

The storms of life.

By Rick Ales

"We're gonna die, we're gonna die!" It was Thursday night of the Stewart Jones regatta when the worst squall in my 30 years of sail boat racing swept over the fleet. Lightning flashed across the blackening sky as the storm's first hurricane force gust nearly capsized us. It was Kylie, our newbie sailor, on deck next to me, hugging the life out of a lifeline wailing, "We're gonna die! I'm never gonna see James again, My God, Why didn't we have sex this morning?"



It's funny what comes to mind when you're scared. For me, I remembered back to when I was 13, my mom had left my father and I lived with grandma. Without the firm discipline a young man needs, I fell in with the wrong gang, my grades faltered, and I developed a truancy problem. I was a troubled teen, on the verge of delinquency with one foot in prison.

Then In spring of '68 my mom married Scotty, a used car salesman, and my Grandma sent me to live with them. Scotty laid down the law, "Young man... If you live with me, you'll get your hair cut, go to school every day and be home and in bed by 10 o'clock! DO YOU READ ME?" I thought I'm gonna die, but I meekly capitulated, "Yes sir." Then Scotty's stern demeanor softened, "Hey I brought home a new Mustang GT. Do you know how to drive a 4-speed?" I was 15, my eyes lit up, "Really?"

That summer Scotty not only taught me to drive a 4-speed, but how to tune a Dodge Hemi and how to water ski on Grand River. An accomplished raconteur, Scotty relished telling his Army stories. How he and First Sargent Dumbroski who he affectionately called Dumbo forced

marched through ground zero of an atomic bomb test site in Nevada; or how he and Dumbo outsmarted the brass while on maneuvers in Alaska; or how he and Dumbo terrorized the red light district outside of Fort Benning Georgia. With me as his audience and fueled by a bucket of black coffee, he would go on into the wee hours and I never tired of hearing his same Army stories no matter how many times.

In the spring of '69, Scotty traded a 15 year old Checker taxi cab for the sorriest 21ft sailboat in all the Great Lakes. Scotty and I spend hundreds of hours working on that old boat and we shared much more than just a bucket of chicken and a few beers teaching ourselves to sail Lake Erie.

Our first crisis came on a sweltering summer afternoon when the storm was upon us before we could make safe harbor. Its gale force winds shredded our dilapidated old sails and blew us perilously close to the break wall. Scotty labored to get our finicky old motor started and me, I panicked, we're gonna die! "No we're not!" Scotty said with a moxie I found reassuring. But just that old motor coughed to life, a loose line fell overboard, fouling the prop leaving us at the mercy of the huge waves. A merciless monster of a wave tossed our tiny boat on to the rocks. "JUMP!" Scotty ordered me to safety then followed me on to the break wall. Drenched but safe, we watched as our abandoned boat sailed off into the driving rain— destined to sink from the new 4 foot gash in her side. That day I learned, we each have a hand in our own destiny.

Flash forward, to the Thursday night race with Kylie, whimpering, "We're gonna die!" "No we're not," I heard myself channeling Scotty's moxie. "Hell I've sunk a boat before". Dumb ASS! That's not the best choice of words I scolded myself. But the moxie I learned in in a long-ago storm must have reassured Kylie .... we're Not gonna die. Not today.

Finally, after an eternity, the lighting abated, the wind calmed and the sunset broke though the overcast western horizon. Red sky at night, sailors delight. Again I thought of Scotty.

When I joined the Navy, Scotty threatened to tell my commanding officer about the time I jumped ship—but he never did. When I got out of the Navy, Scotty and I partnered on a proper sailboat. He loved evening sails and Sunday races. And years later, after racing became too much for him, it became MY turn to regale him with tales of our race day triumphs and tribulations.

When he died in '99, I reflected on the importance Scotty had been in my life. You see, I had planned to leverage my Navy electronics training into a career as a TV repairman. It was Scotty who encouraged me set my sights higher. Without Scotty's guidance, I would have never got my Engineering Degree. I would have never been a Vice President of Engineering. For that matter, I would have never stayed out of prison.

It was with a firm hand and gentle heart that a used car salesman taught a troubled teen, it's not the storms of life but how you set yours sails that determines your destination. God how I miss hearing about his adventures with Dumbo.

I will always regret... I'm gonna die... having never called Scotty, Dad.