

Losing *Easy Go*

Abandoning ship in storm-force conditions in the Gulf Stream is something that no offshore sailor wants to experience.

By Robert Groves

I have logged more than 50,000 sea miles on two different versions of *Easy Go*, the latest being a Benford Badger 34-foot junk-rigged dory. Those miles include two Atlantic crossings, a number of trips to the Caribbean, and cruises through Newfoundland, the Great Lakes and associated canals. The majority of these voyages were accomplished engineless, using a sculling oar for auxiliary propulsion. *Easy Go* was upgraded with a motor and electronics before this final passage.

I departed, singlehanded, from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, on Oct. 29, 2013, with a favorable weather forecast for a passage directly to the island of Dominica in the Eastern Caribbean. The first two days of sailing were fantastic, with light to moderate northwest winds providing a good downwind run from River Bourgeois, Cape Breton Island, to the east end of Sable Island and into “the Gully,” a deep underwater canyon on the edge of the Scotian Shelf. I’m never really comfortable until *Easy Go* has moved off the shelf, and when we entered the Gully, we put the wind on the starboard quarter and headed due south to meet the Gulf Stream in a couple of days. I was expecting a change of wind to the southwest in the 25- to 30-knot range.

On Nov. 1 I found myself beating against 40-plus knots of southwest winds south of Sable Island. Easing off the wind made the ride a little more comfortable, but we still had a 35-degree heel with nearly 10-foot seas. Cooking was impossible, so I existed on oatcakes that my wife, Kathy, had made for me before the journey, as well as fresh fruit and raw vegetables with water. The seas and air were about 40 degrees F. Driving into the waves made sleeping difficult, and I started to notice the effects of sleep deprivation setting in after only two heavy-weather days, sooner than usual. I anticipated the passage of a front with wind veering to the northwest, and then another low to take its place, making the going easier. We pounded against the wind for four days, making

significant easting while getting deeper into the Gulf Stream.

After four days of difficult sailing, the winds shifted to the northeast, bringing on a whole new set of challenges. A number of small and usually insignificant events led to insurmountable obstacles and total exhaustion on my part — and the loss of *Easy Go*.



A crewman aboard the bulk carrier *Athina L* snaps a photo of *Easy Go* once the author is safe (above). In better times, *Easy Go* sails comfortably with junk-rig sails set (opposite).

I was napping when the wind dropped suddenly and shifted. Once on deck, I started the motor to charge the batteries. *Easy Go* had changed direction, and we were beating to the northwest with a leftover swell from the southwest against the new seas from the northeast. *Easy Go* was brought to a new course running downwind to the southwest. The wind built quickly to more than 50 knots. The seas started to grow to a size disproportionate to the wind speed and break. We were in the Gulf Stream with storm-force winds against its significant current.

I stopped the engine, lowered the foresail and lashed it down. I then dropped the mainsail, leaving the bundled sail to port to get a little drive from the wind. I towed some warps to provide a little directional stability and ease the burden on the windvane steering.

A breaking wave broached *Easy Go*, causing the sail bundle to jibe to starboard with an instant fan-up of the sail, tangling the yard and two battens with the lazy jacks and halyard. I now had a pretty big piece of sail driving us out of control. Unable to untangle this mess, I lowered the lazy jacks and put the entire bundle over the starboard lifelines. It took two hours to retrieve

the sail and secure it to the stanchions. I injured my hands (including my fingernails, now lifted from my fingertips) getting everything straightened out.

The waves were now breaking heavily over the stern and flooding the footwell on the flush rear deck. Returning to the cabin, I noted water entering via the engine controls in the footwell at a rate of 2 liters per hour. I needed to launch the sea anchor, but its lines were now tangled in the sail bundle, and the deck was not a safe place to be.

The sail bundle barricaded the main hatch. The secondary hatch that I

make sail adjustments from was almost entirely blocked as well, and I was unable to close the hatch cover. Things were starting to get serious. Waves were now breaking heavily over *Easy Go*, with water occasionally breaching the open hatch on the raised deck. It was wet and cold, and the potential for a rollover was a serious concern.

