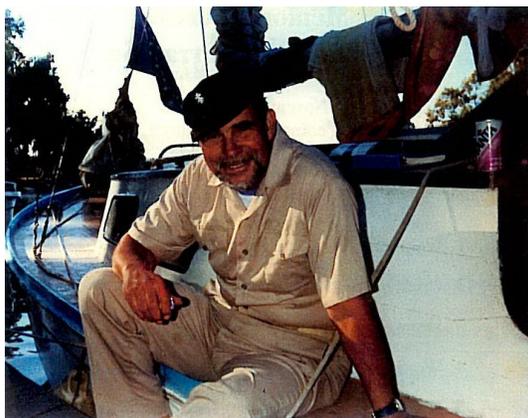


Voyage of the Tortoise

This story took place on the weekend of the Old Salt's Regatta in 1976. I was boatswain of the "mighty Intrepid" that year, and coxswain of the breeches buoy team. The entire ship had practiced several weeks for all of the Regatta competitions, and we were feeling pretty confident. This was especially true for the breeches buoy team, who practiced two to three times a week for a couple of months under the direction of Ken Murray, Jr. The members of the breeches buoy team that year were Don Strong, Kevin Murray, Jeff Frank, Kelly Murray, Miguel de la Pena, Aron Fisher, Kirk MacAfee (I think), and few others whose names I cannot remember (sorry!).

The Boxer was the flagship of the Intrepid at that time. A skeleton crew had sailed the Boxer from Palo Alto to Redwood City earlier in the week, on account of the tide not being high enough for the Boxer to depart from Palo Alto that Friday afternoon. The ship's crew was going to travel up to Redwood City by automobiles and go aboard the Boxer Friday night. The tide was still high enough for the Tortoise to depart on Friday afternoon, however, so the sailing crew got the Tortoise underway, embarked from its slip at the Palo Alto Yacht Basin, and headed for Redwood City into a heavy breeze. I cannot remember all of the crew members on board, but I am certain of the following names: Ken Murray, Sr. (skipper), Kevin Murray, Kevin Reeds, Jack Reeds, I (Mike Woodard), probably Kirk MacAfee, and a mate from the Resolute named Les Loederer.



Skipper Ken Murray, Sr.

The Tortoise was a 28' wooden sloop that was made in Yugoslavia. It had a 4 cylinder auxiliary engine that was sometimes used in rough weather for tacking. This is because the Tortoise did not have a full keel, so it did not

point or tack very well. In a light breeze the jib had to be back-winded in order to come about, and in a heavy breeze the little sloop could only be tacked with assistance from its auxiliary engine.



Mike Woodard & Kevin Murray, 1974

Because it was so windy that afternoon, we were periodically using the auxiliary engine to tack the Tortoise. The seas were 3 to 5 feet high, and I would estimate the wind speed to be about 20 knots and increasing. We passed through the old Dumbarton lift bridge with the assistance of the auxiliary engine and a portable air horn to signal the bridge operator. The tiny boat was getting a pounding from the waves, and the crew was pretty well soaked. Somewhere north of the Dumbarton Bridge Mr. Murray gave the order to reef the mainsail. We had been sailing a zig-zag course northward for over an hour and were a few miles north of the Dumbarton Bridge when I noticed something strange happen. During the voyage, Mr. Murray had been starting the engine before tacking, engaging the propeller shaft, ordering the crew to come about, disengaging the propeller, and then shutting down the engine. This procedure was repeated several times that afternoon. During my turn at the tiller, however, I noticed after we tacked the boat that the little auxiliary engine had shut itself down just a second or two before Mr. Murray hit the switch to shut the engine off. I thought that this was strange, but eventually I just dismissed it as my imagination.

About 20 or 30 minutes later we had to tack the boat again, but this time when Mr. Murray tried to engage the propeller, the engine coughed and sputtered and then died. He re-started the engine

and tried repeatedly to engage the propeller, but each time he did this the engine stopped running. We were all trying to figure out what was causing the problem with the engine, when someone noticed that the main halyard had become unsecured (due to the heavy pounding we were receiving) and was hanging over the side of the boat. One of the crew members went forward to secure the halyard, and reported that the line could not be hauled in; it was secured to something on the other end. Moments later we all realized what had happened. The main halyard had broken free of the cleat on the mast to which it was secured, trailed behind the boat, and had wrapped itself around the propeller shaft! Because of this the propeller shaft simply could not be rotated.

