

rescue in baja

An extraordinary event took place in late November that had nothing to do with sailing and everything to do with seamanship, heroism and the human spirit. It involved the rescue of kayakers in hellacious



You won't see many photos of motor yachts in 'Latitude'. But you won't see many luxury yachts doing what 'Ozark Lady' did, either. This is her in La Paz.

conditions in the Sea of Cortez by the Sausalito-based Fedship motor yacht *Ozark Lady*.

The general perception of the Sea is one of gentle breeze and calm water. But during the fall and winter, the area is subject to ferocious 'northers' that, to the untrained eye, seemingly appear out of nowhere. This was the case on Sunday, November 27, when *Ozark Lady* was anchored under the north tip of Isla Carmen.

They heard the first distress call on the VHF radio shortly before 9 a.m. It was from a woman who identified herself as Victoria. She reported that she and two other women had rented kayaks in Loreto and were on their way to tiny Isla Coronado (about 4 miles to the northeast), when the norther blew in. Now they were trying to return to Loreto, but were unable to control their boats in the building wind. She did report that all three were wearing lifejackets belonging to the kayak rental company, but she was the only one who had been given a radio. A few minutes later, she came back up, her voice obviously more distressed, and said she had been separated from her companions.

The real heroes of this story are the owners of *Ozark Lady*, Jim and Joyce Teel, said skipper Dan Davies. "When that second call came in, Jim turned to me and said, 'Let's go get them.'"

Fedships are known for being among the strongest, best-built motor yachts in the world. And the 120-ft *Ozark Lady* is a prime example of that, with all the good gear like bow thrusters and stabilizers. None of it would help much that day as she upped anchor and pointed her nose around the top of the island into 35 knots of wind and steep, square 10-12 foot waves. Two other boats also left the security of their anchorages to help in the search, the 70-ft sportfisher *Sea Venture* and a 40-ft workboat called *Baja California*.

It took until about 1 p.m. to reach the search area. During that time, many people were talking to Victoria, trying to get her to mention some landmark that could be used to give the searchers even a rough position. When she finally said, "I'm at the northern end of Carmen on the west side," Davies went to the chart, drew a line through the middle of Coronado in the direction of the wind — longitude 111°12' W — and turned *Ozark Lady* south to run down it. Jim, along with his best friend Vern (who with his wife, Gloria, was a guest of the Teels) and Dan's brother Ron (the boat's engineer) manned the bridge with binoculars, each assigned a different section to scan. "It's impossible to describe how difficult it was to see anything in the water in those conditions," said Ron.

After about an hour, Jim spotted what turned out to be Victoria's companions, Christine Richardson and Pamela Fennell, who were still aboard their kayakers. They had tied the boats together to make them more stable. Lifelong friends, the three mid-30s women had fell down from Victoria, Canada, for a few-day break from their careers. All

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were fit and athletic — Victoria was a triathlete who had won several awards.)

Dan maneuvered the boat 50 yards to weather of them, turned the *Lady* sideways to give them a lee, and shut the engines down. (The recovery was going to be difficult enough without the additional danger of turning propellers.) As the big yacht drifted down on them, Christine and Pamela did their best to maneuver toward her stern, where Ron, Vern, and the boat's cook, Alejandro, were waiting. A line was thrown and grabbed, and the two women were pulled the rest of the way. As they got near, a big wave slipped under the *Ozark Lady* and as she came down, it sucked the kayakers under the swim step. Ron grabbed Christine and yanked her aboard, while Vern and Alejandro did the same with Pamela. They didn't even try to recover the kayakers.

The women were put in a hot shower and given dry clothes. Dan Davies meanwhile headed the *Lady* back into the wind to look for Victoria. Because she said she was in the water next to her kayak (rather than in it as the other two had been) he reasoned she would not have drifted as fast as Chris and Pam, and therefore must be upwind of them.

The search continued through the day and into the early evening, with all three boats running big searchlights. Everyone was taking turns talking to Torie, trying to keep her spirits up. They were also trying everything they could think of to help find her — even firing off flares in the hope she would see them. Nothing worked, and with the growing darkness, ineffectiveness of the searchlights and relentless conditions — *Ozark Lady* was taking spray on her flying bridge — she and *Sea Venture* decided to anchor for the night in an exposed cove on Isla Carmen, with the intention of resuming the search the following morning. (*Baja California*, low on fuel, had returned to Loreto.)

They had picked up Chris and Pam within a quarter mile of shore, so the hope was that Victoria might get washed onto the beach somewhere during the night. The loose plan for morning was that *Sea Venture* would search as close as was safe inshore, while *Ozark Lady*, with her higher vantage point, would take up position farther out.

The next morning, *Ozark Lady* upped anchor and soon spotted Pam and Chris' kayakers on the beach. Then they spotted their own — which the high winds had ripped off their foredeck the day before. Then, near the southern end of Isla Carmen, they found Torie's kayak. It was upside down at the base of a rocky cliff. *Sea Venture* sent a swimmer over to see if she was still in the boat, but she wasn't. A short while later, while everyone was trying to decide what to do next, Dan looked over the wing of the bridge and there she was, floating on her side, her head underwater.

Everyone sprang into action. It was still blowing hard and the water was very rough. "I don't know how, but Dan put the stern of the boat close enough that I was able to get her with a boosthook and grab hold of her lifejacket," says Ron. "But as the boat went up on the next wave it sucked her under the swim step. I decided the sea wasn't going to get her back, so I let go of the rail and got her with both hands. Vern — who is a pretty amazing guy at 82 — hooked one of his arms under mine and the other around the rail and held on until the wave went past. Then we got her onto the boat."

They went through the motions of checking for a pulse, but it was obvious Victoria had died sometime the night before, probably not long after her last radio transmission at 8:30.

There was a tremendous outpouring of emotion about *Ozark Lady* then, which neither Davies brother wanted to talk much about. Even Victoria's heroic radio transmissions that saved the lives of her two friends seem to momentarily pale in the presence of her loss. "I just really wish we could have found her sooner," Dan said.

Another emotional moment occurred back in Puerto Escondido the following day as *Ozark Lady's* crew, owners and guests were gathered in the lounge waiting for the taxi that would take them their separate ways. A small boat came alongside and delivered a letter that Joyce read to the group. It was a note of appreciation from the people of Loreto for the fine thing they had done. We hope this short article serves as ours.