**Close Call on the Cape Cod Canal**
*Steve Brookman*

“Turn your boat into the current!” a megaphone blasted repeatedly from an unseen hailer in the approaching patrol boat. Strobing blue lights robbed my night vision and disrupted what had been a pleasant start to my snowbird journey south. I did not need to be told as it was all too obvious that I was in a serious predicament. I had already done a 180, firewalled the single cylinder diesel. Oriana bucked in the turbulence caused by the current. As I feared, the evenly spaced lights illuminating the service roads on either side for the canal were slipping by in the wrong direction, we were losing ground. I was out of options to prevent the disaster looming ahead. I thought I had planned properly, reviewed the charts, checked the weather, the tides, but one thing I did not consider was a possible train wreck.

Planning is essential whenever leaving the safe confines of shore. In this case it would be the next leg of a long planned and highly anticipated single-handed cruise down the East Coast, eventually arriving at Fort Myers Beach on the west coast of Florida.

After a summer of cruising the coast of Maine, which included a Rocky Arrival at Ragged Island (MBH&H #176) it was time to head south. I had spent the last 3 summers in New England living aboard and cruising Oriana, a 26’ traditionally designed full keeled cutter. My mother’s recent purchase of a condo in Fort Myers Beach with access to a deep water slip provided a destination and a good reason to avoid another frigid northern winter.

This leg would take me from Boston Harbor to Connecticut via the Cape Cod Canal. To safely transit the canal you need to go with the current which at full ebb can exceed 5 knots. I was doubtful that Oriana’s Yanmar SB8 could overcome that current if needed.

I motored out of Boston Harbor midday with very light wind, rain in the forecast. A 10 knot southerly breeze eventually appeared, on the nose of course, which made for a tight beat. I found a secure anchorage off the east end of the canal, arriving just after sunset, made a one pot dinner and waited for the tide to turn at 2230. Navigating through the smooth water of the canal was easy as it was well lit with little traffic. It was a beautiful night, the lights along the canal bank zipped by while the Loran C glowed numbers never seen on it before, 10 knots! What a fine start to this voyage, heading south for the season, or longer as I hadn’t thought about the return trip.

I was about half way through the canal when I noticed lights blinking and moving on the railroad bridge ahead. The lights were lowering with the bridge, it was coming down! This was not good! Since I couldn’t possibly get there before it lowered I immediately pushed the tiller hard over and turned...into the current, slammed the throttle full forward. The Yanmar belched black exhaust in protest.

That is when I got the hail from the Army Corps’ patrol boat, telling me to do what I had already done. I was out of options, if I let go the tiller to go forward to drop the anchor, Oriana would spin around and her mast and rigging would be decorating the bridge before the anchor could catch. I needed to let whoever I could that while I was headed into the current I was still heading towards the bridge. How long would the bridge be down? Not that knowing would change the outcome if it didn’t raise before I arrived there.

My fingertips could barely steady the jittering tiller while I stretched to reach the VHF’s microphone mounted just inside the companionway. I made repeated calls on Channel 16 attempting to raise the patrol boat or bridge tender for any information about the bridge closing. I never received a reply but continued to be hailed “turn into the current!” Thanks for that.

I was now less than 75 yards away, making sternway, getting a better and all too good view of that bridge. After what seemed to be one of the longest and slowest trains ever, the last car finally went by. Shortly thereafter, ever so slowly, the bridge began to rise and my heart rate returned to a more normal beat.

With the bridge fully raised, Oriana quickly resumed the 10 knots headed in the right direction. I only got a quick view as we zipped under it in seconds. I tried to image what could have been the end of this adventure if that train had been a bit longer: dismasting, possible total loss. Sobering thoughts.

A mile south of that bridge I safely anchored off the Massachusetts Maritime Academy with a huge sigh of relief. I reviewed the day’s events, actually the night’s, inhaled a few beers, pondered what the next 2000 miles might entail. A little less excitement would be fine.

Looking back, while planning is essential, you can only plan for so much then you need to be prepared to deal with what is thrown at you. Sometimes you need to have a little luck on your side. Over the next few months I continued the voyage with stops in Connecticut, Annapolis and Jacksonville, eventually arriving at Mom’s condo with the warm SW Florida sun beating down. As with any boating adventure there were enough exciting moments to keep it interesting but thankfully with not quite the adrenaline rush of this night. I ended up buying a small house with a deep water slip on that canal, got married, and managed to spend the next 20 years in Florida before migrating back north and eventually retiring in Maine.

My cruising lifestyle was greatly curtailed after moving ashore and dealing with the fixer upper house. I also discovered there are a lot of volunteer opportunities when not sailing from port to port. Oriana and I did manage to cruise the SW coast of Florida to the Keys and Dry Tortugas several times but she never did make the return trip north.