In the early hours of Nov. 4, I lay down to assess the situation. I was a long way from land, exhausted, cold, malnourished, seasick and battered

Later in the day *Bishu Highway*, a car transport ship with 50-foot topsides, arrived on the scene. I had been forewarned by the AIS, and sighted them as they bore down to starboard. The call I had been dreading came over the VHF from *Bishu Highway*, saying they were responding to a U.S. Coast Guard request to provide aid to me. Was I in need of assistance? I hesitated. Did I really need help?

"Yes," I responded.

Bishu Highway contacted the Coast

come to my aid.

I tied myself into the starboard settee with the lee cloth secured over me in case we rolled. Sleep was fleeting, as we were being pummeled by the seas. I occasionally got up to bail and look out the hatch. *Bishu Highway* was there, circling. The antenna on my mainmast appeared damaged, and I was having difficulty making and receiving VHF calls. One large wave I heard coming from far off hit *Easy Go*, fully breaking and swinging her broadside, knocking her over. We were totally engulfed by the crest and driven sideways for quite a distance. I thought we were going to roll, but she managed to come back upright and resume sailing directly downwind. This was the longest night of my life, and I thought it might be the last. I had time to reflect on the travels I'd had with *Easy Go*. I cried a bit, in frustration and regret. I looked around and concluded that everything was man-made and could be replaced. Numerous times I thought I should just call this rescue off. "It's a big mistake! I've made it through storms before!" I thought. I wasn't necessarily making rational decisions. Confusion and second-guessing filled my mind. Luckily, I stuck with Plan A: Abandon *Easy Go*.

Bishu Highway made radio contact with *Athina L*. I couldn't hear the approaching ship but was able to make contact with *Bishu Highway* using my handheld radio. Time to get ready to abandon ship. What to take? I stashed my passport, wallet, some cash, my tablet and a few personal items in a waterproof bag and put that in my backpack. I changed into heavy clothes: work pants, sweater, raincoat, life jacket and backpack. Unable to get out of the hatch with everything, I took off the life jacket and pack and set them by the hatch.

I was finally able to hear *Athina L*. They were less than a mile away and could not see me on the AIS, but had me on radar and occasionally saw my stern light as we rose to a wave top. It was dark, but they wanted to do the rescue then, as the weather was forecast to deteriorate. Waves were close to 20 feet, and the wind was 40 knots. The captain asked me to go on deck, get my engine started and prepare to leave. I made it on deck with life jacket on and backpack secured.

from being tossed around. I had the mainsail down on deck, and needed calmer conditions to repair it and hoist it again. I had water coming in, which was controllable. I was in sea conditions I'd never experienced, and *Easy Go* was at the edge of being overwhelmed. Meanwhile, I was at the point where a rescue effort might not be possible if my physical condition diminished further. So that morning, I put out an emergency request via a SPOT Satellite Messenger that resulted in my rescue.

Guard and informed me that an aircraft had been dispatched to locate me. They would stay with me to provide a target for the aircraft. Toward dark, *Bishu Highway* called to say conditions were not favorable for them to attempt a rescue. They would stay close to me for the night in the event of an emergency. Another vessel, *Athina L*, a bulk carrier with a load of coal and lower topsides, was better suited for rescue in these conditions, but would not arrive until early the next morning. *Athina L* was 19 hours away when they turned to



The engine started as *Athina L* loomed out of the dark to port. I felt so small. The waves were breaking over the ship's decks 20 feet above the water. One moment I was looking across them, the next my masts were barely over the vessel's railings. I eased up to the side. For a moment I was under her bow. I throttled up and drove away. I lost my handheld radio. I held on to a stanchion with my right hand and steered the tiller with my left while kneeling in the footwell. The motion was so violent that I feared I would be thrown overboard. The rescue did not look possible. I considered calling it off and leaving my fate to the elements.

