

A Bad Night

A young man meets an old acquaintance of all fishermen
By Neil Sandvik

In “The Life,” we feature stories told by those who experienced them. In this installment, Neil Sandvik meets the kind of storm that kills.

In the summer of 1963, the F/V *Munroe* from Petersburg fought for her life — and the lives of her crew — on the Fairweather Grounds. As the *Munroe* and her crew battle the sharp seas of the shallow ground, appreciate the modern technology aboard your vessel.

The F/V *Munroe* rolled gently in the 5-foot ocean swell 50 miles off Lituya Bay. The halibut boat’s distinctive gaff sail hardly fluttered as she hauled back the last skate of her string on the Fairweather Grounds.



The ocean conditions that evening showed no hint that in six hours the crew would be battling for their lives. Usually there were warning signs to a local blow, but the wind was light, and the high, gray clouds of the eastern gulf held no clue to any approaching weather.

In addition, the nattering birds following the boat for scraps weren’t more vocal than normal. In those days, no one monitored the radio for weather until it was blowing. The only odd circumstance was the color of the swells, which nearly matched the steel gray sky making the horizon almost disappear.

Oscar Sandvik, the skipper, engaged the manual chain drive clutch so the boat could keep up with the gear lying on the shallow west bank. With

the fish in the aft checker, our catch for the day totaled 3,000 pounds. We would have a decent payday if we maintained that average for the five days remaining on the trip. It was always possible to have a couple of big days, so we could head home via Cape Spencer to Petersburg early.

The final skate

and anchor aboard, we shifted the gurdy into high gear and hauled in the buoyline, bag, and bamboo flagpole. Now at full speed, the skipper set the *Munroe* on course to the next fishing location. We finished baiting the gear and dressing the remaining fish in the shaking checker.

Cliff Southers, the other deckhand, descended into the fish hold to begin icing. Oscar had informed us it would be less than an hour to the next “hotspot” where we would set our 44 skates to soak overnight.

I repositioned the coco mats to help me control the larger fish on the slick wooden hatch and waited for Cliff’s instructions to drop the next fish. My father, the *Munroe*’s skipper, was busy in the wheelhouse paying close attention to the course and the depth, for these were his only navigation tools. Loran A (the original WW II edition) had been installed the year before, but it wasn’t working properly, and GPS was 30 years away. (I had erroneously positioned the boat on Kayak Island the previous season and Dad had never forgotten it.) In addition to the Bendix paper sounder, the *Munroe* was equipped with an RDF unit (radio direction finder) Oscar had purchased for tuna fishing and a Wood Freeman autopilot whose drive motor had just been upgraded. A 60-watt Northern radio was located in the stateroom. VHF didn’t exist.

The icing completed, Cliff crawled out of the fish hold and pulled the 100-watt bulb from the chilly hold. I hosed off his oilskins, then replaced the inner and outer hatches.

We cleaned the deck as the Cummins main engine propelled us to the next fishing location. In the galley below deck, forward of the engine room, Neal Ashby, the cook, prepared a traditional boiled codfish and potato evening meal, complete with a



pot of sweet soup and another of creamed corn. At 17, I was already an experienced fisherman (as the saying probably still goes, “They break ’em in young in Petersburg”) and preferred the sweet soup over the traditional rice soup common on Norwegian boats.

A half an hour later, we were laying the first of four sets. Each set was 11 skates, and each skate was 250 fathoms long, made of nylon or manila, both three-strand. Nylon was replacing the natural manila, which deteriorated much faster and had less strength.

The nylon skates were notoriously cranky, twisting left and right, a vast departure from the predictable, easy-to-work-with manila rope. The

manila was also thicker, and more diameter meant more strain when hauling in tide. The J hooks, attached to an eye tied on a leader, or gangion, which was fastened to a doubled loop or begat, tied into the groundline. Hooks in those days had no eye but a flattened shank on which tarred twine was whipped, or gansed, around the gangion securing the hook.

