
Down Bay 2000: Delmarva Circumnavigation – Part IV

– Marc Cruder

We survived the Virginia Inside Passage, rounded the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula and re-entered the Chesapeake Bay in Part III, despite “surf and storm and howling gale.” Well, at least it seemed that way. This final installment will describe our trek back north, starting along the lower eastern shore and then across the bay via remote Tangier Island. We

then headed across to the western shore and back to some of our familiar sailing grounds and haunts in the central Chesapeake Bay. If your charts are still out and there’s any of that sipping rum left. Here’s how it went...

The Core Group that continued to the end...

Marc Cruder with first mate Matthew sailing *Sylph*: Wittholz/Hermann 17.

Bill Hoover sailing *Gull*: Mystic 20.

Pete Peterson sailing *C'est Moi*: Mystic 20.

John Brown with first mate and helmsman Liz and Danny sailing *Mufasa*: Atlantic City 24.

Saturday, 6/24: Day Fifteen - Destination: Onancock, VA

Weather: Hot, sunny and clear; wind SSE at 5-10 kt.

We were underway under power out of Cape Charles at about 0715. Liz Brown was dropped off at the local bus station, to meet up with us again in a few days. After a healthy rope starting of *Gull*'s inboard, now part of the morning rou-



Catboats flanked by local deadrise boats in Onancock, VA.

tine. Bill took the lead navigator position for the day (*sea story below*). We were underway under sail at about 0730. Upon clearing the harbor entrance at about 0800, all set sail. By 0930 we were abeam red No. 38A, and I was back on the engine to catch up to the Mystic 20s. *Mufasa* was sighted coming up astern. Continuing north, we were abeam red No. 40 at 0945 and red No. 40A at 1000. Off went the engine at 1100 with all three catboats ahead and the wind increasing. The group altered course to starboard, compensating for set off the land, to about 050 deg. per magnetic course (PMC). We ran the engine again to supplement sail and keep up.

Sighted the green No. 1 off Nandua Creek at 1330, lined up for the entrance to Onancock Creek on a course of about 035 deg. PMC and shut off the engine. At 1500 we rounded the red No.2 bell buoy off Onancock Creek. We sailed the edge of the Onancock-Pungoteague Flats, navigating the winding channel into Onancock Creek under sail only, as did *Gull* and *Mufasa*, with rails buried. We found our way to the town dock, but it was full. Checked out the immediate coves and ended up between a gravel dock and a waterman's dock to port of Hopkins and Brothers General Store. We rafted up. Matthew and Danny found a tire swing over the water to occupy themselves while I rowed to town.

I came back to the boat at about 1900 to find a jellyfish had stung Danny and swimming was temporarily suspended. After the long, favorable day we cooked dinner; a hard sailing experience was had.

Cruise Notes:

1. The creek itself is pretty, but has a long entrance with multiple coves for anchoring. Saturday night, however, the harbor filled with cruising sailboats at anchor and powerboats at the limited town dock. It's better to visit during the week.
2. Although the town is historical, it was not particularly well maintained. The external sign on Hopkins and Brothers has the right look, but the inside has been touristized, leaving no flavor of what it used to be. It is not even interesting to sit and have a drink at the bar.
3. The entrance to the harbor is long and there are limited facilities ashore. Gas/ice/showers can be had at the dock.
4. The vintage bay-built passenger boat *Captain Eulice* operates from the town dock daily to Tangier Island.

Best Sea Story: *Gull* to the lead navigator for this leg. When comparing the chartbook to last large chart I discovered I was missing a section of the Eastern Shore from just north of Cape Charles to just south of Onancock Creek.

Sunday, 6/25: Day Sixteen- Destination: Tangier Island, VA

Weather: Hot, sunny and clear. Winds SW at 10-15 kt.

