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# A Greek tragedy

With hundreds of people in the water on a gale-tossed sea, it was all hands to the rescue

BY STEVEN PARRY

Shortly after midnight on September 28, 2000, I received a call over my portable VHF radio from a crewmember aboard one of our four Poseidon Charters flotilla boats. We were securely moored at Paroikia, on the Greek island of Paros, with gale-force winds blowing. A ferry had sunk, and port officials were looking for captains and boats to help with the rescue. I ran to the port office, and a panic-stricken officer looked up at me and said in a thick Greek accent, "There are 538 people in the sea!" I indicated that I had boats in our flotilla that could put to sea.

I ran to my boat, *Margarita*, a 32-ton sloop with a cutter rig and a deep fin keel. She is a heavy, stable vessel and maneuvers well with a 120-horsepower diesel and a strong bow thruster. My crew were three couples from Canada, an American peacekeeper, a Canadian journalist, and an English hostess. I told them that we were going to respond to the distress call. I decided to wait for Yannis Christidis, one of my flotilla captains, to join us. I wanted two of us aboard who knew the area, as there are numerous low-lying rocks off Paros.

One of our flotilla boats, *Annito*, a Beneteau Oceanis 461, left the harbor ahead of us with most of its crew and a local Greek sailor aboard. We set off on *Margarita* into the moonless night

to confront huge waves and 40-knot winds. My adrenaline was pumping as I gripped the wheel. Soon we heard screaming over the VHF; a Greek fishing boat loaded with survivors had fouled its prop and was drifting toward the jagged coast on 15-foot swells. I watched Yannis for a reaction as I could understand only some of the Greek. His face registered disbelief. I instructed our crew to stay belowdecks or in the center cockpit because it was so rough. I had never seen *Margarita* get thrown about so much.

I sent Yannis up to the bow to keep watch and asked the crew to tie loops in lines, thinking these might help survivors get aboard. *Margarita* has 6 feet of freeboard and only a stern ladder for boarding. Meanwhile, a Greek fishing boat named *Kaptaintinos* passed us on her way into port carrying at least 100 survivors wearing life jackets. It was her second run.

One crewmember braced himself beside me while shining a high-power spotlight at the sea. The first body we saw really shocked us. She was an elderly woman in a blue dress and cardigan drifting face-down in the water. I thought about retrieving her, but decided instead to concentrate on living victims.

About 2 miles off the Paros coast, a parachute flare went off. I was struck by the horrific scene—black waves and

white spray all around and the silhouettes of the rocky islets lit by a faint glow. Fishing boats, yachts, and day-trip boats were bouncing through the debris field. Three large ferries stood by helplessly, as if paying respect to a fallen comrade.

In the middle of this chaos was *Annito* from our flotilla. She had entered the mayhem and found a group of survivors clinging to one another. The crew slowed the boat and maneuvered its stern to the victims. Five of them managed to clamber onto the stern platform even though it was bouncing 15 feet out of the water. But *Annito* then fouled her prop and began drifting. Meanwhile, a 45-foot Bavaria with two young Norwegians aboard also fouled its prop and was now drifting on a collision course with *Annito*. The boats collided on a huge wave, bouncing first at the bow, then at the beam, and finally at the stern before drifting apart again.

I approached the scene cautiously and noticed *Annito* raising her sails. It was her only way out. The Norwegians, who had rescued two victims, were drifting down on the rocky coast. One of them tied a line around himself, dove in, and managed to free the prop despite the huge swells and darkness.

Aboard *Margarita*, meanwhile, we spotted a man in the water without a



Illustration by Tedjam Takahashi



lifejacket. We passed him, and then I put the boat into full reverse. It took a few minutes until we were close enough to throw him a line.

Unfortunately, the rope Yannis threw did not get very far. I yelled to him to throw it again, but the waves washed the man away from us and spun the bow around. I grabbed a horseshoe buoy and threw it; it flew away like a Frisbee into the darkness. I quickly grabbed another and heaved it low several feet from the man. He didn't move. A wave caught the buoy, and it too skimmed away into the darkness. A wave caught the victim, and he rolled face up, face down, and was gone.

Moments later we happened on a much larger man wearing a lifejacket who called out repeatedly. This time I ran our stern right up to him, and Yannis reached down and grabbed his lifejacket. It took four of us to heave the 250-pound man 8 feet straight up the hull and over the lifelines and stanchions. I instructed the crew to get him below and warm him up. As he slid by me at the helm he called



"*Pathi mou!*"—my child.