The spacing between gangions was 18 feet. The gear would eventually sink to the bottom where we hoped an abundance of flat ones lay, waiting for us.

At the end of the day, there was little conversation on the stern over the grind of the main engine. I hung onto the side of the dory, which served as a lifeboat and repository of buoyline plus odds and ends.

There I could pass skates of gear to Cliff for the set. The skates in the best condition were used for the ends of the set, with the most worn in the middle. Water sloshed in the scuppers, and the shrieking flotilla of seagulls, goonies, and sea pigeons followed astern looking for any opportunity to steal a free piece of herring, octopus, or salmon.

The J hooks rattled in the metal chute, then shot overboard. Most of the bait was herring, with a bit of chum salmon and some octopus. They were used because of their effectiveness, but sparingly since they were costly. In addition, every scrap fish was chopped up for gurdy bait. Every effort was made to keep the bait bill low, since it was a major expense and the last one deducted just before the crew shares. Those thrifty Petersburg Norskis always had an eye on their wallets. All accounting was done according to the Set Line Agreement with the Petersburg Fishermen's Union (Independent).

Running full speed at 8 knots, the boat rolled slightly more. The "fish" stabilizers hanging aft from stubby poles amidships were hardly needed.

"A little over an hour, and I'll be in my sleeping bag," I thought. The promise of sleep and a hearty meal made the long day and the hard work bearable.

The southeast breeze sprang up while we were setting that first string. Not a second thought was given to the wind as we worked. The swell increased to 8 feet with a frothy chop, and the birds began hovering sideways as they looked for loose bait. Soon the wind was blowing 25 knots.

Sloppy weather is a normal part of fishing, so we continued setting. After I finished rigging the

buoyline for the last end of the second string and the first end of the third, I returned to the stern to help Cliff. As each skate went overboard, he would push the next one into the chute, then quickly untie the securing skate ropes of the next and fasten it to the end of the skate going out. I helped him stack the tops and bottoms into neat piles for storage until they'd be used when hauling the next day.

Wind buffeted the canvas extending from the baiting shelter to the boom. Water started to slop back and forth across the deck through the scuppers of the main deck. I turned to Cliff and said, "Looks like we're in for it tonight."

"Yeah, kid," he replied. "There's nothing we can do about it now. We're committed."

He shoved the next skate into the chute, then turned to me, hollering with a devilish grin on his face, his hat turned sideways.

"It's a pleasure to be out here!"

As we continued setting, the wind increased, now over 30 knots. The boat rolled and heaved even more. We were setting in the trough, which as every halibut fisherman knows, is the only direction a skipper knows how to set. The gaff stabilizing sail helped somewhat, as it was quite nasty by the time the last of the gear had gone overboard.

Blowing spray and the driving rain cut our visibility. With the gear out, Oscar ran the distance between the parallel strings and found the first end of the first set that he had planned to haul the next day. The boat slowed and he disengaged the clutch. The control was a rod from the top of the pilot house through the deck, where a sprocket drove a chain aft to the clutch. The *Munroe* turned away from the wind and oncoming seas, drifting, her stern slightly into the waves.

Oscar walked aft through the pilothouse companionway, stepped over the opening in the deck leading to the engine room, and stood in the pilothouse opening.

He hollered over the wind, which had begun to whistle in the rigging: "We'd better lash down the hatches and anything else loose on deck. It looks like it's going to be a nasty one tonight."

"OK, Oscar," Cliff answered, immediately heading for the dory astern to find some straps.

After securing the deck, Cliff looked up from the break of the poop deck, where he had just lashed down the spare anchor, and yelled, "Oscar! We're right on top of the bag and flag."

Oscar muttered something under his breath as he analyzed the situation. We couldn't maneuver the boat since the line led aft to the stern and the propeller. He made a snap decision.

"Neil, get a 50 fathom shot of buoyline. We'll try to slip it over the bag, then pull enough slack to cut the bag strap. Then we'll have slack to back away from it when the strain is off."

