

The BAY PROJECT

On a blustery January day not long ago, three men were seated at the bar of a hotel in Orleans. They were older men, none younger than 55, fishermen or sea-going types by their dress, of lengthy past acquaintance with other by their speech.

The men were Earl, Doc, and Jimmy. All were native Cape Codders.

The topic of discussion was the impending sale of yet another fishing boat, locally owned by a mutual friend of the trio who had decided to give up the fight to make a living in that most unkind of industries. He was planning on retiring to South Carolina, somewhere inland, he said, where he couldn't see the ocean and it couldn't see him. The trio agreed that the boat owner was very serious about leaving, and the betting in town was that he'd probably be settled in the Palmetto State before the boat was sold.

It should be mentioned that our three heroes had been partners in a fishing venture years back, when a decent living still could be made from the sea, in the days when the supply of fish seemed never-ending and the only government bureaucrats you had to contend with were the cheery lads who boarded your vessel once a year for her Coast Guard certification. The three had done well, and had the property, well-educated kids, and investment portfolios to prove it, but the idleness of retirement had begun to grate on them all. The wives of Earl and Doc, having well performed the duties of motherhood and seen their various offspring happily settled in their own lives, both had their own jobs in town. Jimmy was a widower, about to become a grandfather for the first time courtesy of his oldest daughter. Unfortunately for Jimmy, she lived in Oregon.

But the sea was in their blood, and a boat was up for sale. Partners again, agreed - but what use for the boat?

None of them wanted to go back to the rigors and annoyances of the commercial fishing business, which had changed so much for the worse since their younger days. And since instant riches were not the object of the exercise, some venture that would allow them to use the boat from May through October seemed sensible.

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Unfortunately the boat in question was suitable neither for charter work nor for whale-watching. However it had the peculiarity of being a fairly youngish boat built with a wooden hull.

Wooden hull ...

It was Doc, the Navy veteran, who suddenly suggested that they buy the boat and make her a minesweeper.

Earl and Jimmy thought that Doc had had one too many pints of whatever he was drinking (cranberry and soda, as it happened). But they listened in fascination as Doc thought out loud: a wooden-hull boat, non-magnetic. Paint it Navy grey with a big white number on the bow. Get some war surplus mines somewhere (or make their own). Keep everything non-lethal but noisy. Figure out how to convert the boat's existing fishing gear to minesweeping purposes. Set up a sweep area somewhere in Cape Cod Bay; hire a couple retired minesweeper officers to take loads of excited tourists on daily runs to clear the area. At the end of each voyage give all the "ship's company" a "certificate of discharge" attesting to their "heroism" in searching for and destroying the evil mines. Lots more fun than whale-watching, right?

Pencils and napkins - the entrepreneur's essential tools for success - were deployed. Yep, it could work. Really. Couldn't miss.

And on it went, for another hour. Doc was inspired; there had been no sensible objection raised by the other two that he could not demolish. Yes, they would need a zillion permits (the thought of approaching senior Coast Guard officials with a plan involving live explosives - however innocent - in Cape Cod Bay tickled them no end). No, no whales, dolphins, narwhals, salps, urchins, or other seagoing creatures would be killed, injured, damaged, or insulted by the activity. Yes, before every cruise they would show a safety video. Yes, of course ... no, never under any circumstances ... certainly we will ... yes, fully insured ... blah blah blah.

Doc was a man transformed. But before the others reached Doc's level of enthusiasm for the project, they decided to consult a lawyer.

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It would be beyond our limited powers to describe the utter incredulity that greeted the trio's presentation to Ned Conroy, their good pal, lodge brother, fishing companion, and trusted Of Counsel next morning. In making the appointment, the boys had decided to remain vague on the topic of their desired meeting, referring to it instead as a possible resumption of the old partnership. No sense in scaring away anyone as sensible and well-connected as retired Coast Guard Commander Ned, they figured. As a result the good solicitor heard pretty much what we recounted for the gentle reader a few paragraphs ago, namely Doc's vision of how the "Cape Cod Bay Minesweeping Corporation" would come into existence and actually function.

Ned the lawyer was candid with his old friends. "You're all crazy and this doesn't have a snowball's chance of happening." But he had a tender heart and promised to make a few calls after an unrelated piece of pressing business was settled.

Fate intervened before Ned and the bureaucratic multitude could play their roles in the drama. Exactly two weeks after the meeting in the bar that began this story, the boat in question was a total loss, the innocent victim of an explosion and fire on another boat berthed across the dock from her. Everyone in town heard the blast, and the emergency workers were quickly on scene, but a wooden hull in such close proximity to a raging inferno never stood a chance of being rescued intact.

The owner - in South Carolina - was notified, and took the situation in stride. The boat was a total loss but there had been no deaths or injuries. The adjusters and the Coast Guard came and looked and filed reports. A salvor from Connecticut offered to remove the remains for the scrap value, and a week later there was nothing left where the once-and-future minesweeper had been tied up but badly-scorched pilings and some blackened mooring lines.

Yet another week, and the almost-partners-again were back in the hotel bar. Unlike the first time, there was limited conversation. Minutes passed in heavy silence. An outsider would have thought them strangers to each other.

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“Almost made fools of ourselves, I guess,” Doc finally said with a faint smile, and the others kind of agreed. More minutes. “Still in all ...” Earl began, and stopped, and no one said anything more.

Outside it had begun to snow, lightly at first but more heavily now. Roads were quickly getting treacherous. The bar emptied; the barman, anxious to be on his way home, had to remind the trio what was going on in the real world. They nodded understanding, finished their drinks, and headed silent for the front door and the unforgiving world on the other side.

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