

Telltales

YACHTING TEXAS STYLE

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There are many stories of yachts inexplicably disappearing at sea, and others involving mistakes and lapses of judgement on the part of experienced skippers. Even with the assist of today's instruments, clear thinking and mental discipline are imperative. How many of these incidents might be the result of a carbon monoxide-clouded brain? *by Jay Stormer*

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Shipwreck! Just the mere mention sends tremors down a boater's spine, and, if children are involved in such a catastrophe, it is even more distressful. Elmo Wortman's *Almost Too Late* relates his family's harrowing, shipwreck survival story. Gripping and emotionally moving, it should make a lasting impression on any reader and is recommended for every serious sailor's library. *by Paul Guajardo*

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When they chartered the 29-footer in Pensacola Beach, this couple was looking for solitude, fresh air, and the relaxing sound of water gently tapping the hull. They found exactly that in the protected Intracoastal Waterway of Florida's panhandle. *by Fred Dodson*

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Sometimes, even for those not new to boating, the business of tying knots can have our stomach tied-up in one. There sure are an abundance of them, each purportedly dedicated to an assigned function. Not necessarily so, says Capt. Bobby, and here, he demonstrates how a handful can serve multiple purposes and shares the secret of simplicity. *by Mike Firestone*

Editorial & Advertising Sales Office
228-B Marina Bay Drive
Kemah, TX 77565
(281) 334-2202 / fax (281) 334-2751
waterfrontpublishing@earthlink.net

Mailing Address
P.O. Box 1044
Seabrook, TX 77586

Publisher
Michael P. DuBois

Executive Editor
Kay DuBois

Graphics
Sabine Schrader
Janice Smith

Contributing Writers

Rich Bell Mary Heard
Susan Benner Rob Lucey
NyxoLyno Cangemi Douglass B Nelson
Fred Dodson Jay Stormer
Mike Firestone Chuck Wemple

Contributing Columnists

John Allison Frank Reilly
Marcy Fryday Pokie Stamper
Paul Guajardo Ed Tschupp
Glenn Heath

Illustrator
S.J. Stout

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Staying Warm, Well, and Out of the Bermuda Triangle

T by Jay Stormer
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he "Bermuda Triangle," as you may remember, is a roughly triangular region of the Atlantic, with Bermuda as one corner and extending between the southeastern U.S. and the Caribbean. In this area, a large number of ships, boats and aircraft have disappeared under supposedly mysterious circumstances. The idea that there was some strange and inexplicable force operating in that region was popularized by several articles and books in the 1960s and '70s, although, since then, the abnormalities of this region have largely been debunked by more complete investigation.

The classic example of a Bermuda Triangle incident was the fate of "Flight 19."

Five Navy torpedo bombers left Fort Lauderdale on December 5, 1945, for a training flight to the east over the Bahamas, a route many of us have sailed or hope to sail. In short, after a few hours the flight commander became very disoriented and believed he was near the Florida Keys, while actually being 200 miles away in the vicinity of the Abacos. As a result, the flight proceeded northeastward in poor weather to where the planes most probably ditched, several hundred miles east of Jacksonville, Florida. No trace of any of the planes has ever been found. Extensive and apparently factual details of this story can be seen on-line at <http://www.flight19appreciationgroup.org>.

[flight19appreciationgroup.org](http://www.flight19appreciationgroup.org).

The flight commander, Charles Taylor, a native of Corpus Christi, was an experienced WWII combat pilot with thousands of hours of flight

Carbon Monoxide and Brain Function

time and a survivor of two previous ditchings. We will probably never know the actual cause of his disorientation and confusion on this fateful

