

The Great Escape

GENTLE PASSAGE BECOMES TERRIFYING FLIGHT FROM RED CHINESE PIRATES

BY DR. RICHARD CHESHER

I awoke. For a second or two I was surprised. Freddy called me and fear shocked me to alertness as I realized what she had said. I tore away the sheet and scrambled up the companionway into the cockpit. We were doing three knots and our position was 21°52'N, 116°33'E-64 miles south-southeast of Chia-Tzo Chino, China.

The sea was almost calm and a deep open-ocean color; the sky, amazingly blue with white fluffy clouds. Freddy wore a pink sun hat and a miniscule bikini. The sails soared aloft; barely filled with the light wind. We were on a broad reach. Incongruously, despite my fear, I marveled, "What a beautiful day!" A thought immediately lost as I saw their boat. Pirates!

They were close and bearing down on us fast. The huge black ship was an ugly, terrifying sight. Every sordid detail stood out in the crystal-clear morning air. She was about 70 feet long, black with both paint and years of accumulated filth. She was cluttered with lines, fishing gear and about 30 young, strong, mean-looking Chinese. A stocky man in a black shirt was on the bow with a coiled line and a grappling hook. They looked as though they were going to ram us. I fought down a rising flood of panic and helplessness, desperately trying to figure a way out. No time to run; no way to fight.

"Freddy, hold your course! Smile and wave!" I demanded.

"Smile and wave?" She looked at me but I was already dancing up and down, waving and smiling and yelling, "Hi! Hi there, old buddy!" at the horrifying spectacle of black marauding tonnage bearing down on us. Freddy, amazed, began waving her pink sun hat and showing off her smiling curves.

The black monster shuddered and slowed, turning off to a parallel course about 100 feet away. They had us. We smiled and waved and I shouted, "Hi! We'll be right alongside! Yes, sir! Fancy meeting you guys out here! Just a minute, well be right alongside! I'll get a tow rope for you so you can capture us!" The last in response to an angry shouting and gesturing for us to come alongside. I told Freddy to keep shouting friendly, happy things even though I suspected none of them could understand English well enough to know what we were saying.

I dove below. My hands shook as I flipped on the engine switches. Sweat ran irritatingly down my sides and I felt faint. I grabbed a dock line and streaked back on deck. They were almost on top of us. All of them shouting angrily while Freddy and I, pale with fear, waved and smiled and made cooperative noises. I showed them the heavy tow rope and hit the ignition key at the same time. The diesel sprang to life. A few quick words to Freddy and I ran forward with the rope.

I hand-signaled and shouted for them to slow down as I unlimbered the rope to throw it. The character with the black shirt and the grapnel looked angry. He wanted to throw the grapnel but obviously I was getting ready to heave him a line. The others looked both mad and a little confused, but the helmsman cut power and drifted closer. "Blackshirt" put down the grapnel to catch my line. As I swung the rope, I yelled, "Okay, Freddy!"

She stopped smiling and waving, threw the wheel hard to port, shot the diesel into forward and rammed the throttle wide open. I threw the rope (short, of course) and a dozen Chinese hands swiped at thin air. I gave a wide grin, shook my head and pointed at Freddy. I made a big circle with

my hand, hoping, really praying, they would think we were circling around for another try. I kept shouting friendly things and grinning as I scampered back to the cockpit and grabbed the wheel.

"Sheet her in!" I said, and Freddy did. We were making tracks, about eight knots. The black fishing junk was still dead in the water with all hands standing on the port side watching us. We stopped smiling and I started swearing and shaking visibly. The pirates stayed put for an unbelievably long time. Whether they were waiting for us to circle back, laughing at the guy in the black shirt because -he had fallen for my trick, or simply confused I'll never know. They gave us the edge and we took every inch of it. Then, with a great cloud of black smoke, they were after us. Another boat came into view on the port side and still another on the starboard side; all on a collision course. I recalled the radio babble in the background when we were alongside the junk and hoped there were no members of the fleet ahead of us.

We prayed and whistled for more wind and I pushed the throttle lever harder against the full bore stop. It felt as if we were crawling across the ocean but the junks were not closing noticeably. I headed due south. Was I in Red Chinese waters? There had been stories about Red Chinese fishing boats, but I had been assured by people in Hong Kong that such things were of yester-year, not of today. I recalled my Chinese friend, Chan, in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. As we left, he looked very worried and said, quietly, "Please, remember to stay away from fishing boats."

Out came the sextant and I took a reading. At noon we were still in the lead and a fix allowed me to double-check our morning position. More than 60 miles offshore! I looked back at the black shapes following us. We were outrunning them, but we needed the wind to keep up.

At 14:30 they broke off the chase. I had only two hours sleep since my last watch, and the aftermath of fear left me feeling drained and limp. I flopped onto the bunk. Freddy maintained our full-speed, due-south heading. As I lay there I contemplated their motives. They flew no flag but were clearly Chinese. I was told the Red Chinese might capture us if we got too close to the mainland. They would tow us in and question us, then let us go unharmed-or so one story went. I tried to visualize the huge black junk towing us 64 miles to port. Garbage! No fisherman would terminate his fishing to pull a boat 64 miles just to be questioned.

