

Fire in the galley: 'We're in trouble'

By JOE JULAVITS

Early on the morning of May 12, the *Tiare*, a Cal 48 sailboat, was on a light spinnaker run, bubbling along at 5 knots, 400 miles out in a placid Gulf of Mexico.

The *Tiare* and its New Orleans crew had left Gulfport on May 9, bound for Cozumel in the biennial Regatta El Sol. If the weather held, the crew would be slipping margaritas in a day and a half, celebrating *Tiare's* third overall win in the race.

Thirty-six hours later *Tiare* was out of the race. The boat's cabin was charred. Two crewmen were in the hospital. And the other 10 crew members were in a numbed state of disbelief.

Fire. No other word in the dictionary commands more respect from sailors. At sea there is no escape, no fire department to call.

The prudent skipper reads all he can about fire prevention. He outfits his boat with an approved fire extinguisher. He conducts fire drills with his passengers.

Still, tragedies and near-tragedies occur. Not even seasoned sailors are immune from the painful lessons that a fire on board can teach. Like the one that took place on May 12, leaving an ugly imprint on two experienced New Orleans sailors.

Maurice "Bubby" Hartson III and Danny Killen jr. were in the galley that day, preparing a 7 a.m. breakfast for the rest of the crew. Hartson remembers all too vividly what happened next.

"We were changing a cylinder in the propane stove to heat coffee," he said. "We also had an alcohol stove on. We could hear the cylinder hissing. I told Danny, 'We're in trouble.'"

"Suddenly there was just one big ball of fire. The cylinder erupted, filling the cabin with propane gas. The flame from the alcohol stove ignited it."

Hartson and Killen scrambled to get out of the cabin, now a floating gas chamber. Killen went out the forward hatch, Hartson out the back. "I was in such a panic to get out I ran over the navigator and sprained his ankle," said Hartson. "I don't even remember doing it."

"The people on deck said they saw big balls of fire coming out of the hatches and felt the heat. I started to go into shock. I felt faint, nauseated."

The fire — or more correctly, the flash — was extinguished by the crew.

Luck was riding with Hartson and Killen. *Tiare's* owner, Jack Valley, had included a physician — Dr. Gus Lott — among the boat's crew. Lott administered a painkiller to the sailors, scrubbed them, pulled the burned skin off and bandaged the burns.

A decision had to be made. Lott was running out of bandages and Killen and Hartson needed hospitalization. Cozumel had the closest facilities, but Mexico is not renowned for its medical care.

Trailing the 17-boat fleet was *Acushnet*, a Coast Guard cutter. *Tiare* made radio contact and was ordered to abandon the race and to rendezvous with the cutter. On board the cutter, Hartson and Killen were rebandaged and treated by a medic. A helicopter ferried them to Key West, where they were hospitalized, a day and a half after the fire. Two days later they returned to New Orleans.

After meeting with the cutter, *Tiare* motored to Cozumel, the nearest port. But the crew was no longer in a partying mood.

Hartson, a 45-year-old insurance man, is back at work. He had second-degree burns over 10 percent of his body. Killen, who suffered second-degree burns over 27 percent of his body, including both legs, his right arm and his hands, is still in Tourro Infirmary. And still in pain.

"Yeah, it hurts a lot," said the 19-year-old Southern Yacht Club sailor from his hospital bed. "That was the first time I ever really fooled with a stove. I've never been injured on a boat before. My uncle told me to wear long pants from now on."

"I really wanted to go to Cozumel. I almost made it."

Hartson, who's been sailing for 30 years and has made 10 Cozumel races, came out of the ordeal a little wiser.

"We were handling it (propane canister) improperly," he admitted. "It shouldn't have been done around another fire. If the whole thing had leaked out and then ignited I believe it would have blown the boat apart. There were no instructions on the canister and I had never used one before. I'd recommend that everyone be trained on how to change a cylinder or a sign be posted on how to do it. Frankly, I wouldn't have one on my boat."

Neither would a lot of other boaters if they realized the potential hazards posed by improperly handled propane stoves. Although legal on recreational boats, propane stoves are prohibited by the Coast Guard on boats carrying passengers for hire. Says a Coast Guard spokesman: "They are terribly hazardous. Just about anything sets them off."

Neither Coast Guard warnings nor Killen and Hartson's account is going to make boaters throw their stoves overboard. Breakfast smells wafting from the galley are too much a part of sailing for that. But, as old salts like Hartson will attest, an improperly handled stove can turn dinner into disaster.

"It was such a beautiful race," he said. "Everything was going so great."

Until fire came aboard.

Evangeline first to Cozumel

Evangeline finished first overall in the recently completed Regatta El Sol, sailed every two years from Gulfport to Cozumel. Second in the Southern Yacht Club-sponsored race was *Esprit*, with *Lord Jim* third.

Class winners were: PHRF — *Evangeline*; IOR — *Masquerade*; Cruiser/Racer A — *Esprit*; Cruiser/Racer B — *Sun Wick*.