

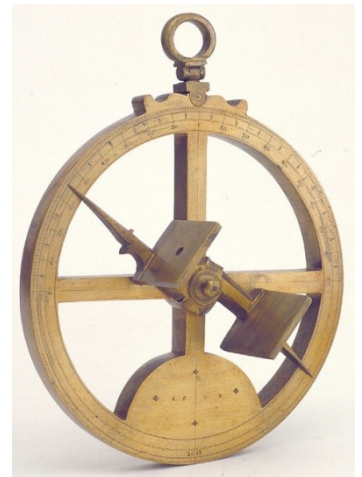
THE WORKING JIB

Special Edition

The Sextant

A “Sea Story” by Charles Goodman

A generation ago offshore navigation involved the use of a sextant plus associated tools; short wave radios, expensive chronometers, navigation tables, plotting sheets, and parallel rulers. Today however sextants are rarely seen on board cruising vessels. They are more commonly ornaments in the dens of sailors who have likely never used one for navigation. And fair enough. G.P.S. has become so accurate, so reliable and so inexpensive.... who really longs for the days of anxiously waiting for clear skies to do an observation and tedious calculations yielding a “fix” perhaps miles from one’s actual location?



Learning to use a sextant may be “intuitive: for some but in 1983, I struggled through a celestial navigation class taught by a tough old coast guard commander. I passed, but barely, using my twenty-dollar plastic Davis sextant. Most of my classmates were all using beautiful bronze sextants; Plaths, Tamayas, and Freiburgers; accurately calibrated tools with front-surfaced mirrors for avoiding optical distortion. Well, I reasoned, I wasn’t setting off for an around the world but only for a run down the Pacific coast of the Baja Peninsula, from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas. My plastic Davis would get me there, even if it didn’t look much like a real sextant.

Preparing my Nor’Sea 27 for this voyage was a pleasure. “Guenevere” was nearly new and Port Townsend, Washington’s Victorian seaport, has more chandleries than gas stations so were an ideal place for a simple refit.

Guenevere was hauled and perched on her trailer in the first week in December and as I made a final inspection of all tie-downs, my friend Larry Montgomery arrived to wish me a bon voyage. He was carrying a varnished mahogany box which he offered to me as a going away present. Inside was a magnificent bronze sextant, nestled in its velvet cushion!

A beautiful gift, but I couldn't accept it. Larry and I had been amicable acquaintances but he was not wealthy and in truth we were not so close as to warrant such a gift. Of course I thanked him for the gesture but insisted I could not accept anything so valuable. My "Davis" would do me, I assured him.



Larry listened politely to my refusal and replied; "This is not as valuable as you think. In fact, it has almost no monetary value. For sure you heard about last December's big storm in "Cabo?" (Indeed all sailors of that time knew about this storm, which "killed" dozens of beautiful cruising yachts, breaking or dragging their moorings and landing them on the beach in Cabo San Lucas where they pounded to pieces). Of course I knew of

it. "Well," he continued, "I did some salvage diving on a yacht which sank in that storm and this sextant was among the things I recovered from a wreck which sank in that storm. The saltwater caused some corrosion to the index and horizon mirrors so it would cost more to refurbish than the sextant is worth."

After a little hesitation I accepted. After all it was still a beautiful instrument and since I preferred to use running sun sites, the slight flaws in the mirrors would not make as much difference as if I was relying on stars. Pleased with my "new" sextant, I thanked Larry, climbed into my truck, and began the long haul south to San Diego where I returned Guenevere to her proper element.

Single-handing on long passages sounds romantic. And indeed there are moments of elation and tranquility, scenes of great beauty, and the enormous presence of the seamless horizon. But sailing alone in a sea lane, especially at night when large and undermanned vessels constitute danger, is not restful. My technique for remaining alert worked well enough, consisting of about equal parts coffee and rum to stay alert without being too wired (don't try this at home), plus a few minutes' meditation every hour or so.

But a consequence of this sleepless "routine" produced an unquiet mind and after the second or third day I began to have hallucinations and a recurring paranoid thought. I imagined that my beautiful bronze sextant had been "stolen" from its resting place on the seabed at Cabo San Lucas, and by some means unclear to my agitated mind, was engineering a return to its rightful place taking me and Guenevere with it. I continued using it for my twice daily observations of the sun and it performed well but as the days passed the disturbing sense grew that this sextant was on its way back to the watery grave in "Cabo" from which it had only temporarily been "rescued."

