



Irwin Ensigns

By Lt. Robert A. Johnson,
VP-94

*F*light school is an exciting and wonderful time in a young aviator's life. A native of the Northeast, I especially welcomed the beautiful golden coast of northwest Florida.

Like most ensigns living from paycheck to paycheck, I made sure I spent all my money wisely—on a great beach pad, a shiny new sports car, and, best of all, a new catamaran. Ah, the lure of the sea! I had waited my whole life for this moment. Of course, I hadn't taken a sailing lesson yet, but how hard could it be to rig a sail, point it to sea, and go? Besides, I had watched the America's Cup on TV the week before, so my PQS was complete.

It was about 1615—maybe a little later—one day when I saw USS *Lexington* pulling into Pensacola Bay after one of its final carrier quals. My roommate and I knew a civilian flo-

tilla would welcome it home, and we felt a need to be a part of history. We eagerly set sail.

Naturally, we were prepared fully—with our Jams shorts (remember those?) but no shirts—when we left. The 8-to-10-mile trip was beginning to drag, and the sun was setting quickly behind us as we watched the *Lex* pull into port in the distance.

“Wow, it's really cooling off!” I thought, noticing that the catamaran had a cargo net. “Guess that's for life preservers—something I need to get. Sure wish I had a sweatshirt.” The tacking thing also was starting to annoy me. It takes time to travel in a straight line when you're sailing.

With nightfall approaching, we decided we should put ashore on the base. That idea seemed good until someone from base security showed up and reminded us that putting ashore

on a military facility with no ID is akin to illegal entry. He threatened to arrest us, so we changed our mind. That kind of attention is unacceptable in flight school.

It was dark when we again set sail—without proper protection, sailing experience, or survival equipment—in an area of treacherous currents. We soon were suffering from the first signs of hypothermia and realized we were in a bad situation that was getting worse. The wind was gusting, which meant we had to pay more attention to trimming the sail, a task that

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depleted our remaining energy.

The ocean spray felt incredibly cold on my skin, and I couldn't remember another night so dark. "Why couldn't the moon be out tonight?" I wondered. As fear crept in, we started briefing each other on our own ad hoc man-overboard procedures. I think we both knew if we went over the side, it would be the last swim we ever would take. To make matters worse, the wind had shifted to the west, which called for more tacking. Without a compass, we used the city lights as our only visual reference. When the lights of Pensacola faded, we knew to tack to port. When we saw the sand dunes break out of the mist, we knew to tack to starboard.

We struggled with the elements for an hour and a half before we made it back to our condo. Six buddies were on the beach with binoculars, looking for us. They were minutes from calling the Coast Guard. We ran the catamaran ashore, then hurried to the condo hot tub—not a real smart idea for two people with purple, wrinkled bodies. Forty-five minutes in that 90-degree water, however, restored our normal body temp and dexterity.

What did we learn from this experience? Anytime you engage in outdoor activities like sailing or boating, think about your limit of

endurance, wear a personal flotation device, and use common sense. Some environments aren't very forgiving. My grandmother used to say the young fight wars because they think they're invincible. I think she was right. This incident made me much more aware of my mortality. ✠

The author was assigned to VP-10 when he wrote this article.

In tracking down the author's full name and current command, I ran across an interesting fact. Both the author and his roommate were named "Robert Johnson." I talked to the roommate, Lt. Robert R. Johnson, currently with VT-86, and he still vividly remembers this incident. He said the security guard in this story really was ready to arrest his buddy and him. Here were two guys without ID cards and both claiming to be "Robert Johnson."—Ed.

