

CAP McGOFFIN'S EXPLOIT

The weather forecasters had gotten it right for once: the Nor'easter of the Decade was pounding the Cape with a certifiable blizzard. The wind-driven snow outside Murphy's Pub was a shimmering curtain at once beautiful and fearful, and discretion being the better part of valor even on Cape Cod, no car or pedestrian had passed in quite a while. The lights of the little pub, bravely maintaining their promise of good cheer, were not likely to entice many fun-seeking patrons on that particular night.

But in the pub's hospitable interior you would find four men and one dog, all locals well known to one another and to their colleagues along the Barnstable waterfront. As the four men talked, the dog dozed blissfully before the gas fire, indicating only by the odd twitch of an ear or paw that he was still among the living. All in all it was the best place for man or beast to be on such a night.

The conversation had been about another local character who had recently passed away, one Barney McGoffin. Known by the nickname "Cap", he had been known and loved on the waterfront as a "character" for years, and had been a personal friend, occasional employee, and occasional employer of each of the three pub patrons for the better part of thirty years. If you lived on the Cape and your trade had anything to do with the sea, you knew and appreciated Cap McGoffin.

Only Jimmy the bartender had not known Cap McGoffin personally, and - being fairly new to the area - had also not heard many of the stories, some true, most apocryphal, involving the good Captain.

Red Connery, Dublin native, charter-boat skipper and diesel engine repairman extraordinaire, took a long draw at a pint of Guinness. "Here's one you probably never heard, Jimmy," he said. "The one about Cap McGoffin and the buoy. It's a great story and typical of the man ... but you'll hear nothing until I get a refill." Jimmy promptly attended to the little group's beverage requirements as another emergency vehicle, yellow lights flashing feverishly, clanked past outside. Red Connery rearranged himself on his barstool and began his tale.

"Do you guys remember the research buoy that the Woods Hole folks put down off Penzance Point fifteen or so years ago? Big ugly thing loaded with instrumentation of all sorts to measure who knows what. There was some heated discussion over Falmouth way about it, but in the end - as usual - the scientists got their druthers and the buoy was installed. The only good thing was that it wasn't intended to be permanent, or so they said.

"The problem was that they had decided for whatever reason to place the blasted thing smack in the middle of Cap McGoffin's favorite secret lobstering area. Of course Cap

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was furious. Unfortunately he couldn't raise as big a stink as he wanted without jeopardizing his secret, so he kind of had to bite his tongue and hope that they got the buoy in and out quickly. But he steamed about it the whole time it was there ... you remember, John?"

"I remember it only too well," replied John Silvia, a large quiet man who lived alone on his boat out in the harbor. "He wasn't shy about squawking, so every waterman on the Cape knew how unhappy that buoy made Cap. I went over to see it one day after listening to Cap complain for the twentieth time about it. It was some piece of machinery, all right, covered with all sorts of solar panels and gizmos and lights ... I didn't want to tell Cap, but it was my feeling that it would have scared any lobster within ten miles back out to deep water in a hurry!"

The company chuckled at the thought. "Right, so here's this monster buoy exactly where Cap doesn't want it," resumed Red Connery. "And one September night he decides to head over to Woods Hole to check his traps, buoy or no buoy. The price of lobsters had gone up two or two-fifty a pound, and Cap wan't going to let any buoy scare him away from the action.

"He kept a little skiff on a friend's property over there somewhere. The beat-up antique of an engine he had on the skiff wouldn't start, so he had to row out to the traps, but it was bright moonlight, and with the buoy out there blinking and ringing, he wasn't worried about getting lost. He knew where all his pots would be - I believe he could locate them blindfolded!

