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SURF IN OREGON

COLD...FICKLE...SHARKY

MONDAY, JUNE 12, 2006

Tragedy



FIG. 106*. — Vague après un cyclone essayé en 1887 par l'Hirondelle.

SW WIND 5 TO 10 KT...SLOWLY BACKING TO S THIS AFTERNOON.
 WIND WAVES 1 FOOT.
 W SWELL 4 FT AT 9 SECONDS.
 TONIGHT S WIND 15 KT.
 WIND WAVES 2 FT.
 W SWELL 5 FT AT 9 SECONDS.

I was at dinner with a friend last night and we talked about the sailing accident that resulted in the death of a local teen. We spoke of the fact that the boy was knocked overboard by a wave, even though seas were only running about 5 feet. Apparently he wasn't tethered and they got hit by a double up that washed him off the boat.

Then at home later I received an e-mail from another friend

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informing me of the memorial service for his brother in law who died in a sailing accident off the California coast.

It's a small world. And one that just got a little smaller...

Here's the Oregonian story...

A Lincoln High School student who graduated last week died Tuesday in a sailing accident in the Pacific Ocean 35 miles west of San Francisco after a wave knocked him overboard.

The U.S. Coast Guard said Andrew Brinkley was pronounced dead at a Bay Area hospital Tuesday afternoon, apparently from hypothermia, after a wave knocked him overboard from his father's newly acquired sailboat.

The 29-foot boat called "Fat Chance" was about 35 miles off the California coastline near Point Reyes when the accident occurred, said Lt. John Fu of the San Francisco-based U.S. Coast Guard.

Brinkley had set out on a sailing trip with his father, two other 2006 Lincoln graduates and Paddy Tillett, another parent, as part of a graduation trip.

The group had driven from Portland to San Francisco early Saturday to pick up a boat that Brinkley's father, Kenneth D. Brinkley, had recently acquired. They set sail on Saturday afternoon and were traveling north to bring the boat to Portland.

Shortly before 7:30 a.m. Tuesday, a wave hit the boat, sending Andrew Brinkley overboard. He was not tethered to a safety line but was wearing a life jacket at the time of the accident.

Fu said it was not known whether the other boaters were wearing life jackets.

Coast Guard officials received a mayday call from the boat and told emergency dispatchers that they couldn't rescue Andrew Brinkley because the engine had failed.

The Coast Guard launched an 87-foot cutter from the Humboldt Bay station; two helicopters from Air Station San Francisco; three 47-foot patrol boats from Station Bodega Bay; and a C-130 rescue airplane from Air Station Sacramento to help in the search.

Fu said the boat's radio also malfunctioned, further hampering the search for Brinkley. He said the crew of the Fat Chance activated the vessel's emergency position-indicating radio beacon to alert the Coast Guard of its position.

About 9:08 a.m., one of the helicopter crews spotted the sailboat approximately 35 miles west of Point Reyes. The Coast Guard then requested assistance from nearby vessels and a tanker, the Valdivostok, responded to help with radio calls.

The helicopter crew spotted Andy Brinkley about three miles northwest of the Fat Chance at 12:23 p.m. Tuesday and hoisted him out of the water. Crew members performed CPR, but he was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Tillett piloted the boat back to shore with the other two boys on board.

POSTED BY DOC AT 11:26 AM

2 COMMENTS:

pdxSysop said...

This post has been removed by the author.

2:50 PM

pdxSysop said...

What was published in The Oregonian right after the accident did not have the benefit of a lot of detail from the others who were on the boat -- skipper Paddy Tillett, owner and co-skipper Ken Brinkley and the two other boys -- Marcus Tillett and my son, Max Hamlin. Their eyewitness reports were not available to the reporter the day after the accident.

These notes are from conversations I had with all of them in the days following the tragedy -- first on June 8 with Paddy, Marcus and Max during the long drive back to Portland from San Francisco, and then on June 10 with Ken Brinkley at his daughter's home, the day after he had returned with Andy's body.

With deep respect for the participants in this horrible tragedy, I am posting these notes in the interest of providing a clearer picture of what happened and how these courageous young and older men dealt with it.

Early information

Max's mother and I first heard about the accident when our son telephoned home from the San Francisco Coast Guard Station at 12:35 a.m. Wednesday, about 18 hours after the Tuesday morning accident. It had taken 11 hours for Paddy Tillett to sail the boat with the two boys - his son Marcus and Max - back to San Francisco. (Ken Brinkley was no longer on board. The Coast Guard had come back for him mid-afternoon Tuesday and flown him to the hospital to be with Andy.)

Paddy and the boys made very slow progress, under sail toward the coast and with no motor -- it had been inundated by the wave that knocked Andy off the boat. As it got dark, Paddy decided to beach the boat rather than risk a collision in the swift currents of the Golden Gate. He brought the boat to land on Rodeo Beach, about a mile north of the Golden Gate Bridge on the ocean side of the Sausalito headland.