Well, we had to tack soon because the Tortoise was quickly heading toward the south bay mud flats and we were in danger of running aground. Mr. Murray could see that we would have to try and back-wind the jib in order to come about. A couple of different crew members valiantly attempted to help the little sloop come about into that heavy chop and fierce headwind by hanging over the rail and back-winding the jib. But that little Yugoslavian craft wasn't going to come about without either a full keel or a push from her auxiliary engine. And it didn't have either one that afternoon!

When several attempts to come about had failed, we were forced to jibe the Tortoise. Mr. Murray explained to us that since we couldn't tack the Tortoise, we would have to jibe the boat in order to keep from running aground. If we were successful this way we might make it all the way to Redwood City. This was a very risky maneuver, however, because if the jibe was unsuccessful and the boom snapped, then we would have a tough time either (1) making it back through the (closed) Dumbarton lift bridge or (2) anchoring north of the bridge in case it did not open for us. We were in quite a predicament. Preparations were quickly made for jibing the little sloop, and I think some quiet prayers were offered too! Mr. Murray took hold of the main sheet himself; due to the distinct possibility of an uncontrolled jibe occurring.

We all held our breaths as Mr. Murray gave the order to jibe the boat. I give Mr. Murray, Sr. the utmost credit for his efforts to prevent that boom from snapping. But the simple truth is that nobody could have handled the Tortoise's main sheet any more smartly that day than our very own skipper. The boom swung from one side of the boat to the other with a loud "crack". Our worst fears had materialized. We were literally

surfing downwind toward the (still closed) Dumbarton swing bridge, with no chance of turning upwind except to anchor, if necessary, with even the possibility of successfully anchoring the vessel seeming remote due to the heavy seas.

The sailors who are reading this are familiar with the dramatic contrast in the way a sailboat handles after it is turned from beating into a heavy sea to running with the wind. We had only a few minutes to make all of the correct maneuvers for a successful homeward voyage. In spite of the tension, however, there was a strange sense of relief we enjoyed from the intense pounding we had been subjected to only moments before.

I attribute our success in navigating our little vessel safely back to its home port that afternoon to the quick thinking of the officers on board, namely Ken Murray, Sr., Jack Reeds, and Les Loederer. After seeing our dilemma, Mr. Murray gave the order to make ready the anchor so that we could prevent the Tortoise from impacting the bridge piers in the event that the bridge operator did not open the bridge in time for us to pass safely through. Jack Reeds (who was also an officer in the Coast Guard Auxiliary) quickly got on the radio and issued a "Security" alert to notify the bridge operator of our dilemma and the need for him to open the swing bridge for us. Les quickly went to work jury-rigging the boom. He mended it as best he could by strapping two boat hooks on either side of it, much like one would bandage a broken arm with a couple of splints. He then secured the boat hooks with a series of marlin hitches along the length of the boom. It later became apparent that the wooden boom was hampered during the jibe because the clew of the reefed mainsail was a few feet forward of the end of the boom where the main sheet was secured. Thus, when the main sail rapidly swung from one side of the boat to the other during our jibe, the sail was bending the boom up like an archer's bow and the boom snapped at the point where the clew of the mainsail was secured.

It was very fortunate that the Dumbarton bridge operator opened the lift bridge for us in enough time so that we didn't have to anchor. I really don't think that our anchor would have held very well in that heavy sea and our little boat would surely have lost its mast and could have been badly damaged if it the waves had smashed it against the concrete bridge piers. After successfully making it through the bridge, the down-wind trip back to Palo Alto was uneventful, even peaceful. Our next concern was

the integrity of the vessel's boom. In order to sail the sloop into the Palo Alto channel we had to change our course, and go from sailing down wind to a broad reach, and again to a beam reach. We were not certain if our jury-rigged boom could handle the stress. Another concern was the tide. We wanted to sail the Tortoise far enough up the slough against a falling tide so that we could at least tie up to the dock at the boat ramp.

As we changed our heading, the jury-rigged boom creaked and groaned, but the marlin hitch that Les tied did the trick and the boom held steady! We slowly made our way up the channel, and hoped that the water was still deep enough to get to the boat ramp. Closer and closer to the boat ramp we sailed. Much to our despair, our little sloop silently touched bottom on the soft "south bay" mud, only 50 feet from the boat ramp dock!

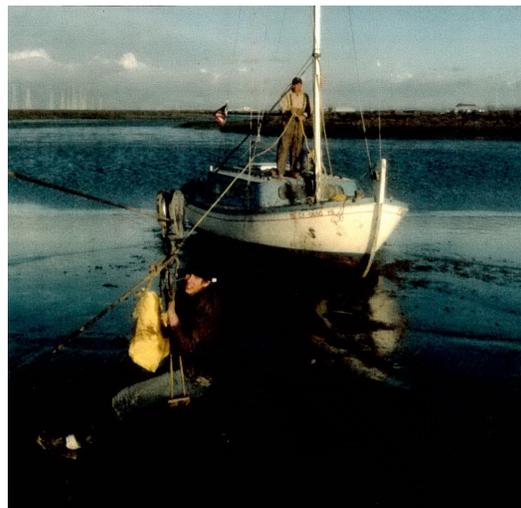
Our crew and officers had beaten the elements, only to be thwarted by the tide! Or so it seemed at first . . .

