

Turnbuckle

She was destined for a family of four to over night along the coast into rivers and bays. The accommodations are spartan but cozy and she sails well while keeping the crew dry. Seagull is her English name, La Moutte her French name. She had been dry docked in the woods for 27 years, providing food for termites and producing about 50 gallons of very nice topsoil from the leaves she mulched.

The former owner scared himself with several unplanned jibes just missing the heads of his elementary aged crew. So, de-rigged and pitched high into the air like an orca breaching in the woods, she sat. I saw her fat belly, round almost lifeboat foredeck, the huge cockpit and fell in love. "How much" I asked. "Free" said the wife with a spear like thrust glance toward her husband. Free he said unconvincingly and gathered the parts and pieces that had spread out over three decades. Seagull was going to sail the ocean breeze again.

Two years of spare time later and it was time to spread her wings. While reworking the mast and rigging, and reading multiple lessons learned to replace quarter century old hardware, new hardware was acquired. I had ordered, reordered, and finally correctly ordered guys, shrouds, turnbuckles, line, sheaves and snap shackles from a wonderful company called Duck Works. The two water birds collaborated and the result was a fitted and shiny sailboat with lots of new parts.

A practice raising of the mast in the back yard (into an oak tree) and tuning the rig with no experience was the best I could do. We prepared the blue topped and white bottomed lady for a two hour trailer ride over rough roads to Kerr Dam in central Virginia. I used a few decades of navy life experience to make Seagull "road"-shape, well tied down and properly equipped. With a beaming smile we were off, a family of four ready to live the dreams of only the father. Alas, no sleeping aboard, we had two vehicles. One was for the boat and the other pulled the pop up camper with AC, ready to be parked on the electric spot number 87' next to the bathrooms. The fourth family member was a dog, but sailing was eminent.

Arriving at the camp site we set up the tent camper, put out the chairs, the grill, let the dog run off some energy and overall domesticated our designated Corp of Engineers home. Tension was palpable as Seagull strained against her lashings and two years of preparation electrified the atmosphere, for me. Finally it was time to get underway!

Upon arrival at the boat ramp I quickly walked around the lovely lady as my 17 year old daughter bustled with energy. My eyes were glistening already from the wind that would be roaring in the sails. Then I spotted the empty end of a turnbuckle. The finely tuned rig had lost a structural component. It was like Vannah White was unveiling the wining word "sailboat" but she was missing her two front teeth. How could this be. Did someone steal my shiny new turnbuckle when we stopped at the rest area? (I don't have the endurance I used to have). What kind of cruel landlubber would disable such a majestic vessel? I was angry with all the fury of Poseidon. Then I noticed another was missing then a third. In shock I touched the fourth and it fell off into my hand, hanging on only by a few threads. I had tied down everything but had never considered the jarring ride would unscrew all my new turnbuckles and that they would fall off the boat along highway 58 never to be seen again. The world was dark and I was far away from West Marine. The inexpensive mighty Duck Works in Texas via the Internet might as well have been in, Texas. I let go with a series of unvarnished sailor frustrations, then I remembered my mate was also my daughter. Fortunately (which is never a great planning tool) I had kept two of the ancient turnbuckles for future use to tighten the safety lines. I also had a few odd shaped metal bits from other failed experiments and we were able to jury rig the mast then tune it in the parking lot. After two hours of a planned 40 minute launch sequence we had the mast in place, the boom attached, the boat rigged and ready without a whisper of wind in the air. I was hot, pissed and not a very loved captain. The crew was bored, tired, and hot with hurt feelings. One of them just kept trying to lick my legs while holding her ears down and tail tucked away.

We motored over to our camp site and after a hearty meal ashore we motored around in the breathless still of a mirrored lake.

The next day we crossed the lake with about 10 knots of wind just aft the starboard quarter. The wind came around to the starboard bow and we had wind in our faces and a tiny bone in Seagull's teeth. All was right with the world. The morning was hot and we kept a steady shower on the dog to keep her cool. The shrouds on the starboard side were taught like piano wire, the port side unloaded shrouds hung limp and loose. I was amazed at how much the mast bends under a load, but it all made sense and was holding without creaking much. She had newly reconnected chain plates, new rivets, the wire was new and just slightly larger than before. We sailed directly to a large house on the opposite shore so the 1st mate (or marriage mate) could "have something to look at". We could see the house but it was set well back from the shore. I decided to get as close as I could to the shoreline before we had to turn so the 1st mate would be happy. To stay erosion, the home

owners had put in place a barrier flowing from several feet outside the water down into the lake. Kerr Dam is the flood water storage facility for the Rappahannock River and the water level fluctuates up to 20 feet per year. We could see the boulders of the rip rap clearly now and it was time to jibe to port, which would swing the boom over our heads left to right. I had the helm and looking in the direction of the turn I noticed the main shroud hanging unattached in the air, the one that would need to take several hundred pounds of tension to keep the mast from being ripped off the boat. Gulp. I gave the first mate the helm and barked "Don't turn", the daughter was dutifully calling out the distance to the rocks and I was rethreading the turnbuckle that had unscrewed to the point of just good enough. The 1st mate wanted to know what I was doing and why. I said "no time to talk, . . . yes I was rude". Then, jibe ho, helm a lee, crash goes the boom, dog's eyes are mostly white, enough threads hold on in the 30+ year old brittle stainless steel and the rocks pass quietly down the starboard side as we leave the shoreline back across the water.

A quick review of what had occurred revealed that only the captain was aware of the peril. The crew thought I was just spastic. Perfect timing for the wind to die completely and the red eyed North Carolina cicadas to fly out in the morning air to dry their wings and feed the birds. Note, 1st mate is not fond of thumb sized demon eyed flying bugs. Becalmed and with the sun bearing down, a protein rich flying snack landed on the wife. Although it was not inconceivable given that the air was buzzing and there was one in the water every boat length (17 feet by the way) as far as you could see, apparently it still came as a shock to my wife. After the screaming ended and the dog was calmed, I put the protein snack on the brim of my hat as an unrated seaman lookout. The bug looked out over the becalmed damn with red beads for eyes. The mates did not love their new crewman, I thought I saw a tiny albatross around its exoskeletal neck. The mates declared it bad luck.

I twisted the handle on the electric trolling motor and we returned to the safety of the camp site with cool water for the dog to swim in and a healthy lunch during the port visit.

Seagull and my daughter are now tested in much deeper water and bigger winds, both have earned their salt. The 1st mate continues to provision the captain often and well and the dog knows how to fish. None will forget the first sail of Seagull across the bar and the adventures equal to Hornblower and Sparrow in our first deployment.