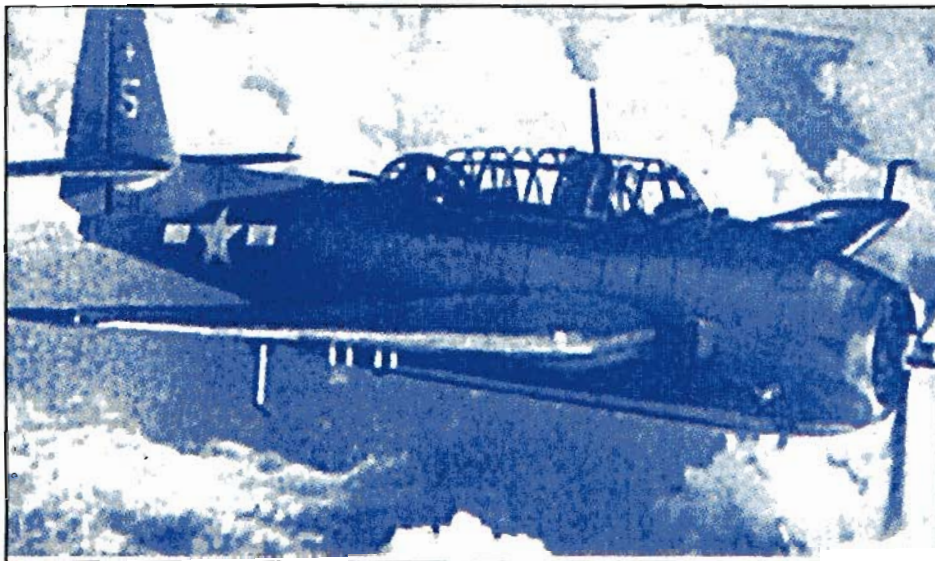
carbon monoxide (CO) exposure can have similar effects, i.e. headache, fatigue, dizziness and disorientation.

The hemoglobin in your blood absorbs oxygen in the lungs and transports it to other parts of the body including the brain. However, hemoglobin loves carbon monoxide. It has an affinity for carbon monoxide that is 100 times that for oxygen. So, it will preferentially bind with carbon monoxide at very low concentrations. When it has taken up carbon monoxide, the hemoglobin can no longer provide oxygen to the brain and other tissues. Then, the oxygen-starved

brain loses its ability to function. Breathing even 100 parts per million (0.0001%) CO for a couple of hours can cause death. Much lower levels can cause the fatigue and disorientation we have discussed.

How many boating accidents and unexplained lost vessels might be a result of a carbon monoxide-clouded brain?

A few years ago, an incident involving a short voyage from Naragansett Bay to Long Island was published by BoatU.S. [Donald Patafio, "Voyage with a Silent Killer," *Seaworthy Magazine*, BoatU.S., July 2001.]. The skipper described his distress: "The more I tried to look for the buoy, the more trouble I had remembering what it was I was looking for. . . . I remember telling myself to concentrate on holding course, but I kept forgetting what the course was. . . . The other disconcerting factor was that I would not be able to figure out



U.S. Navy Avenger torpedo bomber similar to those of Flight 19. From U.S. Navy photo.

flight.

When looking back at the loss of various yachts, there are many stories that also seem to involve inexplicable mistakes and lapses of judgment on the part of very experienced skippers. Even with modern instruments making navigation vastly easier, we still have to make decisions that require clear thinking and mental discipline.

Disorientation, mistakes and failures of judgment on the water have many well-understood causes — alcohol, fatigue, etc. But one factor may have been overlooked. Low levels of



A CO detector is a "life saver." Note that the LED indicator is green. Use the test function frequently. Be sure it is wired to a circuit that is always on or, if battery-operated, install a new battery regularly.

whether I had to turn right or left to get back to the original course line. I knew what I wanted to do. But, I couldn't determine how to do it."

In hindsight, we can recognize that the incipient and unnoticed carbon monoxide impairment probably contributed to a decision made earlier in the day to continue the voyage under questionable conditions.

The above incident involved a gasoline-powered boat, and the dangers of gasoline engine exhaust are well known. Carbon monoxide detector/alarms have been standard equipment on new gasoline-powered cabin boats for a number of years, and the dangers of "teak surfing" and swimming where gasoline generator exhaust accumulates have been much discussed. However, many boaters seem to be unaware of the dangers of diesel exhaust and other sources of carbon monoxide. Diesel exhaust is usually much lower in CO concentration than gasoline, but it is still sufficient to cause intoxication and even death.

Recently, I was on a sea trial aboard a diesel trawler yacht with the wind astern. Shortly after starting out, the carbon monoxide detector in the aft cabin sounded. Although the diesel smell was only mildly unpleasant, it is likely that over a matter of hours anyone in that aft cabin would have been

overcome — or the navigator in the pilothouse could have made a serious error.

