

Cruise the Great Circle in Your Private Yacht – “The Week from Hell”

Cruising is a wonderful, relaxing experience. But into each life some rain must fall, and you'd best be prepared for it. Sometimes you experience THE WEEK FROM HELL (pronounced THE WEEK FROM HELL in a deep, echoing voice. This is what happened to our heroes – Butch and Lynne.

THE WEEK FROM HELL began as our heroes were quietly motoring across the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina, looking forward to a “relaxing” visit in Norfolk just 2 days away. As they were having a sandwich, “Hero Lynne” noticed the bilge pump light come on. It ran for a few seconds, then turned off, then on, then off. After three on's and off's in just a few minutes, “Hero Butch” decided that checking the bilge was a little more important than eating a sandwich. This marks the actual start of THE WEEK FROM HELL (don't forget the deep, echoing voice)

“Down into the bilge we go. And what do we find? Well, it's a little dark in here, but you could see water pouring into the bilge from the area of the port shaft. Damn! We're sinking! Just what we need. And my buddy from Sandy Hook told me to watch out for the hoses around the shaft logs. Can't exactly see the leak, but feeling around the shaft doesn't help. Wait! The water is coming from somewhere else. There it is. It's a fitting to the aft shower. Thank goodness. We're just losing all our fresh water into the bilge. Quickly and adroitly our hero leaps out of the bilge and turns off the fresh water pump. Now back into the bilge to find out why it's so dark down there – and hot.” It's so hot, the handholds on the ladder are hard to grip without burning “Hero Butch's” hands. Suddenly, the 110 volt trouble light just went off. But, damn, there's enough light to see what the problem is. The port exhaust is pouring into the engine room through a gaping hole in the exhaust hose. Our heroes' problems begin.

All is not lost, our heroes have two engines. Kill one, run off the other, fix the leak well enough to use the port engine for docking and go from there. But the troubles are just beginning. It got hot down there. Hot enough to soften a plastic pipe fitting and pop it apart. That's what happened to the aft shower fitting. Why was it so hot? Because hot exhaust and superheated steam were spewing all over. And why did the 110volt trouble light go out? It was fine. Our \$1500 inverter was not. It had quit and there was a troubling error message flashing from the controller. It said something like, “I'm not working, I'm not working. Nanner, Nanner, Nanner!!” At least, that's what it sounded like.

Now it's time for our heroes to rise to the occasion. After a good cry, plans to anchor out are forgotten and a marina in Coinjock, NC is called for assistance getting a new exhaust hose. Midway Marina in Coinjock was a godsend to our heroes. They ordered in a hose from a Norfolk Marina, 30 miles away, and found a local mechanic to help install it. They provided the hose at their cost and the local mechanic tried to get away for no charge.

Our heroes limped in to Midway, and began to assess the damage. First off, the engine room was like a black hole. No light reflected from any surface. It was awful. “Hero

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Butch” spent the entire next day just cleaning. The cleaning helped some. But also, things began to go wrong. “Hero Butch” managed to cap off the shower fitting that had started THE WEEK FROM HELL, and changed to a different water tank, but shortly after getting settled in Coinjock, “Hero Lynne” noticed that the new tank was suddenly empty. Back into the bilge goes “Hero Butch” and finds another fitting popped loose, pouring water into the bilge. A screwdriver fixes that, but what next? Our heroes need another good cry. Here’s a listing of what was discovered on day two of THE WEEK FROM HELL and how our heroes dealt with it:

Busted water fittings – lost a bunch of water, but no big deal. Repaired them so they cannot break again in the future.

Collapsed hose on aft head – The Vacu-flush heads use a vacuum to operate. The hose softened and collapsed. Fortunately, the boat has a second head, because it was several days before the parts arrived to fix it.

Collapsed hose on the macerator – This hose softened and collapsed, but fortunately, the macerator isn’t used often, so no immediate inconvenience resulted.

Shorted Inverter – “Hero Butch” took the cover off the inverter and emptied a can of electrical parts cleaner on the circuits inside. All kinds of black disgusting crap came out. Then the inverter worked fine. Yeah!

Collapsed hose on the holding tank vent – That was discovered when the pump out didn’t seem to work. Without a vent hose, the dockside pump-out vacuum is strong enough to collapse the tank. It did. The tank is a little out of shape, but let’s hope it wasn’t damaged beyond use.

Bilge Pump – Both the main bilge pump and the backup failed this day. Turned out to be unrelated to the “incident”, but irritating nonetheless.

Things are beginning to look up. One extra day in Coinjock has allowed our heroes to catalogue the damage and order parts, fittings, etc. to be delivered to Norfolk. But the nagging question is, “why did the hose fail?”. To get the full impact of THE WEEK FROM HELL, we have to go back a few months.

FLASHBACK

Our story really began in Boca Grande, Florida in March 2001. Aisling ran aground (notice that boats run aground, Captains don’t). It took several minutes to wiggle loose. After that time, the port engine began to run a little hot. In fact, the next 3 months seemed to be a continuing exercise in trouble-shooting the cooling system on that engine as it became increasingly apparent that there was insufficient flow in the seawater side of the port engine cooling system. Our hero tried everything he could, short of dismantling the whole thing. At each stop, he checked a different engine component and usually found something that might have been the cause, but it never seemed to be the correct fix.

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By the time Aisling reached Beaufort, SC where she would rest for a few months, the port engine was effectively shut down.

