: @Wanda~Wonanda.

CORRECTIONS
An earlier version of this article mistakenly the size of Iron Chaser that sank in 2006. It was 40 feet.

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