I flew from Portland early Wednesday and found the two boys and Paddy exhausted. They had rented a truck that morning and were very gradually filling it by trudging the gear from the boat - a ton or more of sails, anchor chains, batteries, lifeboat, tools, personal gear, a week's worth of uneaten provisions - over a half-mile of soft sand to the parking lot. I helped them for the couple of hours it took to finish carting the stuff to the truck.

About 4 p.m. we handed the boat over to a salvager and headed

north on U.S. 101.

On the drive home I had long talks separately and together with Marcus and Max. They clearly understood that Andy's death was caused by an accident and not a failure on their parts to save him. But they did not yet know why the engine had failed (and eventually all power, with no ability to recharge batteries). They told me they knew this voyage had known risks, taken on willingly and thoughtfully, planned and planned by the two dads, both experienced sailors. The equipment and systems were first rate. They had backups to their backups.

At the time they thought the engine failure was due to a clogged fuel line - sediment in the fuel tank stirred up by the rough seas. This was later found to be wrong.

Later information

In the days after our return, I had more conversations with Paddy Tillett, and eventually with Ken Brinkley after he had returned from San Francisco with Andy's body late Friday. Much of what they told me put to rest the "what-ifs" that the two surviving boys had begun to voice.

Ken and Paddy affirmed that all three boys were always clipped on throughout their times on deck, and that Andy had been clipped on during his watch preceding the accident. He had gone below when Paddy took over about 7:00 a.m. Minutes later, Paddy needed to trim some sail, so Andy came back to take the tiller for a few minutes while Paddy went forward to do that. Just as Andy emerged from the cabin, with his tether and carabiner in hand and ready to clip on, he saw the rogue wave - "a 20-foot wall of green" as described by Paddy, who added that in 50 years of sailing he had not encountered such a wave.

Before Andy clipped himself on, he yelled to warn Paddy, who grabbed hold of the side cable as the wave hit. In the split second that it took to yell a warning, which possibly saved Paddy's life, Andy lost his chance to latch on and was knocked clear off the boat.

Ken, who was below with Max and Marcus, estimated that 300-500

gallons of water crashed into the cabin. It flooded the engine, soaked all their bedding, clothes and food. Water was deep in the cabin. Ken knew how ominous this was, and he raced up to find no one on deck. He saw Paddy's hand clinging on the edge. Paddy said he had seen the hull from under water as the boat rolled, and when it rolled back he managed to get a hand and one leg up on the side.

Ken said he hauled Paddy, a bigger man and soaking wet, back in with a single lift and toss. Paddy had blood running over his face and was yelling and pointing to Andy. Ken then saw Andy in the water and realized that he had no tether. Paddy noted later that even having a tether might not have saved Andy, because the force of the wave was so strong that Paddy's O-ring, tested for 6,000 pounds, had split to a wide-open "C" and his line had stayed attached only because there had not been any slack.

After landing Paddy back in the boat, Ken saw that Andy was about 300 yards behind them in the water. Ken turned the craft under sail, and with Paddy lying on the deck, latched and bleeding from his forehead, he started tacking upwind back to Andy.

Ken said the boat came very close to Andy. "I could almost touch him," he said. Max remembers calling to Ken about throwing Andy a line or the second locator beacon. But Ken did not because he saw that Andy was unconscious. His eyes were rolled back, his arms outstretched and not moving. He was upright in the water wearing Ken's super-buoyant life jacket. At that point Ken knew the only way to save him would be to jump in with a line and it was, he said, "the toughest decision of my life" to not do that. But he could not because Paddy's condition was unknown and the two other boys might not survive if he, Ken, with no life jacket, were separated from the moving boat in rough seas and the skipper was too injured to bring them home. All this was split-second thinking, and within seconds the distance between the boat and Andy had widened again.

Within minutes Ken had all hands back up on deck, with Marcus keeping a bead on Andy's location and Max working the radio and handling Coast Guard communications, as Ken tried in vain to start the drowned engine. As precious minutes passed, and with no motor, the boat drifted farther and farther away from Andy.

Eventually the boys lost sight of Andy. We know that Andy later regained consciousness because at one point Max heard his whistle in the wind. But they never again saw him.

Paddy recovered from his dousing, and the cut on his head proved superficial. He was battered and bruised on his back, but able to skipper once again.

Ken said he went below after an hour of not seeing Andy and with the Coast Guard still hunting from the air. Paddy maintained control up on deck in the following hours - while the Coast Guard searched and eventually found Andy about 12:30 three miles from the sailboat. He had been in the cold water for more than three and a half hours.

Paddy headed southeast on a return course to San Francisco. Andy was flown to a Bay Area hospital. Two hours later the Coast Guard flew back for Ken.

Paddy, Marcus and Max sailed another 11 hours to their pitch-dark beaching between the rocks on narrow Rodeo Beach, just west of Sausalito.

Respectfully submitted by John Hamlin.

May Andy Rest in Peace.

3:06 PM

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