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January/February 2012  
Issue No. 199  
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**Why ships don't see boats**



# Towing an Alaskan fishing vessel in distress

BY CECIL RHODES

**W**e had just spent five days cruising, viewing, and photographing the wonders of Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska, on board our Nordhavn 55, *Rhapsody*. On the morning of July 2 it was

in no particular hurry to get to Juneau, so we spent time watching humpback whales along the south shore of Icy Strait near Hoonah. At about 1730, shortly after we turned north into Chatham Strait and left behind the moderate following sea, wind and favorable currents of Icy Strait, we began to feel the effects of the 20- to 25-knot southerly wind, and confused, four- to five-foot

who identified her vessel as *Whisker III*, informing any mariners in the area that she was without power, adrift near Hanus Reef. She reported she and her dog were the only two souls aboard their 32-foot commercial fishing vessel, were not in any immediate danger, and while she had a survival suit and PFD, she'd rather not have to use them.

We recognized Hanus Reef as being a rugged group of dying rocks marking the west end of Icy Strait as it joins Chatham Strait and, therefore, behind us. *Whisker III*, however, was not too far from our then current position. Using our radar to identify

range and bearing to *Whisker III*, we confirmed we were about three and a half miles north of *Whisker's* location. On *Rhapsody's* radar screen, we also saw an AIS target, identified as *Fairweather*, an Alaska state ferry, which we had been watching move north in the strait at an almost unbelievable 35 knots. *Fairweather* was about

time for us to leave Glacier Bay and begin the next leg of our trip, some 80 nautical miles back to Juneau. We wanted to be in Juneau the evening of July 3 for the fireworks celebration, which we had heard so much about.

After breakfast and the morning ritual of checking fluid levels in all engines, radio and instrument checks, weighing anchor, and washing the foredeck, we finally got underway from Bartlett Cove in Glacier Bay National Park at about 0900. We were

seas of Chatham Strait. We resigned ourselves to a sloppy ride for the next 20 miles, until we would turn southeast toward Juneau at Point Retreat Light on the north end of Admiralty Island.

Soon after we made our turn north into Chatham Strait, we heard a "Pan, Pan, Pan" on Channel 16. The call was made by a woman



Cecil Rhodes



While underway in Alaska, the Nordhavn 55, *Rhapsody*, came to the assistance of the small vessel *Whisker III* and took it under tow.



three miles east of *Whisker III*. No sooner had we identified their respective positions, than we saw *Fairweather* make a 90-degree, left-hand turn on a direct course for *Whisker III*. We also heard a radio transmission from *Fairweather's* master to U.S. Coast Guard Sector Juneau that *Fairweather* had heard *Whisker III's* radio alert and was en-route to assist.

### Notifying the Coast Guard

As we came about, we notified Coast Guard Sector Juneau, which had been in communication with *Fairweather* and *Whisker III* on Channels 16 and 22, that *Rhapsody* was also headed in *Whisker's* direction. We reported we would be on scene in about 20 minutes, and would be willing to assist however we could. Because of her speed, *Fairweather* had no trouble quickly covering the three miles to *Whisker III* arriving well ahead of us. While en-route, we established communication with *Fairweather's* master on VHF channel 22. He offered to position *Fairweather* upwind of *Whisker III*, abeam of the wind and seas, and serve as a 500-foot, four-story breakwater making it easier for *Rhapsody* to pass a towline to *Whisker III*.

We agreed to tow *Whisker III* the 50 miles, or so, to Auke Bay, where she could seek repairs.

Because we were short handed on *Rhapsody*, *Fairweather* agreed to put a fast boat with three crew in the water to take a tow bridle from *Rhapsody* to *Whisker*. We attached a tow bridle to the 600 feet of 1 1/8-inch three strand that was

permanently mounted on a reel on *Rhapsody's* swim step. In turn, we set up another bridle, made that fast to *Rhapsody* and attached it to the other end of the tow line. As we made ready on *Rhapsody* to tow *Whisker III* to Auke Bay, *Fairweather's* crew rigged the tow bridle to *Whisker III* and gave us the OK to begin the tow.

We started slowly, eventually increasing our turns to 1,450 rpms, making about five knots through the water. With the current, seas, and wind, we were making a little shy of six knots over ground. *Rhapsody* had no trouble with the tow. We often say to folks with faster boats, "We're slow, but stately." In this case, we were glad we were on board our full-displacement Nordhavn 55 trawler with its John Deere engine just loafing along at 1,450 rpms consuming a mere 4 gph under the load. We could have towed a boat twice *Whisker's* size.

As we parted company with *Fairweather*, we thanked her master for the incredible effort and amazing execution. We smiled inside at the commitment merchant mariners continue to make to small vessels in trouble and we sure were glad *Fairweather's* crew was as able and as willing to help as they were. We could have been in the middle of a real "Louisiana Snowball Knot" (no offense meant to Louisiana) had it not been for *Fairweather*, her master, and her crew.