I grabbed the first 50-shot of line I found in the dory. Cliff climbed over the railing with Oscar gripping him firmly. I untied the coil, made a quick eye, and passed it over the bulwarks to him. As I reached to the baiting table for a knife, I heard the evidence of failure over the shrieking of the wind and the crashing of the ocean. The line had parted, and Oscar's frustrated epithets couldn't change it. No matter now, it was done, in the history books.

The captain immediately told us to rig another end, bag, flag, buoyline, and anchor. He jogged into the wind and turned the port side into the wind. We rigged another light on a spare bamboo flagpole. A long cylindrical battery was inserted into a hefty

bronze case and secured to the bottom of the pole near the flagpole weight. Then, the long cord to the light fixture was wrapped up the pole and the light secured to the top.

We hollered that the end was ready. The skipper judged that we were in the approximate position of the lost end and signaled from the pilothouse doorway to drop it overboard. Now there was nothing to do but wait out the blow.

The cook took the wheel so that Cliff, Dad, and I could eat. We served ourselves the codfish, boiled potatoes, and cream corn from the pots and pans secured on top of the stove's railings. Butter and flatbread topped it all off. Making it through

the delicious meal without making a mess was quite a chore.

Oscar ate quickly as the boat's motion increased, rolling and then pitching fore and aft. We could see he was worried since our fishing depth was relatively shallow (30 to 45 fathoms). The wind by this time approached 60 knots (since we didn't have an anemometer, it was just a guess) and churned the ocean into steep, towing seas packed tightly together.

In contrast, a slowly building storm in deep water produced larger, more widely spaced ocean swells with less severe seas. The captain put his dishes in the sink and made his way to the wheelhouse, concerned about the increased savagery of the storm and handling the boat in it.

By the time the cook came below, Cliff and I had finished eating. We secured our dishes in the sink, pumped water over everything with the hand pump. Neal told us he had eaten previously. Not much was said as we quickly stowed anything loose and climbed into our bunks. The seas crashed into the hull. But the creaking of the vessel's timbers working was noise

Welcome aboard the *Munroe* , circa 1963

Here's what equipped the *Munroe* in 1963:

Pilot House: Bendix paper sounder. Compass. Wood-Freeman RDF (radio direction finder). APN-4 Loran A. Northern 60w AM radio. No SSB. No VHF. Chart table in stateroom. Barometer.

Engine room: Cummins main, about 200 h.p. Lister auxiliary. Twin Disc gear.

Galley: Hand pump next by galley sink. Oil stove with carburetor and fan. No freezer or refrigerator. Fresh water: 200 gallons.

Steering: Chain drive to quadrant.

Deck: Three-gear transmission through bulkhead into engine room. Ice hold. One bulb light cord for illumination. Deck controls — chain drive. Controls on flying bridge — Kolstrand anchor winch forward.

Safety: Dory astern. Main use buoyline storage. Cork lifejackets. Some years carried kapok life raft, no cover or stores. No E-PIRB

Halibut gear: Manila groundline being phased out by Mitten-nylon blended line. J hooks. Nylon gangions. Polyform bags phasing out canvas. Glass ball floats to keep buoyline off bottom. Bamboo flagpoles. Seine-corks for floats. Heavy pole lights of brass. No stern house. Covered bait tent with flap to boom. Metal setter.

enough.

I found it impossible to sleep due to the ferocity of the storm and the increasingly violent motion of the boat. The fo'c's'le was nearly dark. Only one small light was left on. It was covered with tinfoil to reduce the glare up through the skylight into the wheelhouse.

As we jogged into the waves, the bow of the *Munroe* dropped quicker after passing through one of the biggest ones. Then I heard Cliff hollering as water cascaded from the overhead.

“Which stupid bastard forgot to secure the skylight?” he screamed. As the cook feigned sleep, Cliff dragged his wet sleeping bag aft to attempt drying in the engine room.