We searched for another hour and saw nothing but bodies, overturned life rafts, and empty flashing lifejackets. At this point I could feel a chafing knot in the cable when turning the wheel. The cable had worn through from steering backward through the heavy seas. It was 0300,

and by now any survivors would have been in the water for 4½ hours, so I called off the search.

On our way back to port, we passed the area where the main effort had taken place hours before. We moved by slowly, nursing our steering system. Squinting in the wind and spray, I saw something up to port flashing once, then again. Then nothing. I screamed to Yannis and he saw it too, a sporadic flash in the water. We adjusted course and headed for the last flash. "Yes, yes, there are two!" We approached and saw two young brothers clinging to each other. They had an angel watching over them.

I gingerly maneuvered the stern right up to them, released the helm, and ran to the stern dive platform. I threw open the platform hatch and plunged down the ladder face forward toward the waves. I grabbed the

**I grabbed a horseshoe buoy and threw it; it flew away like a Frisbee into the darkness**

## SURVIVAL & SAFETY ■



The author's charterboat, *Margarita*, has a deep fin keel, strong 120-horsepower diesel and a good bow thruster

skinnier boy under his armpit, then nearly fell into the sea myself hauling him up on deck. His brother, fortunately, had enough strength to climb up on his own. I slid the skinny boy down the companionway, and the crew from Toronto reacted instantly, smothering him with body heat.

We made for port. *Margarita* now carried three survivors and a relieved crew. We had to raft three deep to

other boats in the harbor, and around 0420 our victims were passed boat to boat to waiting ambulances. *Annito* made it in with five victims, so collectively our charter flotilla saved eight lives that night.

Some facts about the tragedy: The ferry *Express Samina* was scheduled to be taken out of service at the end of the year. She was the only ferry to leave Athens that night. The *meltemi*

(north wind) was as strong as I have ever seen it, and most ferries were not running. The only person on *Express Samina*'s bridge was a 22-year-old trainee who was not allowed to maneuver the ship. The 70-foot rocks and surrounding reef where the ferry struck are lit by a lighthouse visible for 7 miles, but it flashes only twice every 16 seconds. The ferry was traveling at approximately 18 knots when it hit the rocks and ripped a 247-foot-long hole in its hull.

The ship lost power, started listing, and sank within 15 minutes. The only Mayday was transmitted as *Express Samina* was going down. No directions or orders were given to the 538 passengers, 82 of whom perished. The lifejackets on board were outdated. Many of the lifeboats were fused or painted to the deck and were very difficult to launch. Since the accident, the worst in the Greek ferry service in 35 years, all the ferries have been thoroughly inspected. Mandatory safety equipment has been installed, and sweeping new regulations have been implemented.



The author (center) with the two brothers he saved the night of the tragedy

It took a year before I was able to write about this incident. I have not wanted to recall the events of that night. What I have wanted to talk about is the technical difficulties we faced in the rough conditions. I hope my experience and the lessons I learned may someday be useful to others involved in a sea rescue in adverse conditions.



**Steven Parry** has worked as a charter skipper in Greek, Caribbean, and Turkish waters for 13 years and is the charter director of Poseidon Charters, based in Montreal, Canada.

## HINDSIGHT

- The common procedure of retrieving a victim to leeward was not possible as the boat rolled too much when beam-on to the heavy wind and seas, making it impossible to stand on deck. It was also hard to see the victims from the helm. It was easier to run past the victims, then reverse up to them. This way I had good visual contact with the victims until we were practically on top of them. Stern-to-rescue also allowed easier access to the stern ladder.
- The time when you are within range of the victim and can make contact is short. I call it "the precious minute." A heavy life ring with draw cord should be thrown if you are not close enough to grab the victim. Horseshoe buoys and ropes are completely ineffective as they are too light to throw in strong winds.
- Once victims have lost body heat, they cannot move their hands, arms, or legs to swim and grab lines. It is best to get right up to a victim and grab him if he cannot help himself. Hold the victim until more crew can help hoist or pull him aboard.
- Once aboard, victims should remain in the fetal position to maintain core body temperature. Stretching out a hypothermic person could cause cold blood to rush from his extremities to his heart and kill him. Get the victim's clothes off and warm him with blankets, body heat, and warm beverages.
- On a dedicated rescue mission, take only qualified crew with local knowledge, solid boating skills, strong swimming or diving skills, and/or familiarity with the boat and its systems. You need good people on the helm, a spotter on the bow, a spotlight operator, and crew to help manhandle survivors aboard and care for them. I would consider four crew the minimum: a helmsman, a spotter, and two to handle survivors.
- Always consider your safety and that of your crew first. Stay clear of other boats whenever possible in case you lose your power or steering. Be prepared to make sail if your prop is fouled or your engine shuts down.