

High Adventure

By Mike Vandamm

As Dr. Johnson said: "Nothing so concentrates the mind as the immediate prospect of a hangman's noose."

Yesterday afternoon (Tuesday 8/5) about 4:00, as I sought shelter from a violent thunderstorm in the lee of the Baltimore Light (Magothy River mouth) tower, my thoughts were not lacking for concentration.

First came **regrets**:

- I regretted that I had told no one of my trip plan (I was, after all, playing hooky from work).
- I regretted that my new VHF radio was at home, snug in its recharging cradle.
- Then I took careful mental inventory of the emergency gear in my PFD:
 - whistle;
 - 12-gauge flare pistol with 3 red flares (which were showing some corrosion and might prove dud. I had meant to replace them.)
 - signalling mirror
 - strobe light
 - neoprene headliner
 - a pair of glove liners (for protection in the event of blisters)
 - and waterproof matches.

Next, I thought through a worst case scenario involving a night spent swimming on the Bay with only jellyfish for company, and concluded that I probably wasn't going to die.

How did I get into this mess? On Sunday evening the weather band was predicting a small craft warning for the Bay on Tuesday, with 20 mph winds. This was just too good to pass up in August, so I laid plans to work late on Monday and reward myself with an afternoon off on Tuesday. By Tuesday morning the small craft warning had been called off.

The revised forecast was for winds from the north at 10, temperatures in the low 80's in the afternoon, falling to the 50's at night, with a slight chance of afternoon showers and a "very slight" chance of thunderstorms. I made a mental note to take along a paddling jacket in case night came early.

Arriving at Sandy Point at about 3:00, I was amazed at the view from the beach. The whole Central Bay was laid out before me with exceptional clarity. I could make out individual houses on Kent Island 4½ miles away. The sky was partly cloudy, and a gentle breeze was blowing from the north. I decided to paddle north, upwind, rounding the Sandy Point Light to the Baltimore Light, and from there to the Outer Harbor of Baltimore before turning. I had been paddling steadily for about 15 minutes in my Pintail when I saw dark clouds and lightning flashes over Baltimore, about 15 miles away.

The storm appeared to be an isolated cell, and I assumed it would pass well to the north of me. As I reached the mouth of the Magothy, however, the whole western sky darkened with amazing suddenness, and it came to me that I would be in BIG TROUBLE unless I sought shelter immediately.

There were two obvious choices, both about a mile away: the western shore, where I was as likely to find a bulkhead as a sandy beach, or the Baltimore Light. I chose the latter, and reached the southeast side Light, which I fervently hoped would be the lee side, not more than two or three minutes ahead of the storm.

The storm came on very suddenly and violently. Within seconds the wind, judging from how it grabbed at my paddle, was gusting to 30 in the lee of the Light, and probably twice that velocity a few yards away. Waves rapidly mounted to a steep 3 foot chop from the northwest, coming with amazing frequency--every 2 or 3 seconds--wrapping around the tower leaving only a small moving pocket of relatively calm water on the downwind side, about 1 kayak-length wide and 2 long. In this pocket, with my bow inches from the tower, I struggled to remain. The swirling wind was pushing me away from the Light into open water, and I had to paddle hard at times to maintain my position. Out in the open, where the wind was blowing spray horizontally in great sheets, cutting visibility to a few yards, I didn't like my chances of staying upright. Fear had tightened my muscles, robbing me of strength and agility. At the height of the storm, it was impossible to distinguish rain from windblown spray. Lightning was all around.

I looked up and was able to dimly make out the shoreline. A few minutes later the storm had passed. I left my shelter behind the Light--and felt my legs still shaking. I then continued my trip over calm water with light winds and a clearing sky. Reaching the No. 3 green channel marker at the Outer Harbor, I had a fine view of the Francis Scott Key Bridge backlit by rays of sunshine, and the enormous, satanic Steel Works at Sparrow's Point. Shrouded in mist, perpetually emitting fire and smoke, its jumbled geometry reminded me of photos of Pearl Harbor on the day after the attack.

My lessons learned include that the law of large numbers applies with a vengeance to weather forecasting. If you paddle many times when there is a "slight possibility" that the weather will take a nasty turn, sooner or later you're going to wind up in the middle of something big and hairy. Plan accordingly.

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