

Cruising Quandaries

In the real world, cruising captains must decide if they want to get involved in a rescue at sea. Meet one brave couple that has gone to the aid of mariners on more than one occasion.

BY JACK BRINCKERHOFF



What would you do in any one of the following circumstances?
You are offshore at night and you notice an unusual light at an unknown distance off the starboard side. A 90-degree change of course brings you close enough to realize the light is a hand-held flare.

You hear a Mayday call on the VHF from a foreign fishing vessel, but it is at least 10 miles from your current position. The vessel lost its rudder and is drifting onto a lee shore.

You see a boat anchored in shallow waters. It's pitching madly in steep 5- to 6-foot seas and the entire crew is waving shirts, towels and anything else they can locate in the hopes of attracting attention.

My wife, Jo, and I have been cruising *Bodacious*, our Kadey-Krogen 39, throughout Florida, the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos during the winter months for five years. We were personally involved in each of the situations described above. Here's what happened.



GOOD SAMARITANS. Jo and Jack Brinckerhoff on their boat (opposite). Bodacious pulls the conch boat Breakthrough I to safety (above).



THE CRUISING LIFE. *The Brinckerhoffs have cruised their Kadey-Krogen 39 Bodacious through the Bahamas, among other places, for five years.*

What's That Light?

It was about 8 p.m. and *Bodacious* was steaming northwest in the Gulf of Mexico about 25 miles offshore from St. Petersburg, Florida. Both Jo and I were in the pilothouse when I saw an unusual light on our starboard side. I initially continued on our northwesterly course, but was bothered by my lack of ability to identify the light. After several minutes of agonizing, we turned to starboard to get a closer look.

The source of the light was the very last hand-held flare on board an 18-foot open boat with two men on board. They had been adrift in the Gulf for 24 hours after having lost their anchor and suffering a complete electrical failure. The seas were flat calm, so there was no immediate threat. Jo and I were alone, and she was not entirely comfortable with our distressed seamen, so taking them aboard was out of the question. After several tries we successfully reached the Coast Guard on the VHF and advised them of the situation, including our reluctance to take the men aboard. The Coast Guard agreed to dispatch a cutter. We agreed to stay on station with the 18-footer (circling their boat) for about an hour so the rescuers would have a good fix on their position. Later that night, the Coast Guard cutter hailed us to let us know they had the men on board and all was well.

As you might conclude, this "rescue" did not require

any special equipment or training. At no time were we or our boat in peril. The only requirement was a willingness on our part to steer off course and to invest a little time toward the welfare of our fellow man.

It's Gone, Mahn!

A foreign fishing vessel had suffered a steering failure (we would learn later its rudder had fallen off) and was adrift about 25 miles from our position and roughly 10 miles from Nassau, Bahamas, when we first heard the distress call at about 11 p.m. After listening to the radio traffic for a while, it appeared the vessel was in touch with someone in Nassau and help would arrive soon. So we turned the radio off and headed to bed.

You might imagine my surprise the following morning when the first thing I heard on the VHF was the same boat, *Breakthrough I*, still asking for assistance. They had been broadcasting a distress call on VHF Channel 16 for about 12 hours and no one — including BASRA (Bahamas Air Sea Rescue Association), the Bahamian Defense Force or even the company that owned the fishing boat — had come to its aid that night. I answered the call to learn the boat had drifted to within about 10 miles of our anchorage and it was roughly one mile off Bonds Cay. We were the first vessel to even answer the distress call, let alone actually attempt to go to its aid.

After talking with the captain of *Breakthrough I* on the VHF, Jo and I decided we would go out to its location. At a minimum, we would get the people out of the water, if it came to that. Any decision to do more would be made after we arrived on the scene. Several days of moderately strong winds had churned the seas into a nasty, steep chop — uncomfortable conditions at best. We decided to ask our friend Greg Sapp, the captain of *Hemisphere Dancer*, to come aboard and help.

When we arrived at *Breakthrough I*'s location, we found about 65 feet and probably 50 tons of rusting Bahamian conch boat. Further communication with the captain revealed he had engine power, but not his rudder. "It's gone, mahn!" said the captain. After a brief conference with Greg and Jo, a decision was made to attempt to tow *Breakthrough I* about eight miles to a safe anchorage, where it could await the arrival of a tug to take it back to Nassau. It was nearly five hours later that we left the very grateful *Breakthrough I* in a secure anchorage.

I think it is important to note that at no time did we endanger either our boat or crew during this rescue. No one was in a hurry, and each step of the process was carefully thought-out and discussed among all members of our crew before any actions were taken. Once again, no special equipment was used, as the towing bridle was made of nothing more than our dock lines.

While reliving the experience with Greg and his wife, Sally, that evening, we wondered if we were the only boat to hear the distress call. We assumed the answer had to be no, because after it was known that we were under way toward *Breakthrough I*, other boats came on the air with offers to assist with communications (much appreciated assistance, I might add). What is the extent of the average cruiser's knowledge of another boat's peril, we wondered? We got our answer the following week.

Call for Help

We were still in the Bahamas when the captain of a local fishing boat — anchored in shallow waters and pitching madly in the seas — broadcast a distress call on VHF Channel 16. Unfortunately, the captain didn't know his position. By good luck, our course took us very close to his boat, and we altered our course to see if we could help. The captain asked if we would take one of the crew to Nassau to arrange a tow. We immediately agreed and were then faced with the dilemma of getting the captain (he decided he was the best choice) safely from the other boat onto ours. He suggested we come close alongside and he would jump. The mental image of a Bahamian

man splattered all over our pilothouse was not comforting. A far safer approach (and the one we used) was to use a line trailing astern with a throw ring secured at the end. We told the captain we would come close alongside (but well outside of jumping range) and disengage our transmission. We also showed him the safety line we were towing behind. We told him to swim for the line and we would pull him aboard. The plan worked flawlessly, even though I had forgotten to ask him if he could swim.

After we got the very grateful captain aboard, he told us about several boats that, having seen his boat, turned away and refused to respond to his pleas for help. I then asked him if he had been in touch with BASRA. He said he had, but because of the sea conditions and the fact that he did not know his exact position, they refused to start a search for him.

Once again, our ability to help this captain required no special equipment and no special training, just a willingness to get involved.

If you take a moment to think about these situations, several things will become apparent about what is and is not necessary to assist in a rescue.

» Special equipment. Unless you call good, stout docking lines "special," there was none required at any time.

» Special training. Neither Jo nor I have any.

» Special communication. Communication between captain and crew is always essential, but in a rescue situation it

becomes doubly important that each member of the crew understands how the rescue is going to proceed and what each member's job is.

» Risk to boat or crew. We've been involved in a number of rescues, yet there was only one situation where we were not comfortable with the crew in distress. Use your good judgment and trust your instincts.

The larger question here is how in the world did we get involved in so many rescues in such a short time while many crews participate in none at all? The answer is simple: You have to care. You have to be willing to go out of your way to assist your fellow boater. You have to be willing to put your own comfort and schedule aside to help someone who is in a far more difficult situation.

It may be a tribute to the design and construction of our Kadey-Krogen that our 15-ton trawler was able to successfully tow 50 tons of Bahamian conch boat, but there is not a trawler or sailboat among us that could not have gone out that morning to rescue the crew. Look again at what we did in the other situations. Any boat afloat with a VHF radio and some line could have accomplished what Jo and I did. ❖

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