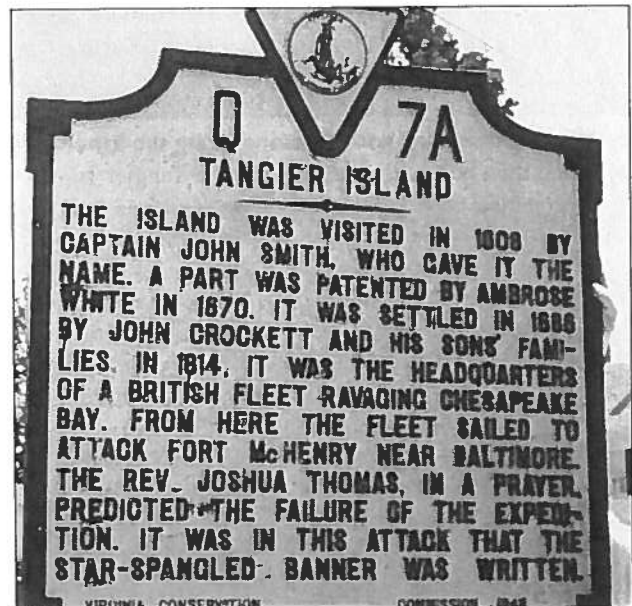
With short mileage today, we took our time getting underway. By 1000 the trawlers tied to the town dock were leaving, so I pulled *Sylph* around for some gas and ice. The *Captain Eulice* was boarding day passengers.

We were aweigh under power at 1030 out of Onancock Creek. We cleared the creek at about 1100, raised sail with one reef for Tangier Island reaching on a course of 330 deg. PMC. We were abeam Watts Island at 1230, and picked up the approach markers to the east channel of Tangier Island at about 1330. The tide was extremely low or the water was extremely shallow. We came in alongside the passenger boat *Stephen Thomas*, which was out of Crisfield with a load of tourists, locals and the mail.

We tied up outboard of *Mufasa* at about 1430. He was tied to a local dock (everyone has one) next to an old round stern deadrise named *Johnny Boy*. I knew we couldn't stay here, so I headed for the town dock where the tour boats came in. Looked for Rudy Thomas, the current proprietor of the island's waterborne commercial transportation link to the Eastern and Western Shores. His family has been running what started out as the mail boat since 1912. Having been a previous Chief of Inspection for the Coast Guard in Baltimore, I was familiar with all Rudy's passenger boats and we knew each other. Rudy was on the road, but his wife Beth and brother Stephen recognized me after awhile; my beard was in strong by now. They called Rudy by cell phone, and he said he'd be in by 1600. In the interim they offered us dock space after the daily tour boats left, because they wouldn't be back until the next day. They also gave us a good recommendation for dinner, and asked to join us. We were glad to have them and their local knowledge, not to mention their dock space.



First Dock – Tangier, VA.



History of Tangier, Island, VA.

We lost no time moving the boats around, while witnessing what can only be described as genetic feats of high speed boat handling all around us. The island is a maze of crab shanties and processing finger docks stretching out into the useable waterway. The locals know every inch of the water and zip in and out making it all look simple. The visitor is the inferior boathandler here and should take some time to size up the busy waterway around before dropping a hook, or assuming you can get ashore.

Matthew and I went into town and took the \$3 golf cart guided tour. We had root beer floats, as it was so hot that was all you could eat. We then went souvenir hunting. Rudy and his wife met us for dinner, which gave us a chance to catch up on his business' growth, which was expanding into sportfishing. After dinner, Rudy and his son took us over to see the family "peeler and soft crab" operation. He explained to us the different stages of making and harvesting soft shells. Later we got a water tour of Tangier Island. Having been a marine inspector with an interest in the local maritime culture, all I noted was the design of the local deadrise hulls, the low beamy crab scrapes. They are now all powerboats, but obviously were once sailing hulls. Rudy even called them "barcats" - a term I know only from the book *Barcat Skipper* by local Chesapeake Bay author, Larry Chowning. Tangier also has the largest collection of still operating, round stern deadrise workboats, all originally built and imported from Deltaville, VA.

Rudy then lent us a golf cart, which he normally rents at his dock. Only golf carts, bikes and motorcycles are on the island. Of course I went down to see what was dying in the local boatyard. Found the local version of wood boat hull sheathed with fiberglass to be alive and well executed.

Tangier is a dry, Methodist island. I noted the locals coming from church in their Sunday best. Judging by their attire the scene had not changed much for over 50 years.

Finally we got back to the boat and hit the rack. Bugs big and aggressive so we installed the Debbie Bug Screen.