Athina L had cut her engines and was swinging beam to the wind. We had one more chance. I motored behind the stern of the ship and into the lee. The wind stopped instantly. The seas seemed to calm although there was a 10-foot swell. I motored to the side of *Athina L* and crashed heavily into her. At that point, I had to get off *Easy Go*. How long could she take a beating? The masts were crashing against the railings above. The crew threw me a line to attach to her. It tore out the bits and took the lifelines and stanchions away. I motored alongside, again leaving the motor in gear and the tiller to port to drive the bow against the side of *Athina L*.

I LOOKED UP THROUGH THE WATER AND SAW THE SPOTLIGHT OF ATHINA L. I THOUGHT, "THIS IS IT. I'M GOING TO DIE NOW."

I retrieved the line again and tied it to the forward mast. We stayed attached this time. The crew lowered a cargo net over the side, but it was only in reach when *Easy Go* rose to the top of a wave. I stepped forward with my pack on my back and tried to get my arms through and tangled in the net, but the best I could do was barely grab it before *Easy Go* dropped away and I was suspended. I struggled to get a better grip while the crew pulled the net to the deck. My right hand slipped and

my left hand quickly followed. I fell.

In the water between *Easy Go* and *Athina L*, it seemed warm, quiet and calm. I looked up through the water and saw the spotlight of *Athina L*. I thought, "This is it. I'm going to die now. What a useless way to go."

The next moment my head was in the air at the stern of *Easy Go*. I reached out to grab my dragline and wrapped it around my wrist. Somehow I wasn't crushed or struck by my own propeller. I called to the crew. One man saw me. He hung a weighted heaving line over me and dropped it. I got a loop around my chest. I was getting weaker.



The captain of *Athina L* poses for a shot with the author. Eight days after the rescue, the ship pulled into Hunterston, U.K.

It was not the time to remember knots. Two half-hitches would do. A life ring dropped into the water to my left. I rose through the ring, locked my arms over it and held on to the two lines now attached to my body.

I went up the side of the ship and reached the railing. I had no energy left and couldn't get over. One man grabbed each arm. Another pulled on my coat. One grabbed my belt, and I made it over the railing onto my knees on the solid deck. Relief, then blackness. I regained consciousness a few times. Hands were all over me, removing the lines, my pack, my coat. I tried to get up but fell down. More hands grabbed my clothes and lifted me onto a stretcher.

One of the crewmen asked what to do with *Easy Go*. I suggested running her down. He said no, they would just let her go. "Would you like to see her one last time and say goodbye?" he asked.

I was carried into a hospital room.

Clothes came off, and I was rubbed all over. Towels were drying me. Someone tried to take my temperature and blood pressure. I had the realization that I was alive.

For the next eight days, *Athina L* steamed to Hunterston, United Kingdom. I was mostly in bed, with injuries to my back, hip and hands. I still don't know how I sustained most of the damage. The officers and crew of *Athina L* were from the Philippines. During this passage they were worried about their families as Typhoon Haiyan bore down on the island nation.

In Hunterston, Frances Rennie of the Ocean Cruising Club, of which I am a member, met me and facilitated my entry into the U.K. Frances took me to her home and saw that I was taken care of while flight arrangements were made to repatriate me to Canada, where I recuperated from this ordeal.

Without the SPOT Satellite Messenger, AMVER ship-rescue system and the U.S. Coast Guard, this experience could have had a far different ending. I'm eternally grateful to the crew of *Athina L* for my rescue, and to all the people who were involved, wherever they were. I was never alone.

Did I make the right decision to abandon *Easy Go*? The weatherfaxes on *Athina L* confirmed my belief that the low I was caught in would be followed by another chain of low-pressure systems, the last of which was Tropical Storm Melissa. Being unable to escape the Gulf Stream in storm conditions could have caused more gear failures or even sinking. I would have continued to deteriorate physically and mentally. The results instead were a successful search and rescue. *Easy Go* was not insured, and was lost at 39°20.7' N, 54°40.2' W. But I survived to tell the tale.

Robert and Kathy Groves built Easy Go in 2005 and completed an Atlantic circuit including the Azores, Portugal, Morocco, Cape Verde and the Caribbean, as well as cruising the U.S. East Coast and Canadian Maritimes. They currently live in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.