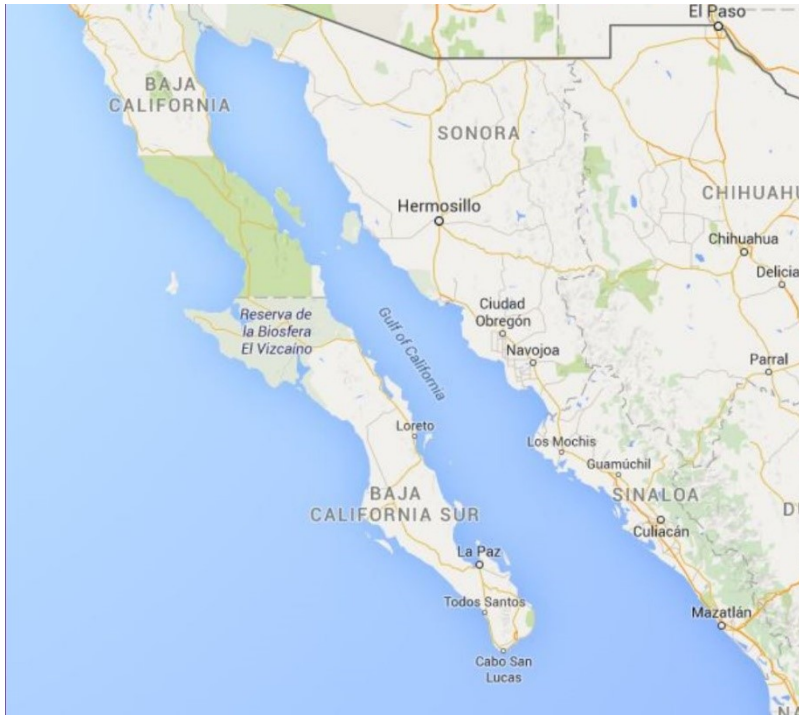


I arrived in Cabo the day before Christmas 1983 and joined the 30 or 40 yachts anchored just off the beach. I could easily understand the reason for the many shipwrecks on that beach just one year earlier. The water was deep to the beach and even with 200 feet of chain and plenty of rode I could only get a good set which left my stern perhaps twenty yards from the beach. If a storm arose suddenly, there was little chance of clawing off this shore.

The other sailors were as uncomfortable as I about this anchorage (although they didn't have a demon sextant aboard determined to sink their boats) and every day we gathered at the 70-footer of a wealthy Californian who had the only weather fax to warn of approaching storms.

A few nights of decent sleep and I recovered from my 8 day, sleepless passage and the disordered thinking it caused. Nevertheless, the sense that my sextant would sink me in Cabo persisted although in milder form. When, after a couple of weeks I set off heading for La Paz, I felt a great sense of relief. The sextant had been thwarted in its desire to take itself, me and Guenevere to the bottom of the sea.

This second leg of the voyage was also made lighter by the addition of a crew member. A woman from Texas named Ann had approached me on the beach a few days before and asked if she could ship with me to La Paz. Ann had her own boat near Galveston and was an experienced and competent sailor. It was an offer not to be refused. I had done enough



single-handing and was glad of the company. Now I could forget about my “premonition of doom” and the morbid thoughts about my “maleficent sextant.” Its destiny and mine were not to be the seabed of Cabo San Lucas.

Between Cabo and La Paz, 25 years ago, there was not much to lure a sailor. Los Frailles and Muertos, popular today, were virtually without habitation and a suitable anchorage only in good weather. We sailed on by, my Texas mate and I, taking 4 hour tricks and looking forward to La Paz, a real city with a harbor and restaurants.

On the last night of this passage I laid a course between Isla Cerralvo and the southeastern horn of the Baja Peninsula. It was a roomy strait perhaps five miles across and I favored the peninsula side as there was a shallow reef lying a mile or so from Isla Cerralvo. Winds were steady from the northwest so I didn't anticipate the need for a change of course during my four hours off watch. Giving the helm to Ann I went below and fell deeply asleep.



Suddenly I was urgently awake and alert with fear. A 6th sense told me that something was very wrong. I flew through the companion way expecting some disaster. Perhaps Ann had fallen overboard..... but all was well. Guenevere was sailing nicely, Ann competent as ever at the helm. Still, the feeling of danger was very strong. A glance at the compass told me why. Ann had changed course some 20 or so degrees to the east from the course I had given her. I glanced in the direction of Cerralvo Island and another jolt of fear shot through me. The island was close. Much too close. I felt sure we must be right on top of the shallow reef lying a mile or so from the beach.

Roughly taking the tiller from Ann I warned “ready about, helm’s alee” even as I urged Guenevere onto a starboard tack and away from Cerralvo’s hungry reef.