But our hero was not to be deterred. While stopped in Beaufort, he removed every component related to seawater flow and had it cleaned. One of the components removed and cleaned was the exhaust elbow. Now this is an interesting animal. The exhaust elbow has two parts. The inner part carries exhaust gases from the engine. The outer part carries cooling water. They join at the outlet of the elbow. Apparently, the water shoots out small holes around the perimeter of the opening and cools the exhaust. Remember this fact. It's important.

In the end, the cooling water flow had improved dramatically, and our hero declared victory and moved on to the next problem.

The following spring, on the first trip from the Beaufort Marina since the repairs, the exhaust hose failed. That's another story. Anyway, our hero chalked that up to the abuse of running on low water in Florida, replaced the hose and left Beaufort for the RELAXING cruise north. Next came Albemarle Sound and THE WEEK FROM HELL.

FLASH FORWARD

So, we know what the problem is. “Hero Butch” insisted on being a mechanic – which he isn't – and fix the original flow problem himself. Let's fire that incompetent bastard and hire a real mechanic to fix this once and for all. Our heroes made a reservation at a new Marina in Norfolk that promised a consultation with a mechanic to, at least, diagnose the port engine cooling problems. So, on day three of THE WEEK FROM HELL, they're off to Norfolk, 50 miles away, hoping for NO NEW PROBLEMS.

WRONG!! Two hours out of Coinjock, it became obvious that the exhaust on the port engine was running abnormally hot and that engine had to be shut down and reserved for “special occasions” like docking in Norfolk. But wait, during one of his many trips to the engine room, “Hero Butch” noticed something strange from the battery monitor. Hmm! The batteries are not getting charged by the alternator. Our hero isn't even a little bit interested in troubleshooting that problem. He's been fired as ships mechanic, anyway.

On day four of THE WEEK FROM HELL, our heroes finally got to speak with a mechanic – actually the mechanic supervisor. But not until they waited 6 hours for him to come. The mechanic and the heroes agreed to install a new seawater pump (that's the only component our incompetent mechanic didn't address in Beaufort). He also promised to send a mechanic over the next day to check out the alternator. Meanwhile, our good friends Don and Violet Waldecker came by with fittings to repair our collapsed hoses and new float switches for our bilge pumps. “Hero Butch” spent another day in the bilge fixing things.

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On day five of THE WEEK FROM HELL, the mechanic confirmed that the alternator wasn't working so he removed it and sent it to be rebuilt. Maybe it'll come back today, maybe tomorrow. With nothing left to do, our heroes decided to do some sightseeing.

On day six of THE WEEK FROM HELL, the mechanic installed the new water pump and ran the port engine. He was convinced the water flow has improved. Our hero wasn't so sure. He suggested they look at the two engine exhausts together, but they couldn't because the alternator still hasn't been returned. We don't want to run the starboard engine without its alternator so we agreed to wait. Our heroes decide to go to a movie.

On day seven of THE WEEK FROM HELL, our heroes spend the entire day sightseeing, and it was fun, but there's still this nagging concern about the port engine. “Hero Butch” is certain it isn't fixed, yet. What to do, what to do. Meanwhile, the alternator arrived and the mechanic put it in. Our heroes return to the boat as he is leaving for the day. The alternator still isn't working and he confirmed that the port engine still isn't putting out enough water. He agrees to return the following morning.

Aside from the nagging doubts about the engine, our heroes were also anxious to get on our way. We had hoped to spend some time in Annapolis visiting our friends, and that time is getting eaten away while struggling with these problems. And by the way, the aft head isn't working right.

On day eight of THE WEEK FROM HELL (You might think a week has seven days, but not THE WEEK FROM HELL) the mechanic arrived as promised and had a crazy idea. It looked like there was a slight angle between the exhaust elbow and the exhaust pipe. Is it possible that this is pinching off and redirecting the water flow just enough to overheat the hose? Eureka! That was the problem. He twisted the elbow just a few degrees and went aft to admire the dramatic increase in water flow. That's one problem solved. Now what of the alternator. My good friend, Don, faxed the manufacturer's instructions for testing the alternator/regulator combination and the tests confirmed that the regulator was also bad. So, it cost \$350 to rebuild a \$450 alternator and another \$250 to replace the regulator. Since our heroes were anxious to leave, they arrange for the regulator to be shipped to Annapolis.

Our heroes had hoped to leave on day eight, but it was getting late and the boat needed cleaning after eight days of greasy engine work so they decided to clean and leave tomorrow. There's a front coming through, but it should be gone by morning and the weather forecast is promising.

WRONG! Day nine was terrible. Our heroes were stranded and getting tired of being there. Not that the people at Ocean Marine were not real nice. They were. They stopped charging for dockage after the fourth day. They had a courtesy car for shopping. And the mechanics did fix the port engine. On day nine our heroes went to another movie.

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Finally, on day ten our heroes are off. The weather forecast is good and they plan to leave early, early, early and make Solomon’s 110 miles away. NOT! The Chesapeake Bay was the worst they ever saw. Needless to say, our heroes did not make it to Solomon’s that day. They stopped way short in Mobjack Bay to lick their wounds and have another cry.

The following day, dawn gave clear skies, low winds and small waves. Our heroes made it to Solomon’s that day and Annapolis the following day. Thus, ending THE WEEK FROM HELL.