"But when he gets out near the buoy, all of a sudden the wind shifts southerly, and this big fog bank comes rolling up the bay from way out past Cuttyhunk. In less than five minutes it's pea soup, and Cap figures that maybe he'd hang around out there to wait for it to clear. So he ties a line to the buoy - normally a no-no as you guys well know, but Cap figured this buoy wasn't worthy of the same respect as a real Coast Guard buoy - lets out a good twenty feet or so of slack, and makes himself as comfortable as he expects to be for the evening. The day had been warm, and the water temperature was still in the high sixties, so even with the damp of the fog he wasn't concerned. He had rigged a little sleeping area on the skiff for himself, had half a cheeseburger and a bottle of beer for sustenance, and figured if he had to stay out there the night, he could manage.

"Once the fog had settled in, the wind fell off to nothing, so Cap could see that the pea soup wasn't going anywhere any time soon. He checks the line holding him to the buoy, doubles the knots, finishes his snack, and wraps himself up for a snooze. Eventually even the buoy's flashing lights bells didn't bother him any more, and once he was asleep, he was out cold."

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"Cap McGoffin could sleep as sound as any man I ever met," said Eddie Mihalyk with a chuckle. "I sailed bosun with him when he was mate on that godforsaken tub Red River Victory that we took out of the Hudson River reserve fleet back in 1967 ... or was it '68? We were trying to get her ready to load a cargo from Seattle out to Okinawa or Vung Tao or Subic Bay or some other exotic destination, but her main engine broke down about nineteen times between before we got near the West Coast. They had to tow us through most of the Panama Canal. It was embarrassing.

"By some miracle we managed to get up the West Coast as far as Puget Sound. One night we were at anchor off Longview doing yet more engine repairs when an ammo ship lying less than three miles from us blew itself to smithereens. I swear our ship jumped ten feet out of the water. The noise was incredible - you could hear it echoing back and forth in the mountains, and people in Boise, Idaho, claimed they heard it - but Cap swore on the heads of any future grandchildren he might have that he never knew anything about any explosion before Billy Grune the second mate told him about it at the change of watch the next morning. Pete Johnson was the Master, a no-nonsense Swedish guy from Minnesota somewhere, and he refused to believe that Cap hadn't heard the uproar. He started to read him the riot act and was going to make a formal complaint to somebody because he thought Cap - the "wise-ass Cape Cod guy", as he called him - was pulling his leg. Cap finally convinced old Pete that he was telling the truth, and any time afterwards when Pete would tell the story of the explosion, it would always end with 'And by yingo, that Cape Cod mate of mine never even heard it!' "

"Sounds about right," said Red Connery laughing. "And Cap sure didn't change any over the years. As dead to the world when he slept as your friend Swifty the Wonder Hound over there in front of the fireplace. Maybe the odd twitch or snort from time to time, otherwise no sign of life. - that was Cap asleep." At this point Swifty obliged with a twitch and a snort. "Good doggie," said John Silvia. "Always ready to help a friend prove a point!"

"So you have the picture," continued Red Connery. "Cap's snoring away in his skiff tied to the big buoy. No breeze, sea dead calm, big moon overhead. Safe enough, except for a couple of things that Cap couldn't have known: first of all, the buoy - for all the scientists' haste to get it up and running and churning out data - had not been properly secured to the cement mooring block on the bottom. Instead of three or four chains being used, there was only one, and even that one wasn't attached correctly. Second, the currents in that particular area of Buzzards Bay were at their strongest for the year, especially on the flood tide. Cap of course was a good sailor, but it wouldn't have occurred to him to check tides or currents just for a quick run out and back to his traps."

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"It's south to north that time of year over there," said Eddie Mihalyk. "I did some dredging there once. And man, can that current run, especially on a full moon!"

"Exactly," said Red Connery. "Now when Cap had reached the buoy earlier in the evening, it had been close to slack water - that's the quiet period in between tide movements, Jimmy - so he couldn't have anticipated what was about to happen. And he also didn't realize that a huge spar, carried up by the current from who knows where, had somehow inserted itself between his skiff and the buoy."

"There was a lot of that big stuff in the water around that time," said John Silvia. "Nearly took the bottom out of a scalloper off Nobska one night. Somebody said it was a piece of junk from that pier in New Bedford that collapsed a month or so before when the tug bumped it. My cousin Tommy Correia was nearly killed on the tug by a piece of it."