After a few minutes it dawned on us that we had on board at least three members of the Old Salt's breeches buoy team. If we could only get a line passed from ship to shore or vice versa, then we could rig a breeches buoy and get the crew off the vessel in time to make it to the Old Salt's Regatta in Redwood City. God must have smiled on us again that day; because no sooner had we discussed our plan than there appeared an elderly gentleman on the dock who was an honest-to-goodness "old salt". This old man called to us from the dock and asked us if he could help us. The wind was still pretty strong, so we yelled back to him that if he could go get our breeches buoy equipment that was in a storage locker at the Sea Scout base, then we could rig a real-life breeches buoy that we could use to get ashore. He quickly departed for the Sea Scout base as requested, and we waited for him to return, hoping all the time that some Sea Scout was still at the base that could unlock the storage locker and gather all of the necessary items. Well, God must have been really grinning by that time, because 10 minutes later who should appear with the old man but our dear friend Miguel de la Pena! Miguel was also a member of the breeches buoy team that year, and he knew exactly what items were required to rig a breeches buoy, and he had brought them all with him to the boat ramp dock.

Without haste Miguel and the old man got to work getting the gear ready. All of our heaving lines were 50' long, and they fell only a few feet

short of our vessel. After Miguel made several attempts to land the sandbag of the heaving line aboard the Tortoise, it became apparent that another line would have to be used. The old man saw that the heaving line was too short, so he casually took the "shot" line for the breeches buoy, and in only about two minutes he fashioned a monkey's fist on the end of the shot line, and on the first attempt heaved the monkey's fist into the cockpit of the Tortoise. I never saw the old man before or since that day we became stranded on the mud flats, but I rather think he was a real-life angel of mercy!

Once we had the shot line on board, we hauled the high line aboard and secured it to the mast. In no time we were each riding the breeches buoy chair from the Tortoise to the dock, with our duffel bags on our laps, and only inches it seemed above the soft mud. Mr. Murray humbly dropped over the side of the boat into the brown salt water to cut the main halyard free from the propeller shaft. He stayed aboard the vessel as the last crew member was leaving the dock, and on the next rising tide that night he powered the Tortoise safely back to her slip.



Mike Woodard in Breeches Buoy

The rest of the Tortoise crew members drove to Redwood City by automobile that night, and we all shared our real-life adventure with the rest of the crew of the Intrepid aboard the Boxer. The next day our breeches buoy team performed in what can be described as nothing less than absolute perfection. Don Strong and Kevin Murray were on the tower. Kevin road the chair down to the ground (boy, he was really flying!) where Kelly grabbed him and in one swift motion pulled him out of the chair. In a blur I yelled for the crew to come to attention and snapped the button on my stopwatch. I knew that we had completed the event in record time.

The team members held their breaths as we waited for the judge to say something. Miguel and I walked over to the judge to find out our elapsed time for the event, while the team and crew patiently waited for the outcome. “Two minutes fifty-five seconds”, cried the judge. We were elated, but I wanted to check my stopwatch just the same to make a comparison between the judge’s stopwatch and my stopwatch. Luckily, neither the judge nor I had re-set our stopwatches after the event was finished. I looked at my stopwatch in disbelief, then showed it to Miguel, then showed it to the judge. The minute hand of the watch was between the “1” and the “2”. Our elapsed time for the event was in fact only 1:55 instead of the 2:55 announced by the judge!! The judge looked carefully at his own stopwatch once again, and I think he was as amazed as we were! He then humbly announced that the correct elapsed time for this event was one minute less than previously stated, much to our exhilaration I might add!

What a weekend it had been! First, the crew of the Tortoise had put into actual practice seamanship skills which we had learned for the breeches buoy event at the Old Salt’s Regatta, and which most sailors never have the need to use. Secondly, the Intrepid’s breeches buoy team finished their event in record time, and in so doing perhaps even set a world record in this event!

Later that month Steve Deneen’s father fashioned a replacement boom for the Tortoise that was of even better quality than her original boom, and the Tortoise and her crew were soon sailing the waters of San Francisco Bay once again.



Crew of the “Tortoise”, 1974

*Mike Woodard
S.S.S. Intrepid
1972 - 1977*