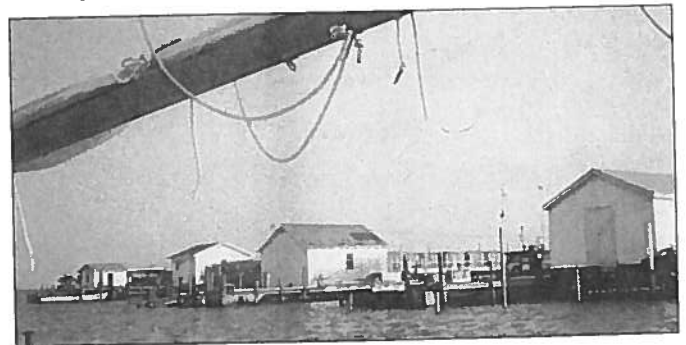
Skippers (L to R) Bill Hoover, Catboat Pete, Marc Cruder, John Brown at the hub of transportation - Ruby Thomas' Dock.

Cruise Notes:

1. It is worth the stop, to witness a way of life that is fading fast from the bay
2. Soft crab market is solid with Tangier as a primary national source. The locals are anti-Chesapeake Bay Foundation, based on the signs we saw on some crab shacks.
3. There are enough old workboats dying in the mud or still operating to stock another maritime museum.
4. The entire island is accessible and can be walked, but a golf cart rental is easier on your feet.
5. There is really no place to tie up. There is a boatyard facility with some limited space on the west side of the island. Otherwise, you can anchor where there's room, but watch out for those high-speed stealth skiffs running around in the dark.
6. An alternative to the well-advertised Hilda Crocket's was the Fisherman's Corner, a fairly new restaurant that was nicely appointed and clean with fresh, well-prepared seafood at reasonable prices. I recommend the soft crab bites.

Best Sea Story: I had to quickly modify catboater's sailoresque behavior pattern by ordering cease and desist on open beer bottle in hand coming off the boat. This was a religious and technically "dry" island. I didn't want anyone to get locked up, or buried in the mud up to our necks at low tide!

As predicted by Rudy Thomas: "the local boys will be moving around the dock early with their outboard skiffs." Then came this warning from a local crabber that woke me out of sound sleep about 4 a.m. "Hey look out...there's sailboats in thar.... somebody put sailboats in thar!" Glad I hung that anchor light at the end of the boom.



Outbound under sail from Tangier Island.

Monday 6/26: Day Seventeen - Destination: St. Jerome's Creek, MD

Weather: Sunny, hot and clear. Wind SW 15-20 kt.

Underway under power with two reefs tied in at about 0715. The weather would be a little brisk, but favorable, so there were no doubts about moving out. Double reef up at 0720, engine in neutral but running while proceeding out Tangier Island's west channel. Putting up sail and being set for sea was the right move. As soon as we cleared the channel at about 0730, it was certainly open water. Those who waited to set sail looked like they were having a time of it. I can only say that the seas were large rollers and following. For me that meant double topping lifts picked up to prevent dipping the boom and careful steering to keep seas on the quarter. The pictures I took don't do the situation justice, but early on the swells were large enough to obstruct my view aft when we were in the trough

(see *Kid's Log* below). I was originally worried about the Atlantic Ocean leg. This was infinitely more challenging.

Not accounting for our leeway, we were on a course of about 328 deg. PMC and abeam Smith Island by about 0835 with the shipping channel in view. Continuing on, we were abeam No. 66 red at 0935 and No. 68 red in the vicinity of the target ship at about 1050. At 1120 I put the engine on to catch up to *Mufasa* and *C'est Moi*, with *Gull* visible astern as the wind began to ease.

We shut the engine down at about 1200 in the vicinity of Point Lookout. At 1300 we were abeam Point No Point and shaping up for St. Jerome's Creek. We negotiated the switchback entrance under sail, and with power assist arrived at a nice beach area. A swim call for all was followed by a short investigation up the creek. We finished the day rafted up and dined aboard back near the beach.

Cruise Notes:

1. St. Jerome's Creek is a nice untouched spot with room to anchor off an accessible beach with lots of sea room.
2. The tricky, switchback entrance to the creek is hard to spot. You can sail it only under the right conditions. I remember Jim Wagner did so in 1993. The strong, foul current aborted any attempt on my part.



John Brown pulls *Mufasa* off the beach in St. Jerome's Creek and sets the hook manually.

Best Sea Story: Seeing John in waist deep water off the beach, picking up his anchor and moving *Mufasa* around like she was a big farm animal on the end of a line.

Kid's Log (Matthew): "The waves were humungous!"

Wednesday, 6/27: Day Eighteen – Destination: Slaughter Creek, Little Choptank

Weather: Overcast, SW to W wind at 10-15 kt. with 3 to 4 ft. seas.