"Could well have been," said Red Connery as he took another draw at the pint of Guinness. "Anyway, with the weight of Cap in the stern, the bow of the skiff was just high enough for the spar to slip gently under it; meanwhile the other end of the spar got caught somewhere in the underwater structure of the buoy, so that in effect the skiff was now being kept the spar's length off the buoy."

"Sounds complicated but easy enough to figure out, even for a landlubber," said Jimmy the bartender. "Buoy here" - a Heineken's coaster - "spar here" - a swizzle stick inserted under the coaster - "Cap's boat here" - a slice of lime laid across the end of the swizzle stick. "Good man, Jimmy!" said Eddie Mihalyk. "We'll make a sailor of you yet!"

"The length of chain between the buoy and the mooring block gave way about four in the morning," continued Red Connery, "and the buoy - with the spar and Cap McGoffin's skiff attached - began moving north on the strong current. Around five in the morning, the wind backed to the north and the fog began to clear. Just then Cap opened his eyes, stretched, yawned ... and nearly died with fright. In the dawn light he could see right away that they weren't where they should have been. Next he sees that the buoy is moving and - he thinks - bearing down on his skiff. He didn't know about the spar that was keeping a constant distance between the skiff and the buoy - per Jimmy's teaching aid here - so his only thought was to unship the oars and row like the hammers of Hell away from certain grinding death from that cursed buoy. He was in such a state of panic that he actually forgot to cut the painter that was keeping the skiff attached to the buoy, and he started to row like he had never rowed before in his life. But since skiff, buoy, and hidden spar were all moving at the same speed in the current, he wasn't making any progress, just keeping in the same relative position. He was one frightened pup, but without all his wits about him, he couldn't take the time to

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wonder what the hell was going on. As far as he was concerned, his survival depended on getting away from that buoy.

"It was now full daylight, and I had gone to my boat to get ready for a day's fishing down near Wasque. My VHF was on and listening out on the hailing channel when I heard this very peculiar call to the Coast Guard. I recognized the voice of Mike Lambro, a pilot buddy of mine, who happened that morning to be bringing a light - that means empty, Jimmy - tanker out of the Canal power plant down to the Point Judith seabuoy. Mike's a great shiphandler and is also blessed with a weird sense of humor, as you'll see.

" 'Coast Guard Group Woods Hole, this is Liberian tanker Alkyon on channel 16 ... Captain Lambro, the pilot, speaking. We have ... uh ... something rather unusual to report. Can we switch to Channel 12?' 'Tanker Alkyon, Group Woods Hole switching to 12,' replied the watchstander, and naturally, like the first-class busybody I am, I switched too to see what was up.

" 'Alkyon, channel 12, back to Group Woods Hole - I think we have someone out here trying to steal a buoy,' said Mike in as normal a voice as possible. I was sure I heard laughter and yelling in some foreign language in the background. There was a five-second delay. 'Say again, Alkyon - didn't copy your last,' said the voice from Woods Hole. It sounded tired, like the watchstander had maybe worked a double shift and didn't need crank calls to add any spice to the end of his watch. Mike Lambro repeated the message and received a tired acknowledgement from Woods Hole. Then after a few seconds a new and more authoritative voice came on the channel. 'Tanker Alkyon, Captain Lambro, this is Chief Dellinger at Group Woods Hole - sorry, sir, but we seem to have some confusion at this end ... are we correct in understanding that someone is trying to ... uh ... steal a buoy?' Mike Lambro assured him that was in fact what the ship was reporting, and then gave the Coast Guard the details of what they could see a mile or so off the tanker's port side: a moving buoy, description so and so, a man in a skiff with a line to the buoy rowing like a lunatic, estimated speeds and directions and so on. But of course Mike Lambro and the folks on the ship couldn't see the hidden spar either.

