

Starfisher's Last Voyage

This story is based on fact, even though the names are fictional, and incidents have been added in reconstructing the original news story. The list of what went wrong on Starfisher may seem exaggerated ("Could all that happen?"), but sinkings more often than not are the results of a train of misfortunes or errors. Usually, only a few errors are enough to sink a boat - and when a defective lifeboat is added to the chain, no one returns to tell the story. So follow the trials of the Barlow brothers; maybe we can all learn from them . . . and save some lives in the future.

Arlo and Tim Barlow, brothers who had made many fishing trips together, got the 12-meter combination boat, *Starfisher*, underway one night last March for a one-week trip to the local fishing grounds.

As they cleared the inner harbor, they felt *Starfisher* start to work in the large swells coming into the outer harbor. After clearing the sea buoy, they set course for the fishing grounds, ignoring the heavy swell, and both brothers settled down to their at-sea routine.

Before they were two miles beyond the sea buoy, *Starfisher's* motion became labored - she hesitated before righting herself after each swell passed beneath. As *Starfisher* hung up on particularly large swell, almost refusing to right herself, Arlo decided he had better see if everything was in order.

Shining a light into the engine compartment, he saw that the boat was taking water. Her motion in the swells had apparently opened a seam in the engine compartment, and the bilge pump was not staying ahead of the rising water.



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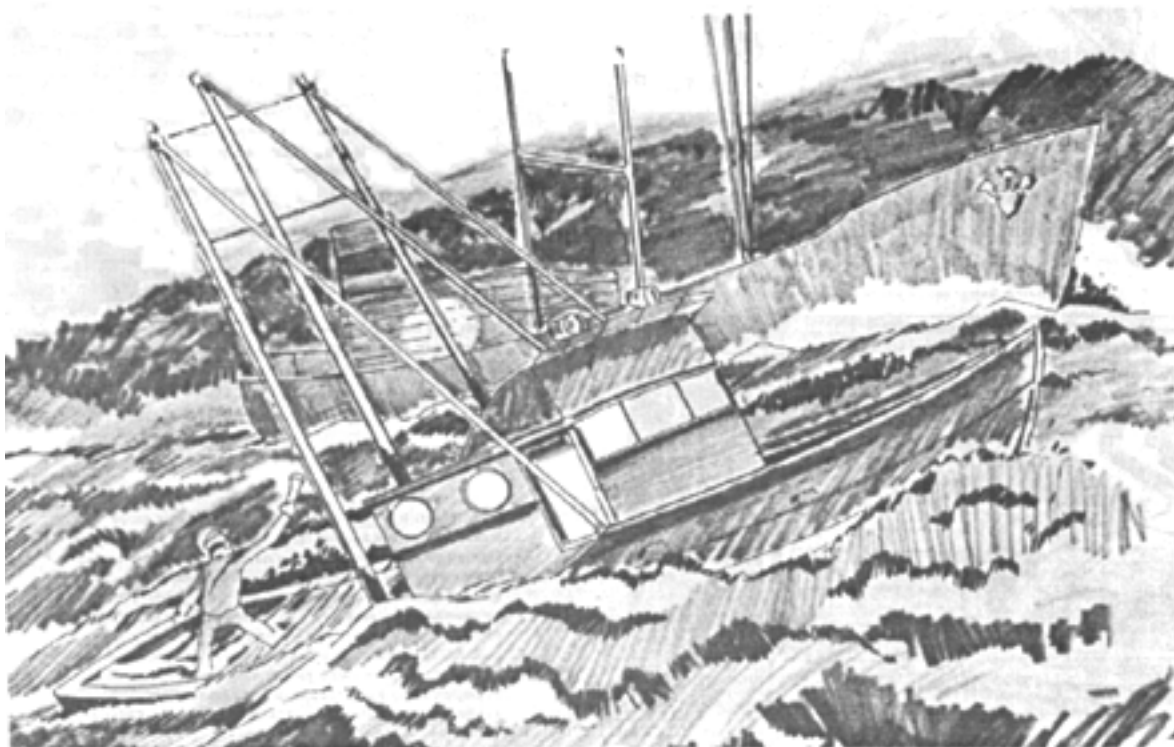
Arlo told Time to send the distress signal on the radio while he tried to put another bilge pump on line Within 20 minutes, both the engine compartment and the adjacent fish hold had flooded (*Starfisher* had a common bilge for both spaces).

Tim had no luck raising anyone on the radio. Then, much to his relief, he saw the lights of not one but two ships bearing down on *Starfisher*. He thanked heaven that his problem was solved.