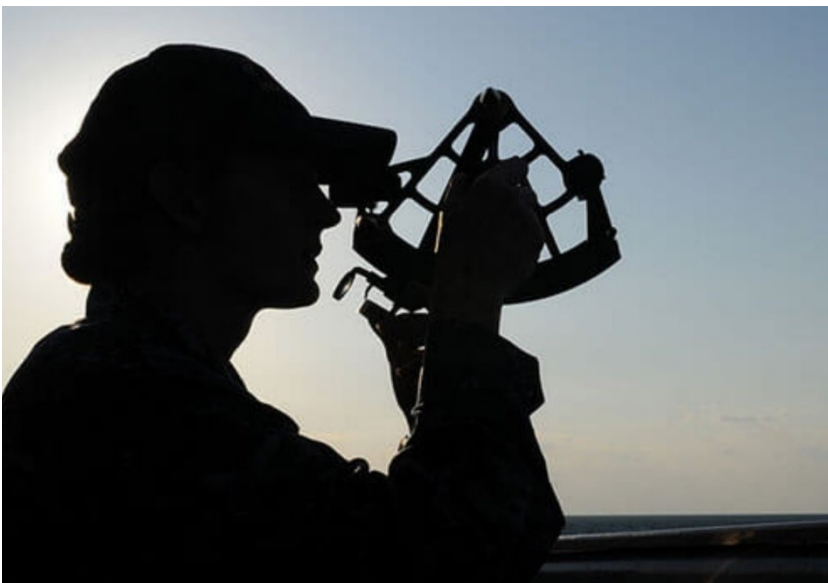
I realized that I should have explained to Ann the reason for the course I had given her. She hadn’t seen the chart and so was unaware of the reef which nearly brought us to doom, and when the wind backed a bit, she saw no harm in falling off to keep us moving well. The error was mine. I apologized for not giving more complete instructions. A lesson learned, almost too late.

Things remained somewhat tense for a time but with the dawn and our last run into La Paz, calm returned. After a couple of days enjoying the restaurants and other attractions of city life, Ann left to return to Texas.

On the afternoon before I left La Paz, at around sunset, I saw a strange and disturbing sight. A boat, dismantled and sunken to the cabin top, was being towed into the port. I enquired about it and learned that this boat had struck the reef and sunk off Cerralvo Island on the same night that Guenevere had nearly suffered the same fate. When I heard this news the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. What sense had waked me in time to save my boat? So many mysteries of life on the sea....

The rest of my voyage was uneventful. Cruising slowly up the Sea of Cortez, in no hurry to return north to Port Townsend before the winter passed, I sailed once more alone stopping at the usual places.... Loreto, Mulege, and Concepcion Bay.

Well there was one incident, so typical of my magical lady, Guenevere when I crossed the Sea of Cortez at night in a lump swell, a distance of perhaps 70 miles. Leaving Mulege one afternoon, I laid a course for Guaymas on the mainland and set the autopilot so that I could get some rest. At sunrise the next morning I could see nothing on the land ahead to suggest a town or harbor of any description. I could not determine my position until later in the day when I could use my sextant again for the first time since arriving in Cabo weeks before.



I continued sailing towards the shore, intending to anchor just off until I could make my sun sights, when directly ahead, there opened up a narrow passage into the tiny harbor at Guaymas. In a passage of 15 or more hours, without touching the autopilot, Guenevere had threaded the needle into an impossibly small harbor. The sextant was no longer needed. It

had done its job, and the sea part of my trip was over. I hauled Guenevere the next day, placed her on the trailer and set off for home.

Trailing a sea-going boat up Route 5 at 55 mph is a lot easier than sailing north up the Pacific Coast into headwinds and foul currents. From Mexico to Port Townsend took a mere five days and easy ones at that. No more marine adventures; just hot motel showers every night and rest in a stable bed.

I arrived back in Port Townsend in March exactly three months after I left. Signs of Spring were appearing. The winter was mostly behind.

Guenevere received new bottom paint and returned to her slip a more seasoned and appreciated “queen.” Larry Montgomery showed up a few days later to welcome me back and asked how the “navigation” had gone. I told him that the sextant had performed perfectly, but confessed the story of my paranoia. “I know it sounds crazy,” I told him, “but I was sure that sextant was determined to return to the sea bed at Cabo San Lucas where you took it from its resting place.”

“You are mistaken,” Larry told me. “It’s true that the sextant was on a boat that sank during that storm which destroyed so many boats last winter in Cabo. But the boat I salvaged didn’t sink at Cabo. It sank on a reef a mile or so off Isla Cerralvo.”