"As I listened on my boat, I came to the inescapable conclusion that our boy Cap McGoffin was involved, because I knew - like everybody did - where his 'secret' lobster pots were located. I also knew that he hadn't come back ashore from checking the pots on the previous night, because he always parked that beat-up car of his in the same place down the wharf, and that morning it wasn't there.

"And I came to another conclusion at the same time. You see, Mike Lambro, the pilot on the tanker, knew Cap McGoffin too. And like all of us, Mike had listened to Cap's

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frequent dark threats against the intruding buoy. And again it was common knowledge that Cap McGoffin owed Mike Lambro a tidy sum against some gin rummy losses that had piled up during a couple of all-night tuna trips out to the Canyon, which sum Mike had never been able to collect. So when Mike looks out from the tanker bridge wing and sees his deadbeat friend Cap McGoffin in the skiff ..."

"Ouch!" said Jimmy the bartender softly. The others, only too well aware of the reason for the strained friendship between Mike Lambro and Cap McGoffin, only nodded as Red Connery continued.

"Back on scene, the Coast Guard chief seemed a little at a loss for words after Mike Lambro supplied all the facts he had to hand, and again fifteen or twenty seconds passed. 'Let me recap, sir, if I may,' resumes the chief, seemingly straining to remain reasonable. 'You're reporting that the Penzance Point research buoy is being ... er ... forcibly relocated by a single individual in a rowing skiff. They're presently two miles west of the Quissett Harbor buoy heading in a northerly direction at about three knots. Is that correct?' 'Yes, all correct,' replies Mike. 'We're southbound in the channel and already pretty far down, so it's hard to see more details, but I would swear on my license that the guy doing the rowing is Cap McGoffin.' 'Oh my God,' says Chief Dellinger, forgetting all about correct VHF radio protocol, 'you mean Cap McGoffin from Hyannis? Guy in his mid-sixties, crew cut, wears a Sox baseball cap all the time, built himself a boat with a concrete hull, claims he has a cat that can sing in Portuguese? That Cap McGoffin?' 'Affirmative to your list,' says Mike, then sort of under his breath, 'and maybe you should add "and a lousy gin rummy player." ' "

"I heard it loud and clear, but the chief didn't, or at least pretended not to. 'Tanker Alkyon, didn't copy your last,' says the chief. 'Never mind,' says Mike Lambro. 'Anyway I don't know how long a guy of his age can keep up that rowing before he has a heart attack, so I'd suggest you get a boat out to him a.s.a.p.' 'Roger - we have an auxiliary on standby up in West Falmouth - we'll alert them and they'll be out to him in five minutes,' says Chief Dellinger. 'Great,' says Mike Lambro. 'I'd appreciate your keeping us posted - we're standing by 16 and 12.' 'Roger, Alkyon,' replies the chief. 'And thanks for the information.' "

"My God, Red, I wish I had been listening to that conversation," said John Silvia as the narrator took a long drink of his Guinness. "Damn if I wasn't on my boat that same morning, but I was at the mooring replacing an oil filter and never bothered to turn the radio on. You must have been peeing yourself laughing." Eddie Mihalyk and Jimmy the bartender were wiping tears from their eyes.

"It was comical as hell, that's for sure," said Red Connery. "But it sure wasn't over yet.

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"By the time that Mike Lambro had notified the Coast Guard about the sighting, the current over on the west side of the bay had slackened somewhat, so the happy trio of buoy, spar, and skiff were no longer moving as fast. At this point, it occurred to Cap - exhausted as he was with the rowing and still scared poopless at the thought of disappearing in splinters under the monster buoy - that he had forgotten to cut the painter earlier. It didn't seem to matter much, since he still thought the buoy was chasing him, but he figured at this point that he'd try anything to get away from the goddam thing. So he takes his knife up to the bow of the skiff to cut the painter away, and that's when he senses a bump - the bow of the skiff touching something solid underneath his boat. He pokes over the point of the bow with a boathook and feels something big and woody, and finally realizes that his skiff is in fact riding atop a large spar, the other end of which is caught in the buoy somewhere. It took him a full minute to put it all together, but when he did finally figure it out, he was both relieved and angry at the same time.