Then I had a chilling thought. Naturally we hear about the people who are released, but what about those people who are not released? What might happen to them? If we had been caught 64 miles at sea and vanished forever, who would know? The only people we knew in Taiwan were not expecting us to notify them of our safe arrival in Hong Kong. If we did not show up in Hong Kong, the people expecting us there might assume we decided to go another route. Folks back home might begin to wonder what happened to us after awhile, but by the time months passed, what could they discover? We would simply be lost at sea.

At 1700 we were again vectored in on Hong Kong when a boat appeared off the port beam, then one off the starboard beam, and off the port bow, and dead ahead. I took bearings on them and waited. After 30 minutes the bearings were unchanged. Collision courses.

"Oh, you're just paranoid," said Fred. "True," I said and did a 180° turn and headed back out to sea. We were more than 100 miles offshore. After another 30 minutes I rechecked the bearings - no change. Binoculars showed the flanking boats had followed my reversal and were trying to head us off. I began to sweat and looked at the sun slowly creeping toward the horizon. There was no wind. We were under full power. The enemy was closing in on us. This fishing fleet was faster than the last. Then it was dark. As night closed in I watched the flanking boats fade into the darkness. No lights came on, of course, from any of us.

"If they don't have radar, we've got it made. Still think I'm paranoid?" I asked Freddy.

"Yes, but I am, too," she replied.

As soon as it was dark I shut down the engine and drifted to a stop. There was no wind; the sails were down. We ate supper. I heard a boat in the distance. Then a wind came up; about five or six knots. We took the dishes below and hoisted sail. No moon, no lights. We slipped silently back toward Hong Kong.

"Maybe we should give up and head for Manila," I suggested.

"We don't have enough food or water," Freddy pointed out. We peered into the darkness.

"What if we run into one of them?" Freddy whispered as though they were just ahead with their lights out. Which, of course, they might be.

"I think we are already past them," I whispered back. Behind us, some three miles away, a searing spotlight flared to life. It began sweeping back and forth, back and forth.

"Let's crank up the iron genoa and get out of here," I said. And we did.

The general manager of the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club peered at me in silence for a moment, his long British countenance drawn up into a quizzical expression. "Is there anything unusual about your boat?"

"Nothing that would attract fishing boats in droves," I answered. "It is a brand-new Peterson-44 cutter just launched in Kaohsiung, Taiwan." We were in Hong Kong to outfit her and make the numerous repairs normally required by Taiwan-built boats.

"Were you flying a flag?" he asked, still looking puzzled that we should have encountered such difficulties. Some weeks previously he had informed me that such things were no longer a problem today.

"The U.S. flag," I replied.

"Well!" he smiled. "Perhaps that explains it."

I thought about that. A U.S. flag on a new boat coming from Taiwan in Red Chinese waters. Perhaps that wasn't too bright, considering the U.S. position on Taiwan.

But like many satisfying theories concerning the Chinese, the "flag hypothesis" turned out to be wrong. I discovered that any yacht coming from Taiwan to Hong Kong will be chased, regardless of the flag she's flying or even if she isn't flying a flag at all. There is a steady parade of Taiwan-built boats heading to Hong Kong. Four arrived during the month we were there. All of them were exposed to the terror of pursuit and, in two cases, capture.

For the benefit of those readers intent on buying a boat in Taiwan, you are herewith informed that you will be chased by almost every junk you see between Taiwan and Hong Kong. If you stay well offshore (better than 50 miles) and run when you see a boat on the horizon, you may not get caught.

Every Red Chinese fishing boat (and there are an incredible number of them) is an official Red Chinese Coast Guard vessel. They fly no flag and wear no uniform, but they pursue every yacht they see. Nice-weather days are the worst. There are so many boats out there, it is impossible to avoid seeing at least one fleet per day. Stormy-weather days are better, but not entirely secure. First, because it is hard to tell where you are going in stormy weather; your navigation has to be 'right on the money' or you will deliver yourself to Red China. Second, because some boats will be out there to look you over even in gale-force winds. They can't very well board a small vessel in 30-foot seas, however. You have to be stupid enough to follow them when they beckon. People do.

Consider the story, "Terror Trip on a Yacht," that appeared in the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong (June 8, 1976). The week after our misadventure, a 38-foot Ta Chao cutter with an Australian family of three adults and two children was intercepted by a Chinese junk. A woman on board reported:

"We were motoring along when an absolutely decrepit, jet-black junk with about 40 people on board seemed to come from nowhere. It came within three feet of us and we were asked, in a mixture of sign language and broken English, where we were going. When we said Hong Kong, they said they would help direct us in. After a while we began to wonder about the direction we were heading. Then

land appeared ahead and the character on the junk shouted, 'Hong Kong, Hong Kong' and we sailed through a small passage." Right into a trap. Seven junks raised their Red Chinese flags.

