A Cold October Day

It was a cold day in October, the leaves where just beginning to fall from the trees and the smell of the cold air surrounded everything. It was a time for apple cider and pumpkin carvings, but not for the Oswego State crew team.

Instead of participating in holiday festivals, in celebration of Halloween, we prepared for our last and final regatta of the season. We had to do well. We had to represent Oswego State. As the captain of the team, I yelled the orders to begin a day which will stick in my mind forever: “Hands on Boys.” The guys of the crew team began to push the boat into the cold icy waters of Lake Ontario. “Smush-Smash”, you could hear their cold feet enter the water. Knowing very well that today was the last day of practice before the big regatta, it was necessary to do well, despite the unbearable coldness of the almost frozen water.

Once we got out to the water, I stabilized the boat and began to give everyone their workouts for the day. Tim and Emilio were going to do strong distance pieces, while Mike and Connor would work on form and speed. “These two sets working together in perfect harmony should keep the boat balanced and now allow for any weakness,” I thought.

As I began to give Emilio and Tim their workouts, I took a glance out into the distance and saw the formation of cumulonimbus clouds right above the horizon. This is not a good sight, as every good marine knows. Not wanting to return back because of how close the Regatta was, I continued with the orders of the day. This was inevitably a bad idea.

We where about four hundred meters from the shore when the waves began to pick up, threatening the low hulled boat. Conner who is a veteran of rowing and has been doing it for many years said: “The waves are getting to high Bryan, we need to head back to shore”. Focused on the short proximity of time before our regatta, I yelled “NO!,” a word that I will regret saying for many years to come.

Struggling to keep the boat in the right direction and stable, the waves began to violently hit the side of the boat. They kept rowing trying to fight to control the boat and I began to get cold and wet from much backsplash while the boys themselves where getting more and more fatigued. As the water was near hypothermic state, I knew I had to make the decision. “Boys we are going to return to the shore and hope for the best tomorrow,” I said.

As I turned the steering cord to move in the direction of the shore, we became parallel with the oncoming waves. Knowing this was not safe, I yelled out many commands to speed up the process. Suddenly, I began to see the boat starting to flip. A huge squall had taken the boat prisoner and through us into the glacial feeling water. At this point, I started to panic because I had lost everything of importance to our survival: my rescue bag, my flashlight, my whistle, everything! We were now in water with nothing but our cold dead like bodies, as well as a far distance from the coast.
We were in the water for no more than two minutes, but it seemed like an eternity, when we got on the bottom of the capsized boat and began to make a plan. We now had to use our humanly instincts to save ourselves and prevent certain hypothermic related death.

As captain of the boat, it is my job to protect all member of the team. With this mentality I said: “I am going to swim to the shore and get us some help.” But, that was not an okay opinion with the other members of the boat. Tim said: “You will die Bryan! The water is way too cold and the current is too strong for your body to handle.” Agreeing to Tim’s statement, Mike who is also a veteran of both swimming and crew decided that the best course of action was to remove all of our cloths and swim with the boat to shore, using it as a basic floatation device. Because of the respect Mike has on the team we did just that: the boys got into the water and I sat on the hull of the boat looking for any signs of help and rescue.

As the boys swam, I helped with keeping their minds off the severity and coldness of the situation. “Almost there boys, you’ve got it,” I continued to yell from the hull seeing that no one was insight to help us. The boys continued to swim fighting the cold water. After several minutes in the cold water we reached the rocky shore. Being the coxswain, I lack height. With this, Emilio brought me to the shore and I ran up the hill with all the energy I had to get help for the freezing boys.

As I continued to run up the cold dirt hill, I found a man. I began to explain the situation: “Hello sir, my name is Bryan Koller and I am the coxswain for the Oswego State Boys Crew Team. Our boat took a wave and we got thrown into the lake. Is it possible that I could use your phone and maybe get some towels?” Looking at my shivering state, the guy walked me into his house and handed me a pile of freshly washed towels. We took these towels and walked them down to the boys. On the walk down, the man introduce himself: “My name is Charles boys you’re going to be alright”, he said. Not worried about introductions at the time, the boys took the towels and began to cover up their exposed shivering blue colored bodies.

After dragging the boat up the shore to secure it more, we went up to the house of Charles. A few moments later his wife Barbara came down and began to talk to us about how she use to row for Syracuse University and how her team flipped the boat, just like us. This made use seem like less failures knowing that it has happened in the past.

We sat around the house for a while and called our coach, who was very worried and said she would be there in ten minutes, a trip that takes at least thirty. Waiting around the house, we saw the Coast Guard outside, who stopped and asked if we were okay, as well as, asking if we needed any assistance. Realizing we were actually all fine, just cold and shocked, we properly declined their help.

After a short amount of time, our coach Allison came to the house. She was worried as one can be and the look in her face was nothing more than of pure fear. Almost the same as a mother whose child almost got hurt. She walked us back down to the boat, looking for any damage to the hull. “What are we going to do with the boat? We have to get it back to the boat house!,” she said.
Not wanting to be scared of the water, since we had a race in less than fifteen hours we made it a team decision that we would take the boat back out into the water and go slowly following closely to the shore. Looking at the water, Allison realized that the water was much calmer now and we had no choice, but to row the boat back, one stoke at a time.

As we sailed into the sunset of the closing day we all just wanted the day to come to an end. We had to row back over uncharted water with nothing more than the wet clothes on our backs, knowing very well we could be ejected into the freezing cold water at any time. Keeping our optimism and spirits high, we rowed strong and powerfully though the cold Lake Ontario waters. We were able to put aside our fears and terrors of falling back into the water. Thus, increasing our brotherhood and forming a bond that can never be broken, we are the five boys who survived Mother Nature.

The fifteen hours have passed and we lined up for our last regatta of the season. We rowed hard and gave it all. Placing second out of twenty-five teams.