We spent a comfortable night on the hook with no bugs. We got up at 0700 to discuss plans with the group. The wind was up again, so the reefs stayed tied in. Underway out of St. Jerome's Creek at 0715. Sail up with Matthew on the helm at 0730 off No. 1 green. We headed for Point No Point on a course of about 035 deg. PMC. At 0745 we turned north onto our heading for the day, with wind heavy on the stern. At 0750 the

boom gooseneck fitting let go again. This time it broke at a circumferential weld around a bolt integral to the fitting. Junk! The last time I was alone; this time I had help. Matthew did a great job at the helm while I tied everything down. We got ourselves back on the engine heading north under power while the rest of the group sailed.

At 0900 we were off "the targets" and on a steady course with Matt at the helm. I cooked up the rest of the pancake batter and finished breakfast before the wind started to take a more westerly component. I put the battery on charge via the outboard alternator. At 1000 we had Patuxent Naval Air Station in sight off Cedar Point, as well as the Cove Point LNG docks. We saw the 100 year old log-built buyboat *Wm. B. Tennison* come out from the Calvert County Maritime Museum. By 1100 we were abeam Cove Point lighthouse, with great visibility. James Island was in sight. *Mufasa* and the Mystic 20s were astern and a single tug/barge combination was downward bound the Bay. At 1200 we were within a mile of the James and Taylors Island cut, and looking good with all catboats astern under sail.

After running the cut between James and Taylors Island, we eventually picked up entrance buoys to Slaughter Creek at about 1300. We tied up to Taylors Island Marina at 1330 and restocked with gas, ice and soda. Even dumped sewage. By 1400 we were anchored in Taylors Cove. Swim call. Matthew was sent ashore with the dinghy to warn the Taylor's Island General Store that we were coming in for dinner. They do need some notice at times. We ran them out of crabs with too big a crowd one year. We rigged the *Matta Siete* (red-sailed pirate ship) when Matthew got back. He and Danny "yo" Brown went sailing. Crabs and beer followed ashore.



Catboat kids Danny Brown and Matthew Cruder get some sailing in on *Matta Siete* in Taylors Creek, MD.

Cruise Notes:

1. With unlimited visibility to both sides we had our best run ever up this part of the bay.
2. We sighted one skate in the James Island cut and one at the entrance to Slaughter Creek.
3. Except for our misfortune with the gooseneck fitting, a good day was had by all. At least I charged the battery.
4. The secret to getting through the James and Taylors Island cut is holding to James Island until you get a good visual on the small island to the south side of Oyster Cove and

then "take 'er down the middle."

Best Sea Story: From Gull's log: "A good day, however, Slaughter Creek is real familiar country and we feel we are really home!"

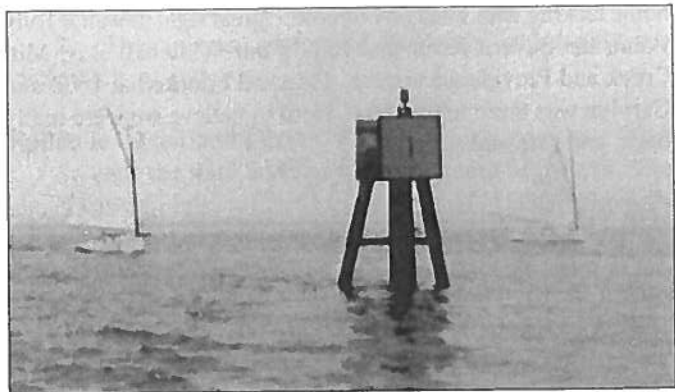
Kid's Log (Matthew): "Big waves! First, Dad broke the boom again! It was good sailing, but we couldn't. We went to Miss Mary's for dinner and I finally got to sail my dinghy. Then there was a huge thunderstorm."

Tuesday, 6/28: Day Nineteen - Destination: LeCompte Creek, Choptank River, MD

Weather: Overcast, black clouds with intermittent rain. Calm.

After dinner last night, we all waited just a little too long. The weather came through and stayed — a non-stop pouring rain. We waited about an hour, talked with the locals and pondered a piece of an old transom hanging on the wall that had the name *Red Necks and Gizzards*. Finally made a dash back out to anchorage with our dinghies half full of rainwater.