"I was so scared," she related, "that I could hardly think. I went numb. I was so frightened for the children. The junks started blowing their whistles. and people began screaming at us."

As they desperately maneuvered to escape, two junks tried to ram them, one nudging the rudder. A grappling iron was thrown, but it missed. Six junks pursued them out of the harbor as they broke free. They managed to evade the junks and found their way to Hong Kong waters and safety.

Another Australian knew enough not to follow the junk that came alongside him in route to Hong Kong. His new, 41-foot Ta Chao ketch was chased for a day and a night before one junk materialized ahead of him and managed to get alongside. Since he had been running for some time, he was tired and irritated but prepared.

"Blam!' I fired the flare gun smack at the wheelhouse! It made a beautiful sight, the red flare skittering all over the deck, Chinese running in every direction. There was an incredible amount of smoke." He smiled. It was the ' only time he smiled during the story.

The junk veered off and paced them, out of range. Shortly, the three-man crew spotted another boat steaming toward them. They quickly stashed their flare gun along with their hopes when a Red Chinese Navy gunboat hove to alongside with a 50-cal. deck gun aimed directly at them. They were boarded and immediately told to surrender their weapons. Then they were hauled into port, held for three days of late-night interrogations, and sent on their way with a very clear idea of their status should they enter Red Chinese waters again.

A very nice, older couple came into the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club about three weeks after we did. Another Ta Chao ketch.

"See any Red Chinese?" I asked.

"See them? They captured us and held us for a week!" he answered in prolog to his story, "We were three days out of Taiwan. Saw some rough seas. Our main boom had snapped in half, the jib halyard broke and we lost our engine. A soft plug blew and ruined everything-the alternator, the starter; no hope of getting it going again."

I looked at the two oldsters and began to wonder what it was like for them in the South China Sea in rough weather under mizzen alone. Not too good, I decided, as he continued.

"Those dirty Commies got me when I couldn't get away! They came alongside and threw us a line and towed us in. There was nothing we could do. It was a huge fishing junk, a sailing junk. It towed us along at seven knots. Those things can really move."

"They held us for five days. Our biggest problem was the droves of people who came to see the boat. At one point we must have had a hundred of them aboard, fingering everything. Often, the crowd would just stand and watch us like we were animals in a zoo. But they didn't take anything or hurt us. In fact, they were highly offended when we told them we were worried they might take our belongings. They asked us some questions and fixed our engine.

"We had to get out of there. I was afraid I. would be the cause of trouble. One day a guard shot a pistol at the crowd to make them back away from the boat. I knew someone would get hurt eventually. I asked to be let go. Some officials came to the boat and, while I was explaining my fears to them, the guard unslung his submachine gun and pointed it right at the people. The officials left in a hurry and an hour later they returned and told me I could go whenever I wanted."

I had to think for. a while about this man's capture. In many ways it sounded more like his rescue. All of the "capture" stories sounded innocent enough. No one was hurt or seriously inconvenienced by his adventures in Red China. Why the Chinese go to all the bother of chasing and hauling in boats, mushing through miles of red tape for days (involving a cast of thousands)

and then releasing the boats again is a mystery of Chinese politics. But my incident still bothered me. Would they really have towed me 60 miles to port? If not, then what did my big black junk want?

One evening, in the comfortable yacht club bar, a club member and longtime Hong Kong sailing enthusiast told me, "The boat might have been from Taiwan or Red China, or even from Hong Kong. All three are out there. All three might try to stop you. Why? Well, perhaps for some booze or cigarettes, or whatever they thought they might get you to hand over."

"A whole fleet is willing to spend half the day chasing one yacht for some cigarettes? Come on," I replied skeptically.

"Well, they could have been after anything, couldn't they?" he observed. I considered the implications for a moment.

"What do you think would have happened if I whipped out a rifle and started blasting away at them?" I asked.

"Why, I imagine they would have whipped out their weapons and started shooting back at you. I don't know how well armed they are but I'm sure they carry something aboard. And if you should have been so unlucky as to kill someone. . . . The others on the boat are likely to be his family. In fact, the whole fleet would probably be his relatives. I don't think you would escape if you happened to kill one of them. And if they were really Red Chinese, a gunboat would most certainly capture you if the junks couldn't," he replied, quickly putting an end to my daydreams of self-defense.

When I cleared Customs to leave Hong Kong for Manila, the port authorities gave me a form to send back to them when I safely reached my destination. If the form didn't come back within a reasonable time, they assured me they would ask all vessels and aircraft in the vicinity to keep an eye out for me. A nice system.

The marine officer was very friendly. I told him about my encounters with the Red Chinese. and asked him if the problems were the same on the way out of Hong Kong. His answer was rather guarded. He said they really did not have reports of such problems, even on the way in. I asked if they had any yachts that simply vanished.

"Well, yes, but probably they simply forgot to mail back the reply form," he answered.

"Probably," I said.

As I left, he added, "Strictly off the record, you understand, I would make the first 50 miles as fast as I possibly could."

That was, of course, exactly what I did.