Oscar jogged to the light pole, then set the boat adrift. It took only minutes before she would be broadside to the never-ending series of waves coming at us. The wind would then be caught in the sail and forced down the stack of the idling engine, forcing diesel exhaust into the engine room and fo'c's'le. A double-dose of aspirin did nothing for the headache.

It was a constant effort to stay in my bunk. When the bow fell quickly, after punching through a wave, I would nearly be airborne. With the diesel fumes, I felt increasingly queasy and began wondering whether we would see the light of the next day. I figured I might as well leave the relative comfort of the bunk to join Dad in the wheelhouse.

Cautiously, I made my way hand over hand through the galley, into the engine room, then up the ladder leading to the pilot house. I opened the wheelhouse door.

“I couldn't sleep, Dad, so I thought I would keep you company.” It was a poor excuse to mask my fear.

“Yeah,” he said, his tone firm. “It's getting pretty nasty.”

The increasingly small vessel dipped into the trough, then rose, immediately engulfed by the breaker atop the next wave. White water danced around the long, narrow bow, then drained off toward the main deck to await the next wave. Oscar would jog up to the light pole, then let the boat drift back until the light became difficult to see in the increasing darkness or a large set of rollers approached.

He didn't want to be caught broadside, when the largest of the waves could damage the 52-foot



Oscar Sandvick

Munroe. The captain could only let the boat drift a short distance before gunning the engine with the rudder hard over to avoid the punishment of the seas. Jog, then drift, jog, then drift. Time slowed, measured only with the passage of the giant waves.

Suddenly, the light was gone, extinguished for some unknown reason. Fortunately, we were right on top of the flagpole and buoy.

“Get Cliff,” Dad quickly ordered, “then get your oilskins on so we can fix that light.”

Cliff and I pulled on our hip boots and carefully made our way by the gurdy to a rack of oilskins on the house. We geared up as the motion of the boat allowed us, and hollered into the pilot house that we were ready.

Oscar jogged into position so we could retrieve the buoy and flagpole. The roar of the waves crashing by the sides of the boat had my heart racing. Seawater surged over the railing as we neared the extinguished light. One minute the buoy would be above us and then far below after the roller had passed.

We snared the flagpole with the retrieval hook and pulled it aboard. First checking the globe inside the fixture atop the bamboo pole we found the problem: a loose bulb. Cliff twisted it firmly into the

socket, and the light came on, bright as a silver dollar.

“Back ’er down,” Cliff hollered to Oscar, eying us from the cracked pilot house door forward.

“We’ve got it, Oscar!” he repeated. The boat’s motion reversed, we tossed the pole and bag over the side.

That problem solved, I tried to sleep once more. It was no use. The waves colliding with the bow, and the quickness with which the boat would drop into the trough, made me decide one again to join the captain in the pilothouse.

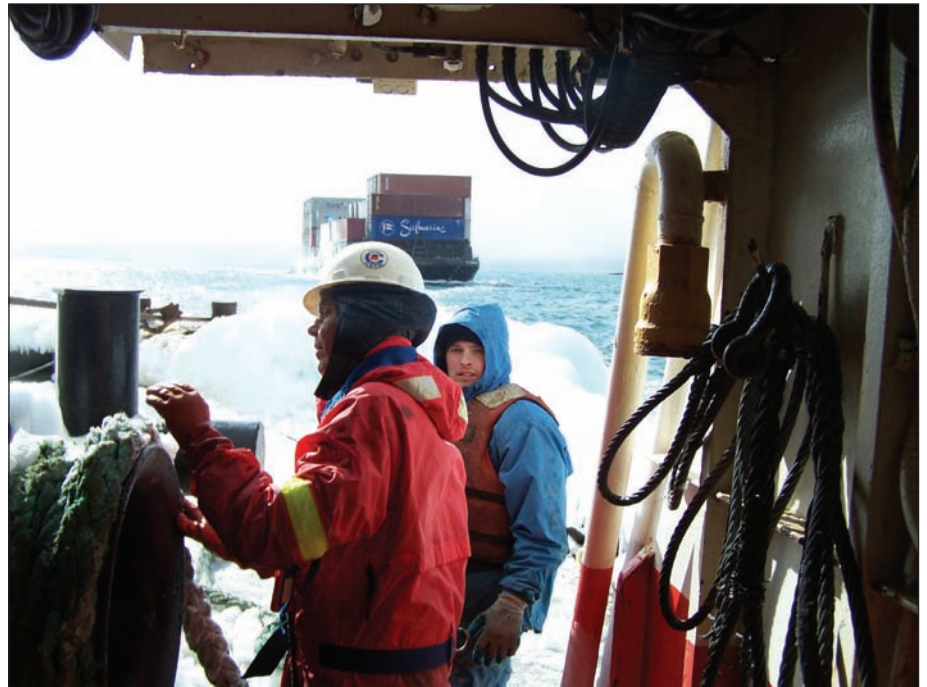
Little was said as we hung on, watching the fury of the storm in the dark. As the storm built, Dad faced an increasingly delicate task: We’d drift away from the light, but that drift would put us broadside in the trough. We couldn’t go past the light since it would necessitate going before the waves, increasing our risk.