It was a buggy night, but we slept well. I made the morning rounds between the raindrops by dinghy and decided to head out. *Mufasa* hung back to have breakfast at the General Store. I got *Gull's* engine started after three pulls. I had the magneto switch in the wrong position; it was my fault. We powered out of the creek at about 0900, cleared the No. 2 red at the entrance to Slaughter Creek at about 0930 and the flashing green No. 1 at the entrance to Little Choptank at 1030. We turned east into the Choptank River, around red bell buoy No. 10 at about 1145. We finally headed south into LeCompte Bay off red No. 16, in search of No. 2 red nun. We saw another skate in the process. They move fast and you can't miss them as they break the water.



Mystic 20s rounding the mark enroute to LeCompte Creek.

We searched the landscape for LeCompte Creek, which is now marked by a single daymark, green No. 5. Powering to the end of the creek we recognized our shore access behind old Richardson's Shipyard shed. At 1330 we tied to a piling and dinghied ashore. We walked up to the house and met with friends Tom and Judy Howell. Tom cleaned out an old aluminum rowboat for use as a supplemental water transport. Tom's old pickup made the run from the water up to the house. I brought my boom end fitting in and made a temporary repair with a stainless steel bolt. I was determined to finish this trip under sail.



Sylph tied to a piling "eastern shore style" in LeCompte Creek.



Rub-a dub-dub Catboat Pete and Bill on the run - LeCompte Creek.

Cocktails, showers, dinner, dessert and camaraderie were the order of the evening, all courtesy of our gracious hosts. Debbie came by land to pick Matthew up. They were scheduled to be guests on a Coast Guard cutter for OpSail in Baltimore harbor the next day, so I'd finish alone. Tom and Judy were their usual great hosts. Conversation around the table had a lot of common ground with some of our newer participants, as things ran the range from airplanes to farm equipment. A great stop and good meal was had by all.

Cruise Notes:

1. LeCompte is a nice, secluded little creek off the beaten path.
2. My potential tugboat (a.k.a. CCBA Committee Boat) was looking good.

Best Sea Story: I had to row Tom's long haired Jack Russell Terrier back in after he swam out to anchorage following Bill and Pete in the dinghy and then over to me. Once I put him ashore, I kept yelling for him to "STAY" as I rowed away. He eventually went back to the house.

Thursday, 6/29: Day Twenty - Destination: HOME!

Weather: Rainy and cloudy. Light NE wind with 1-2 mi. visibility.

The creek had been buggy to start the night, but got comfortable as the temperature cooled down overnight. I woke up to find one boat missing. John "Old Bay Lines runs at night" Brown had gotten an early start to getting back with his family. I can't say I blamed him.



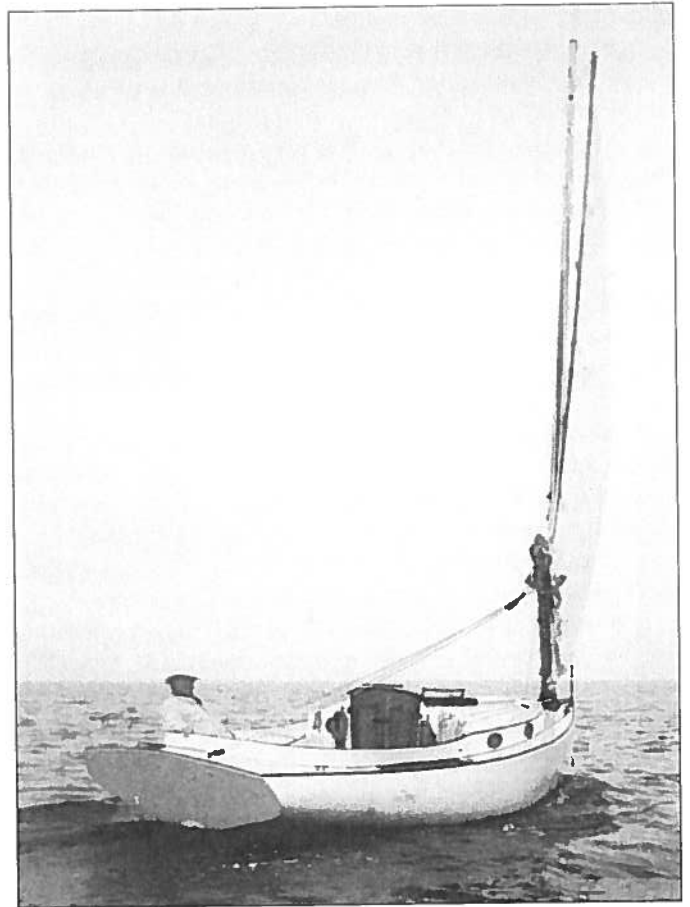
Homeward bound! The last hand start for Gull.