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Just to be sure that the ships saw him, Tim flashed a spotlight at first the bridge of one and then the other Moments faded into minutes. Neither ship slowed or gave any indication it had seen *Starfisher*. Both passed and eventually disappeared without even acknowledging *Starfisher's* presence.



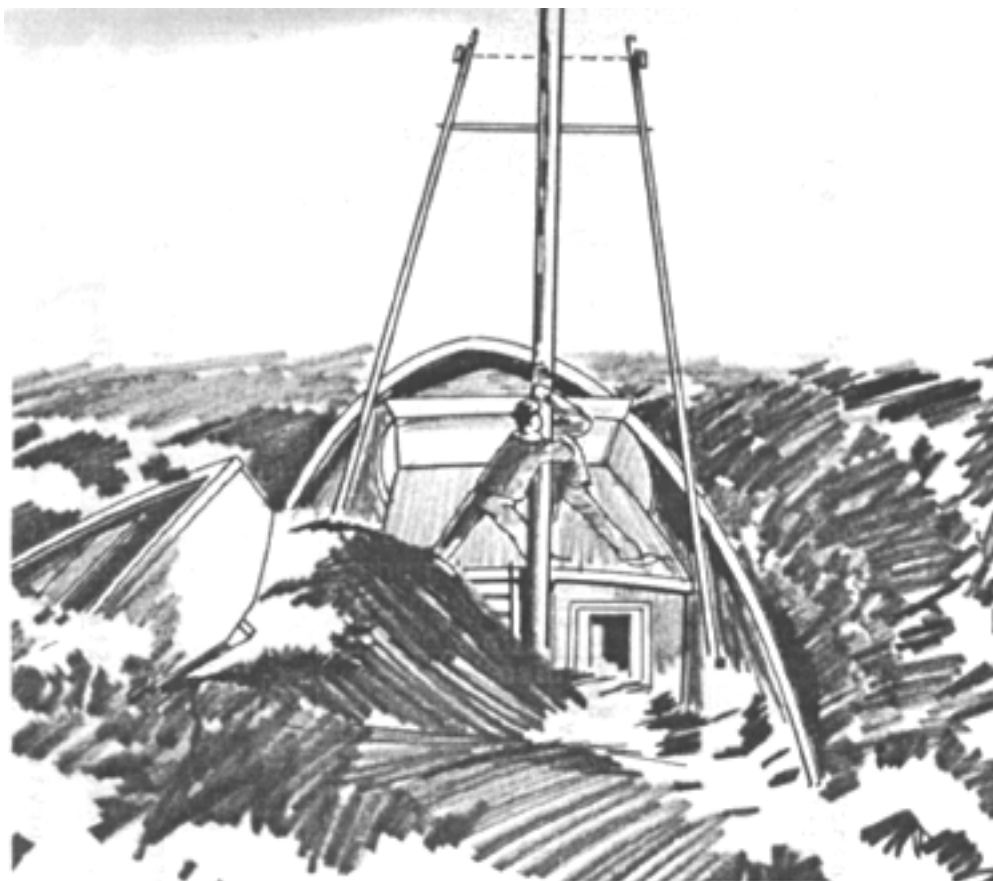
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Meanwhile, Arlo found that the bilge pump driven by the engine had clogged with debris from the bilge and was no longer working. He could not find the standby pump, though he was sure he had told Time to pick it up at the repair shop the day before. He realized then it must not be aboard.

Arlo clambered topside, to find *Starfisher* so low in the water that seas were washing over the deck. A quick - and unprintable - exchange between the brothers made it clear the situation was hopeless; it seemed their best bet now was to abandon *Starfisher*.

With that, they unlashed the lifeboat, tenderly lowering it alongside, and wasted no time climbing in. As they cast off, they realized with a shock the lifeboat was also taking water - worse yet, it began to sink faster than *Starfisher*; within moments the lifeboat capsized and sank.

At this stage, the brothers decided to put on their life-jackets and stick with *Starfisher* as long as she remained afloat. A frantic search through the now flooded cabin revealed no life-jackets, so without them both men climbed the mast as *Starfisher* continued to settle. Clinging to the mast, Arlo and Time were reduced to signaling with their flashlights to try and attract attention.



Arlo and Tim climbed the mast as Starfisher continued to settle.

They chanced to live and tell about their misadventure because a fellow fisherman became curious about those peculiar lights. Captain Jack von Kelly later said it was the weirdly flashing lights that prompted him to take a look before he returned to port. His curiosity almost certainly saved the Barlow brothers.

The moral? Not maintaining the equipment on a boat is like playing Russian roulette . . . eventually the odds will catch up.

The sea may forgive a careless error or two, but those who compound one error into a series of mistakes and return to tell about it are few and fortunate.