"Swearing to himself, he used the oar to push the boat off the spar and get it floating free. Then he undid the painter from the buoy. For the first time in five hours, he was an independent unit. If the buoy wanted to continue its escape on the northbound current, Cap and his skiff didn't have to go with it. Of course he had no idea that in the meantime he had been reported to the Coast Guard as a buoy rustler by his fishing buddy Lambro ...

"By this time the Coast Guard auxiliary had come on scene and was busily reporting back to Woods Hole. Yes, the research buoy was adrift, yes, there was a skiff in the area, yes, there had been a line out to the buoy from the skiff, no, the skiff was no longer secured to the buoy, no, they hadn't interviewed the person in the skiff. As a matter of fact ...

"There was a break in the auxiliary's radio transmission, silence for a minute or two. 'What's the status out there?' Woods Hole asks at last. 'Did you talk to the person in the skiff?' 'Actually ... not yet,' replies the auxiliary, sounding embarrassed. 'The guy in the skiff is too busy cursing and swearing at the buoy ... oh my gosh - he just threw his boat hook at it. I mean this guy is pi ... this guy is furious. I don't think we should go near him until he calms down a little.'

"At this point Mike Lambro, who had been listening in from the tanker, struck another blow. 'Coast Guard auxiliary so-and-so, this is the pilot on the tanker Alkyon. Hey, that's only Cap McGoffin in the skiff, terrible temper but it goes away pretty fast ... nothing to worry about. He's really a pussy-cat.' 'Thanks, Alkyon, good to know, but he's still ballistic ... we have two kids and a mother-in-law aboard and we had to send them all below - his language is that bad.'

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"I nearly fell off my boat laughing at what Mike Lambro said next. He told the auxiliary - knowing that the Woods Hole base was copying all radio traffic - that he was a friend of Cap McGoffin's who had been concerned about the Captain's erratic behavior of late, and he recommended that they handle the matter of the attempted theft of the buoy very gently.

" 'You mean your friend actually ... uh ... actually tried to steal the buoy?' asks the auxiliary. 'Can't be sure,' says Mike Lambro, 'but the way he goes on about it, I wouldn't be surprised. He's had some financial reverses lately. I think he said something about a scrap metal dealer over in Providence who would pay him big bucks for it ... but I may be wrong ... He might be carrying on so because his nefarious scheme has been foiled ...' On and on Mike went in a similar slanderous vein. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and I could only thank God that Cap McGoffin didn't have a radio in the skiff to hear all Mike's nonsense.

"They say that vengeance is sweet, and I'm sure that by the end of the day, Cap McGoffin wished to heaven that he had paid that troublemaker Mike Lambro whatever gin rummy losses he owed him. Mike knew, of course, that the Coast Guard folks ashore and on the auxiliary were taking seriously everything he said, but he was starting a three-week vacation on some tiny coral atoll near Hawaii the next day so he wouldn't be around to answer too many questions.

"When the folks on the auxiliary finally did get to talk to Cap McGoffin - from a safe distance - and introduced the subject of Mike Lambro's hints and allegations about Cap's larcenous intentions vis-a-vis the buoy, Cap went off into another hissy fit and made such a stink that the folks on the auxiliary were seriously concerned that Cap had snapped for once and for all. They backed off fifty yards or so while Cap foamed at the mouth and cursed and swore at them as well as at the buoy and - naturally - at Mike Lambro.

"Finally a cutter from Woods Hole arrived on scene with a few officers and, as I found out later, a strait jacket and a pair of handcuffs to 'stabilize' the situation, as they delicately put it in their official incident report.

"But fair play to them - the Coasties handled the situation perfectly, and neither handcuffs nor strait-jacket ever left the locker where they were hanging. Before asking Cap any questions - besides 'Are you OK?' - the cutter crew passed a thermos of coffee and a few sandwiches over to him. At this point in his adventure poor old Cap was hungry, exhausted, and disgusted in equal measure, but the coffee and sandwiches restored his spirits miraculously. They took his skiff alongside the cutter while Cap gave a full statement to the officers (who by the way tactfully omitted his references to 'that low sneaking bastard Mike Lambro' in their final report). Cap was

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very grateful to accept a tow back towards his friend's place where he planned to beach the skiff, maybe grab some shut-eye, and begin his drive home.