I reinstalled the boom fitting and hoped it would hold. Then I brought Tom's aluminum rowboat ashore and made the rounds, as the rain was already coming down. Got *Gull's Vire* started, and left the creek at about 0745. Abeam flashing red No. 16, we departed LeCompte Bay with a north wind coming up. We set sail and killed the engine. Finding our channel buoys for Knapps Narrows, we doused our sail at the eastern entrance. After running under an open bridge, we cleared the western entrance of the narrows at about 1115, shaping up for a close cut of Poplar Island. We said our good-byes and parted company with the Mystic 20s.

We continued with the sail up and the engine on. So I hooked the battery to charge again. The wind gradually came around to a northeasterly heading. We cleared the No. 84A red buoy off Poplar Island at about 1230, and was abeam of Bloody Point Light at about 1300. No OpSail vessels were yet in sight. At 1345 I was off No. 1 green buoy just below the South River, so I headed off the wind and shut the engine off. Putting the sail up for the last time, I saw another skate break the water. I still had *Gull* and *C'est Moi* visually on the other side of the bay. I decided not to hang around to see the downward bound OpSail boats. By 1530 I was tied up at Selby Bay. The Great Circumnavigation was complete!



Clearing the last bridge at Knapps Narrows, Tilghman Island, MD.



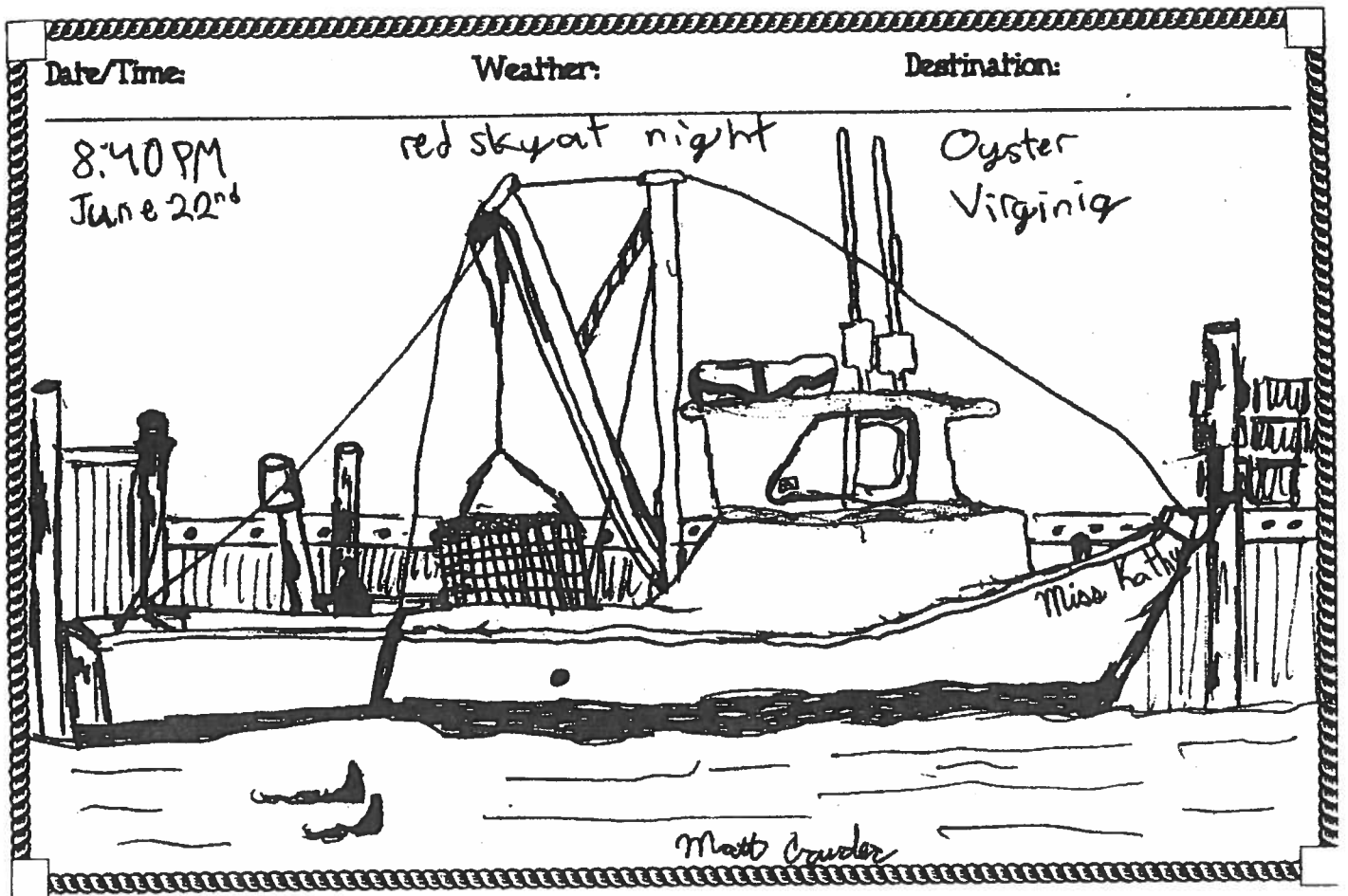
For Catboat Pete from Colorado it was just a walk in the park; voyage complete.

