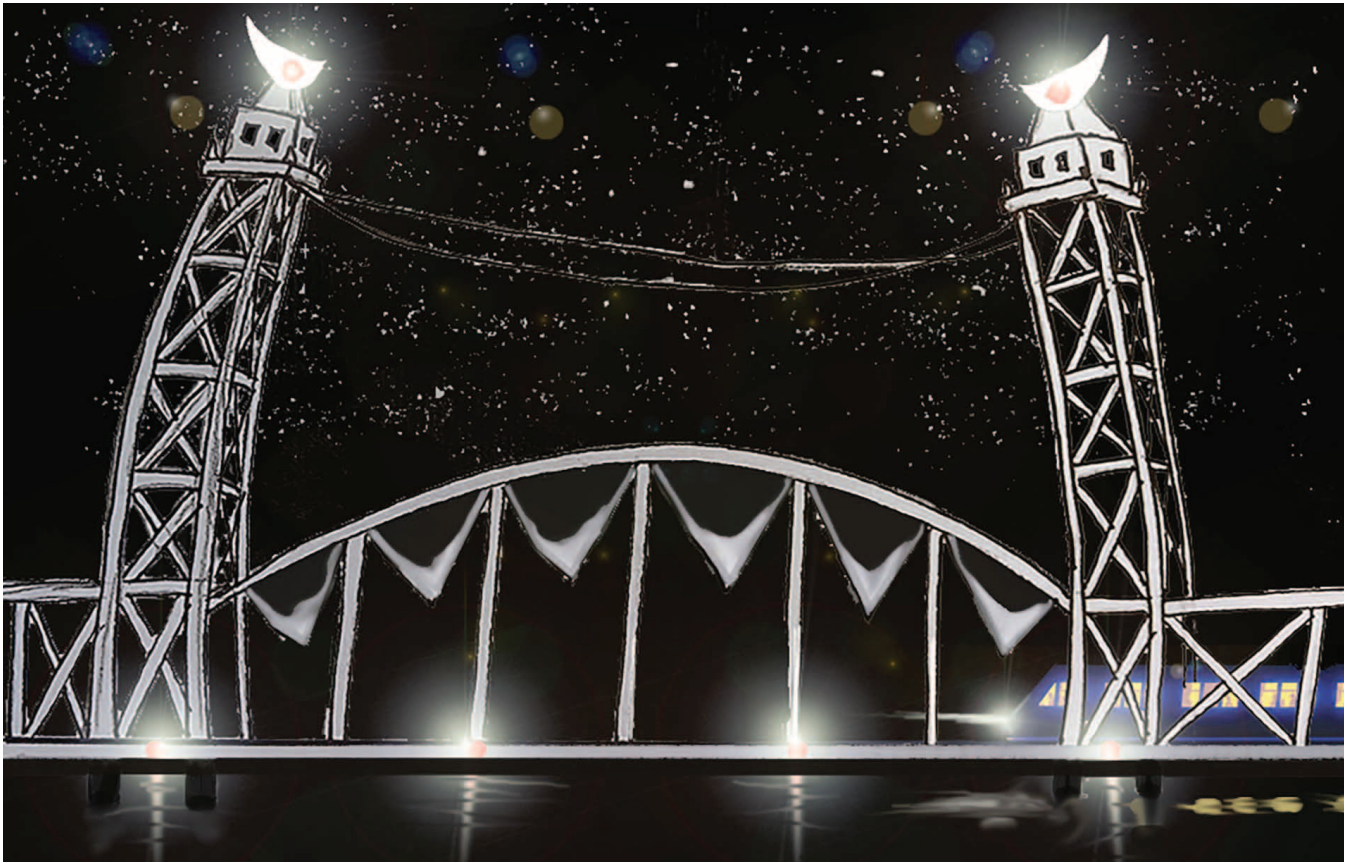




A boater's nightmare: a wicked current and a bridge with an attitude.

CLOSE CALL on the Cape Cod Canal

BY STEVE BROOKMAN

“TURN YOUR BOAT into the current!” a loudspeaker 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 and firewalled the single-cylinder diesel. Still, *Oriana*, my 26-foot Golden Era sailboat, bucked in the turbulence caused by the notorious current flowing through the Cape Cod Canal. As I feared, the evenly spaced lights illuminating the



After 2000 miles *Oriana* arrives safely in her new home on Fort Myers Beach, FL.



It's not always rainbows and sunshine, at night this bridge can turn into a boat munching monster!

service roads on either side of the waterway were slipping by in the wrong direction. I was losing ground and out of options to prevent the disaster looming ahead: a vertical-lift railroad bridge in the down position.

Preparation is essential whenever leaving the safe confines of shore. And I thought I had planned properly, reviewed the charts, checked the weather, and knew the tides, but one thing I had not considered was a possible train wreck.

I was underway on an early leg of a long-planned and highly anticipated single-handed cruise down the East Coast, with plans to eventually arrive at Fort Myers Beach on the west coast of Florida.

After a summer—my third—of cruising the coast of Maine, which included a fouled dinghy line wrapped around the prop while anchoring off Ragged Island (see “Rocky Arrival at Ragged Island,” *MBH&H* Issue 176) it was time to head south. 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 took me from Boston Harbor to Old Saybrook, Connecticut via the Cape Cod Canal. To safely transit the canal in a small sailboat, you need to go with the current, which at times can exceed 5 knots. I was doubtful that *Oriana*’s Yanmar SB8 auxiliary could overcome

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that force if needed. I had motored out of Boston Harbor at midday with very light wind and 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 and there was 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, I thought. I was heading south for the season, or longer as I hadn’t considered a 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—the bridge 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, slamming the throttle to full forward. The Yanmar belched black exhaust in protest.

That’s when I got the hail from the Army Corps’ patrol boat, telling me to do what I had already done. I was stuck. If I let go the tiller to go forward to drop the anchor, *Oriana* would certainly spin

around and the mast and rigging would be decorating the bridge before the anchor could catch.

I needed to let whoever I could know that while I was headed into the current, I was still heading toward the bridge.

How long would the bridge be down, I wondered? Not that knowing would change the outcome if it didn't go back up before I arrived there.

My fingertips could barely steady the jittering tiller as I stretched to reach the VHF's microphone mounted just inside the companionway. I made repeated calls on Channel 16 while 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 and told to, "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, I turned *Oriana's* bow down-current and quickly resumed the 10-knots pace in the right direction. I only got a quick view of the bridge as we zipped under it in seconds, but I had plenty of time to imagine how this adventure might have ended if that train had been a bit longer: dismasting, possible total loss. Sobering thoughts.

A mile south 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, and pondered what the next 2,000 miles might entail. I concluded a little less excitement would be fine.

Looking back, while planning is essential, you can only anticipate so much. Then you need to be prepared to deal with what is thrown at you. And 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, Maryland, and Jacksonville, Florida, before 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 my night transiting the canal.

I ended up buying a small house with a deep water slip on a Florida canal, got married, and managed to spend the next 20 years in the Sunshine State before migrating back north and eventually retiring in Maine. Between repairing a fixer-upper house and other shore-side commitments, *Oriana* and I did manage to cruise the southwest coast of Florida, to the Keys and the Dry Tortugas several times, but the little ~~sloop~~ cutter never did make the return trip north.

Steve Brookman is a retired pilot and lives in Blue Hill, Maine, with his wife, Susan, and two golden retrievers. He builds small boats and sometimes uses them