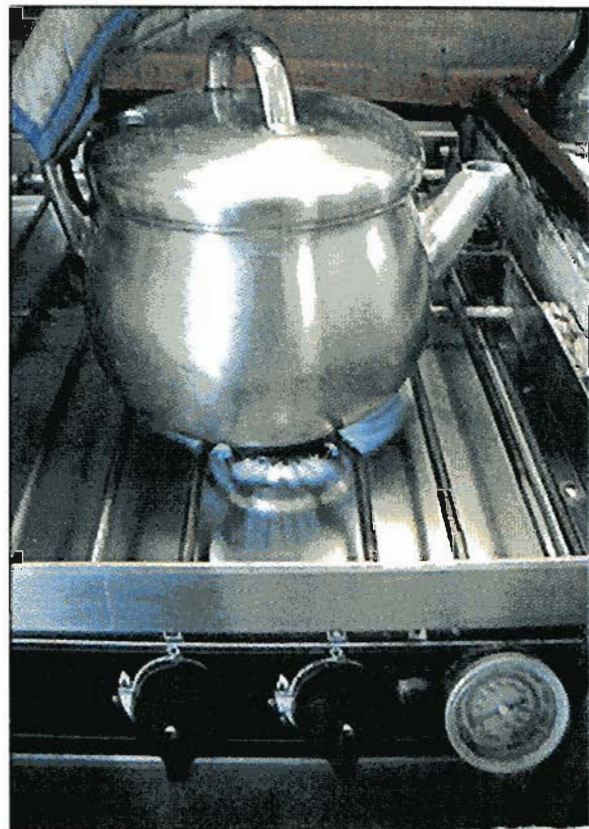
The carbon monoxide death potential of galley stoves, cabin heaters, and even oil lamps seems even more poorly recognized. From fellow surveyors I have heard a number of grim stories of sailors killed by carbon monoxide from galley stoves. One story with a happier ending was published in an article on selecting a galley stove:

"One night after having hot cocoa before bed, we accidentally left the pilot light in our oven on. . . . We were slowly awakened when our CO detector went off, releasing a mind-boggling blare of noise that just barely woke my husband, Chuck, and me. . . . The fresh air never felt better. Now we make sure the CO detector always has a good battery." [Theresa Fort, *A Clean Look at the 'Dirty' Half Dozen.* *Good Old Boat* magazine, March/April 2000.]

My personal epiphany with regard to carbon monoxide on boats came a few years ago, when a lady

(name withheld to protect the innocent victim) and I were living aboard our sailboat in a local marina. One cold winter evening it was my turn to cook supper. Production of my culinary masterpiece required all three of the burners on our propane stove. While cooking, I noticed the stove flames were slightly yellow, and made a mental note that I would need to clean the burners. After supper, I went to my office to finish a report. The lady remained aboard and started writing checks to pay some monthly bills.

When I came back to the boat a couple of hours later, she complained of a headache and, worse, that she couldn't seem to concentrate on the checks. She had needed to void several because of mistakes in the amounts and had trouble getting the right check in the appropriate envelope. (I make that sort of mistake all the time, but she is ordinarily meticulous in such matters.) Having just read the *Seaworthy Magazine* story previously mentioned, the symptoms struck me as familiar. Despite the cold, we opened up the hatches and ventilated the boat. Within a few days I had



Coffee, tea or poison gas? Make sure your stove is working properly.

installed a marine carbon monoxide detector/alarm. The stove burners were cleaned the next morning.

Fortunately, this case was mild and no lasting harm was done. But, consider if the mistakes on the checks had, instead, been mistakes in navigational calculations, mistakes entering waypoints in the GPS, or making decisions about weather, routes, etc. The consequences could have been more serious, but the ultimate cause might have seemed inexplicable.

The folly of using galley stoves for heating should also be very apparent. Unfortunately, various books and articles over the years have published the suggestion that a clay flower pot inverted over a galley stove burner will make a good cabin heater. This bad idea surfaced again last year in one of the slick magazines. Really experienced cruising sailors have warned against using an unvented stove for many years (for instance, pages 62-63 in Eric Hiscock's *Cruising Under Sail*, Third Edition, Oxford, 1981).

Carbon monoxide does not have to be present at a lethal concentration to be deadly on a boat. Any engine, or any appliance with a flame, has the potential to make you a sad statistic or an unexplained disappearance. In my surveys I always recommend a marine carbon monoxide detector on any boat with enclosed accommodations. ***Household-type CO detector alarms may work on a boat, but the marine type is supposed to be better for humid environments. They also are designed to have fewer false alarms in small spaces.***

Any type of boat, regardless of the type of propulsion and cooking fuel, needs carbon monoxide detectors that will alert and wake persons in all enclosed compartments. Even those simply moored or rafted near a vessel with a running generator are at risk. Install CO detector/alarms now, or, if you already have them, make sure that they are working. ¶

Jay Stormer is a NAMS Certified Marine Surveyor and SAMS Accredited Marine Surveyor doing business in Kemah, Texas as Dixieland Marine. With his wife Jane, he lived aboard their Pearson 365 sloop for 14 years and cruised over 12,000 miles.