Best Sea Story: From *Gull's* log: "Awkward motor sail home tacking with wind on our nose...great sight to watch Tolly Point, the Severn River and finally our Whitehall Bay, Mill Creek and Providence appear. Pete and I docked at 1600 and Carolyn was there to greet us! Hard to believe we were really back, and safe and sound."

Post Mortem – Lessons Learned

No matter how much planning you do, every trip teaches you something. Here's my list, which is by no means all-inclusive:

1. Do not proceed on inside bays when wind driven seas are on the nose.
2. Inlets at Indian River and Ocean City are no problem when handled correctly.
3. Time at each stop was just about right. Except, we never got into the town of Northeast, MD. We also needed more time in Lewes, DE, to see the Maritime Museum.
4. Block ice lasts.
5. Getting local knowledge from the Coast Guard was valuable in the VIP.
6. Motorsailing is a "must use" technique when you have destinations to make.
7. Having the kids along was great. This was too much fun to do alone.



Oyster boat at Oyster, VA. with what appears to be one of the many bull rays seen during the trip swimming near the surface. Sketch by Mathew Cruder.

Items for *Sylph*:

1. Redesign the gooseneck fitting on the boom.
2. The outboard performed flawlessly, and the alternator worked.

Epilogue – Last and Final

So ends the third and last major segment of the trip. For me, it was the ultimate Chesapeake Bay cruise and only solidified what is possible in a small boat with a little planning and the right conditions. A competent sailor could have made this trip, since it doesn't require expensive equipment or vast external resources, only the desire to do it. I am fortunate to have had the time, good health and the support of my family, particularly my wife Debbie, to complete this endeavor. The security and seaworthiness of the catboat as a suitable partner in this undertaking allowed me to bring my children along. Each in their own way added richness and dimension to what otherwise might have been an overly nautical and unnecessarily lonely experience. I hope they will always remember the adventure. I also thank my fellow Chesapeake Catboat Association members who shared this experience. They supported my effort from the outset. Those accompanying me provided camaraderie and companionship. Along the way they stuck with me when I made those tough command decisions. They proved to be the top notch and prepared cruisers and sailors I have always known them to be. We didn't lose a one of the core

group, despite mechanical and other inconveniences along the way. We were all well prepared or had contingencies.

From *Gull's* log: "The marshlands of the eastern Delaware and Virginia shore are bleak and foreboding. We spent 6 days in them and survived groundings (stuck in the mud), green flies and intense concentration on our course. We got through whole and in good spirits."

"The great companionship we shared on this trip and the high level of respect shown for each other were the real high points of this cruise. We will never repeat it, but will always cherish the memories."

I couldn't agree more. This event caps off a fitting 10 years of organized cruising by the small yet vigorous group we know as the CCBA. Chronicling these adventures is an invitation to cruisers everywhere to consider exploration of a prime tributary that is easy to get to and offers a wealth of cruising pleasure, especially for our shallow draft catboats. Details were included so that others may follow in our path, and so those who made this voyage will remember our time together long into the future. Perhaps some of the younger members will come back to command an expedition of their own before it all changes, or at least tell their children about it some day. That is the joy of cruising and the benefit of the proper vessel and crew.