The danger had me thinking of the many places I could be, far away from this terror. I easily could have found a job working in a salmon cannery in Petersburg. Another option was salmon seining, where I would have been closer to many harbors. But neither paid as much as halibut fishing, and this was my first full-share year. But here I was, and only time and the skill of the captain would get us through the night.

As midnight approached, we again were drifting back into the trough. Oscar peered into the maelstrom. He had spotted something. “Get ready, Neil! Here comes a really big one.” I could see the waves were much larger than those before. We had to get out of the trough, or the *Munroe* would likely die, taking us with it.

Oscar spun the steering wheel, driving a chain leading around pulleys driving the rudder. He turned the rudder hard to starboard and gunned the engine. The *Munroe* slowly responded, water crashing more frantically into her stout hull. The bow was nearly dead into the waves when we saw one rising up out of the darkness, a huge rogue wave.

The bow went up and up, far higher and longer than any of the previous waves. The white churning



Neil Sandvik today: Formerly a halibut fisherman and president of the Deep Sea Fishermen’s Union, he’s now a mate for Dunlap Towing Co. He’s wearing a hard hat in the foreground.

mass of the wave’s top quarter seemed to slide toward the *Munroe*’s bow with ferocious quickness.

“Get down in the corner and hang on,” Oscar yelled. I crouched down, gripping the clutch control tightly.

Then she hit! With a fury from hell, the rogue attempted to crush the *Munroe*’s hull into kindling. It seemed that the entire forward half of the boat was underwater. For a second I thought the windows were gone, but water had shot through any small gap or tiny opening around the windows like pressurized streams inside a mortally wounded U-boat.

Hallelujah! The windows had held.

The question now was whether the water sweeping aft had swamped the main, killing our ticket to survival. Whether the aft pilot house door was closed, I couldn’t remember.

The front half of the boat started to rise. I could hear the throb of the main engine. The U-boat *Munroe* had surfaced.

There wasn’t time for the briefest of celebrations. Another wave was upon us. We pounded into it, handling each successive wave more easily. The routine began again, knifing into the waves then drifting back. The clock ticked slowly until just before daybreak. Then, in just 15 minutes, the wind dropped to nothing. The skies parted quickly and the rising sun

presided over diminishing seas. The evidence of the savage, monstrous blow faded fast.

Oscar took me up on my offer to spell him at the wheel for he hadn't slept a wink all night and we certainly would begin to haul at the normal hour.

I concentrated, straining to keep my eyes open as I maneuvered the boat close to the mark buoy. As the swells subsided, I nodded off.

"Dammit, Neil, you lost the mark buoy."

I snapped awake. It was 4:30, and all that remained of the storm was the big swell. I was ashamed at falling asleep on watch, but we were still floating and no one was hurt. We found the gear an hour later, but Oscar was still grumbling.

"Damn kid."

Everything was back to normal.