"As the patrol boat was heading back towards Woods Hole, Cap spotted the tender steaming out of Woods Hole Passage into the bay on its mission to corral the errant research buoy. That starting him cursing and swearing again, but they gave him more coffee and a couple of doughnuts and he shut up.

"After a few minutes they got the refreshed and civilized Cap back to where he wanted to go. He climbed into his skiff, thanking them for their kindness, and set off shorewards. But he seemed to have something on his mind, and sure enough he hadn't gone twenty feet when he turned around and came rowing frantically back towards the patrol boat. By then he had cupped his hands around his mouth and was shouting something they couldn't quite hear.

"The Coastie coxswain maneuvered the cutter closer and stopped the engine so they could hear what Cap was yelling up to them. 'Hey ,,, ah ... you guys might want to check on that Lambro's guy's license,' he yells. 'Seems to me he's been drinking pretty heavy recently, and then there's that wife-beating incident he managed to hush up and the grounding he forgot to report ... but I'll leave all that up to you.' Then with a satisfied smile and another cheery wave he was headed back to shore.

"So that's the story of Cap McGoffin's buoy rustling. The funny part is that once the story hit the papers, the Woods Hole scientists figured he was going to sue them for 'mental trauma' or some such nonsense, and they offered to settle with him before it went to court. But he told them he didn't want their money, he just wanted their goddam buoy put somewhere else. By this time there was such a big hue and cry going on - I mean he was on 'Sixty Minutes' and everything - that the scientists decided to avoid further embarrassment by agreeing to 're-evaluate' the buoy's location. And sure enough, they moved it to some harmless location south of Naushon a week later. Cap was off Penzance in his skiff to wave bye-bye and to make sure his lobster pots weren't damaged during the removal process. Fortunately for the cause of Science, all Cap's pots were fine.

" 'Before they moved that horrible thing, the Big Brains called me to ask if the new spot was okay,' Cap told me proudly in this very pub a day or so later. 'I told them I'd check and let them know. I waited a week, never returned their calls. They seemed genuinely grateful when I finally did call them back to tell them the proposed location was ... acceptable.' He laughed till he nearly fell off his stool. "I never told them I had a hell of a lot more lobsters than usual, good sized ones, the season that their buoy was there," he said to me. "I don't know if it had to do with the buoy or not - probaby just a coincidence. But I wonder if they'd put it back if I asked them?"

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"By the way, Mike Lambro was elected to the Board of Pilot Commissioners a few weeks after he got back from Hawaii. We were all happy for him, with one glaring exception. 'Not very particular about who's running the show, are they?' Cap would growl to no one in particular. He never paid Mike the money he owed him. 'The sumbitch doesn't need it now,' he used to say, 'big cheese with the pilots, got a nice bounty check from the Coast Guard for turning me in as a buoy thief,' then he'd get all bent out of shape when we'd laugh at him. 'You're all in this together ... nice set of pals,' he'd say. He really believed Mike Lambro had stabbed him in the back, and that bogus story about the bounty was just his way of making sure that we thought Mike was a snake and he - Cap - the innocent victim."

"Here's to Cap McGoffin, may he rest in peace," said Eddie Mihalyk raising his glass. Red Connery and John Silvia joined in the toast with moist eyes, and even Eddie's dog gave a quiet woof of agreement before going back to sleep in front of the fire. "Attaboy, Swifty," said Eddie Mihalyk. "Old Cap was your buddy too ..."

"Must have been quite a guy," said Jimmy the bartender as he glanced at the clock over the bar. The night outside was no better - even the emergency vehicles had given up.

The other three sat quietly remembering their departed friend.

"Time, gentlemen ... " said Jimmy quietly.

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