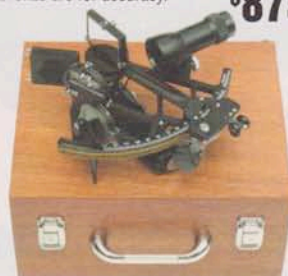
Having *Whisker III* in tow and well under way, we contacted the Coast Guard, gave them a position and conditions report, and estimated our Auke Bay arrival at

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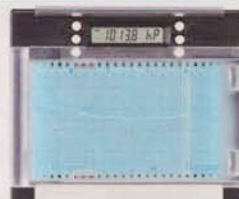


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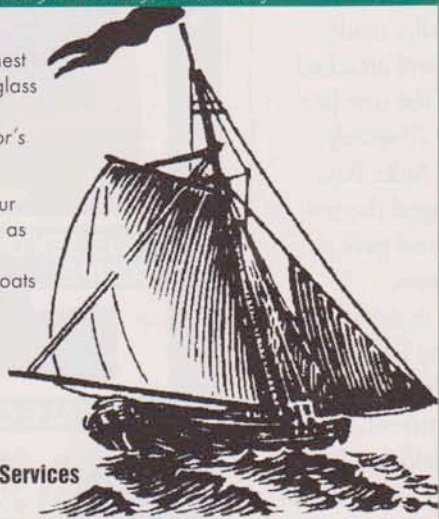
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## POWER VOYAGING

midnight. The Coast Guard acknowledged our communiqué and committed to calling us every hour for a status update and welfare check.

As we turned south around Point Retreat in the lee of Admiralty Island, the wind and seas diminished considerably. Under the conditions, the last 20 miles to Auke Bay became a nicer ride for *Rhapsody* and *Whisker III*.

*Rhapsody* is equipped with several Elbex CCTV cameras, so we were able to keep visual contact on our tow using one of the monitors in the pilothouse. Switching back and forth between the camera up on the stack and the camera in the lazarette, we had a good view of *Whisker III* and the towline.

### Missed check-ins

Despite their previous commitment, the Coast Guard missed a couple of check-in times and later informed us they were unable to make contact with the Auke Bay harbor master or provide us with any local knowledge of the approach to Auke Bay or its harbor as we had requested. They also informed us they had no local assets near Auke Bay which could help us. We took the initiative and contacted the local police department, which was able to get the harbor master on the phone with us straight away. We explained to the harbor master we had an unlit tow, were, ourselves, not marked as having a tow, and never before had been in Auke Bay. We told the harbor master we needed whatever local knowledge he thought would be helpful under the circumstances and asked for his help. He told us to "... come on in past the breakwater and tie her up wherever you can find a spot...we're really packed with fish boats this time of year, so you may have a tough time finding room in there..." and, hopefully, he'd see us in the morning.

Although the charts reflect the approach to Auke Bay and its small boat harbor is straight forward and well marked, as we made our way we had trouble identifying the various marker lights and buoys shown on the charts — most of which we just couldn't see at all. As we got closer to the harbor, we understood why we had





Cecil Rhodes

Cecil Rhodes was aided in setting up the tow of *Whisker III* by the ferry *Fairweather*, which turned beam to the seas and made a lee for the smaller vessels.

trouble seeing the navigation lights and other marks — commercial fishing boats with all of their deck lights ablaze were either anchored near the markers or moored directly to them! Fortunately, *Rhapsody* is equipped with a Furuno 25-kW high-seas grade radar and a FLIR night vision camera, so we were able to pick our way through the fish boats and navigate into the harbor without incident.

Upon our arrival, we helped the *Whisker III* crew tie up to the inside of the breakwater, introduced ourselves and had a nice, midnight visit with Capt. Lucy and her dog, Lucky.

*Whisker III*, which hails from Haines, Alaska, is captained by Lucy, a very able 80-year-old commercial fisherwoman. Lucy told us she was on her way from Haines to Tenakee Hot Springs on Chichagof Island to celebrate the Fourth of July with some friends, when her engine began to overheat just as she was nearing Hanus Reef. She said that while she was forced to put out the broadcast and was resigned to drift for some time before help might arrive, she sure was happy to see *Fairweather* and *Rhapsody* show up as quickly as they did. She had only one criticism of our “rescue” efforts; she thought *Rhapsody* should have taken a more shoreward course along Admiralty Island north up Chatham Strait to cut time off our trip to Auke Bay.

Sitting in the pale blue light of the wee early Alaska morning, *Whisker III* looked right at home in the harbor with all of the other commercial fishing boats of every size and description. And Lucy, with her small, but fit frame, personable smile, undaunting attitude, and curly hair sticking out from under her wool watch cap, equally at home with any of the more rugged fishermen, in experience, ability, and enthusiasm for the lifestyle. ■

*Cecil Rodes splits his time between his Nordhavn, Rhapsody, and breeding roping horses in Texas.*

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