

# GOING FOR IT!

The following is William Mittendorf's account of the loss of the Pyramid 30, Felony, during the Doublehanded Farallones Race.

The narrative offers two interesting insights into the thinking of a competitive sailor. The first is the fact that the gale force warnings don't create any concern except that of getting to the 'right' side of the course. The second is the 'go for it' spirit of cracking off toward the north shore when they were still not completely in control of the boat. Up until she sank, William Mittendorf and Keith Stahnke had been sailing Felony near the top of the fleet.

Since I long ago decided that nothing is fun if you're cold and wet, I dressed well for the Doublehanded Farallones race. Both Keith Stanke and I wore wool long-johns, wool socks, wool sweaters, gloves and full foulies. At the start we never suspected that this clothing would become a factor in saving our lives. We never suspected that in 10 hrs. we wouldn't even be able to find pieces of our Pyramid 30, Felony.

**0815:** We got a mediocre start on the inside of the line. It is a broad spinnaker reach in 4-5 knot easterly. It is raining steadily. Soon it becomes apparent that the place to be is outside in the ebb tide. The wind is dying and the fleet is bunching at the bridge. Yuk. Where are the predicted SE 15-25?

With a fair current we decided to go for boat speed and started to heat it up. We pass an Olson. We pass a Santana 35. The boat feels good as we pass Pt. Bonita making 6-7 knots on an optimistic speed. It's time to jibe back to port pole to stay in the Channel. It starts to rain hard and the visibility drops to 1 mile.

**0930:** As we come up on buoys 7 & 8 Keith turns on the radio for a weather check. "Coastal forecast for Pt. Arena to Pt. Sur and out 60-miles. Change small craft advisories to gale warnings. Southeast winds 25-35 knots. Seas from the south. 5-7 ft. Swell from west. 3-5 ft. . . . Southeast Farallone Island southeast at 20 . . ." Where we are it's still blowing from the east at about 6. We quickly head the boat up to a tight spinnaker reach and go south. We want to be on the right side of the shift.

**1015:** We are south of the channel buoy No. 2 with 3/4 oz. spinnaker and full main, and observe a substantial northwest current flowing on the buoy.

**1030:** We have changed to the No. 3 jib and have a reef in the main. The wind has clocked 50° and is rising. We are glad it has stopped raining. From where we are now the course to the Farallones is about 254° but we can see by getting an LOP off the Lightbucket that to get that course we must maintain a heading of 210°. Within 15 minutes we have pulled in the third reef and changed to the No. 4 jib. We reef the jib. This is as far down as we can shorten and still



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carry 2 sails. The boat feels good.

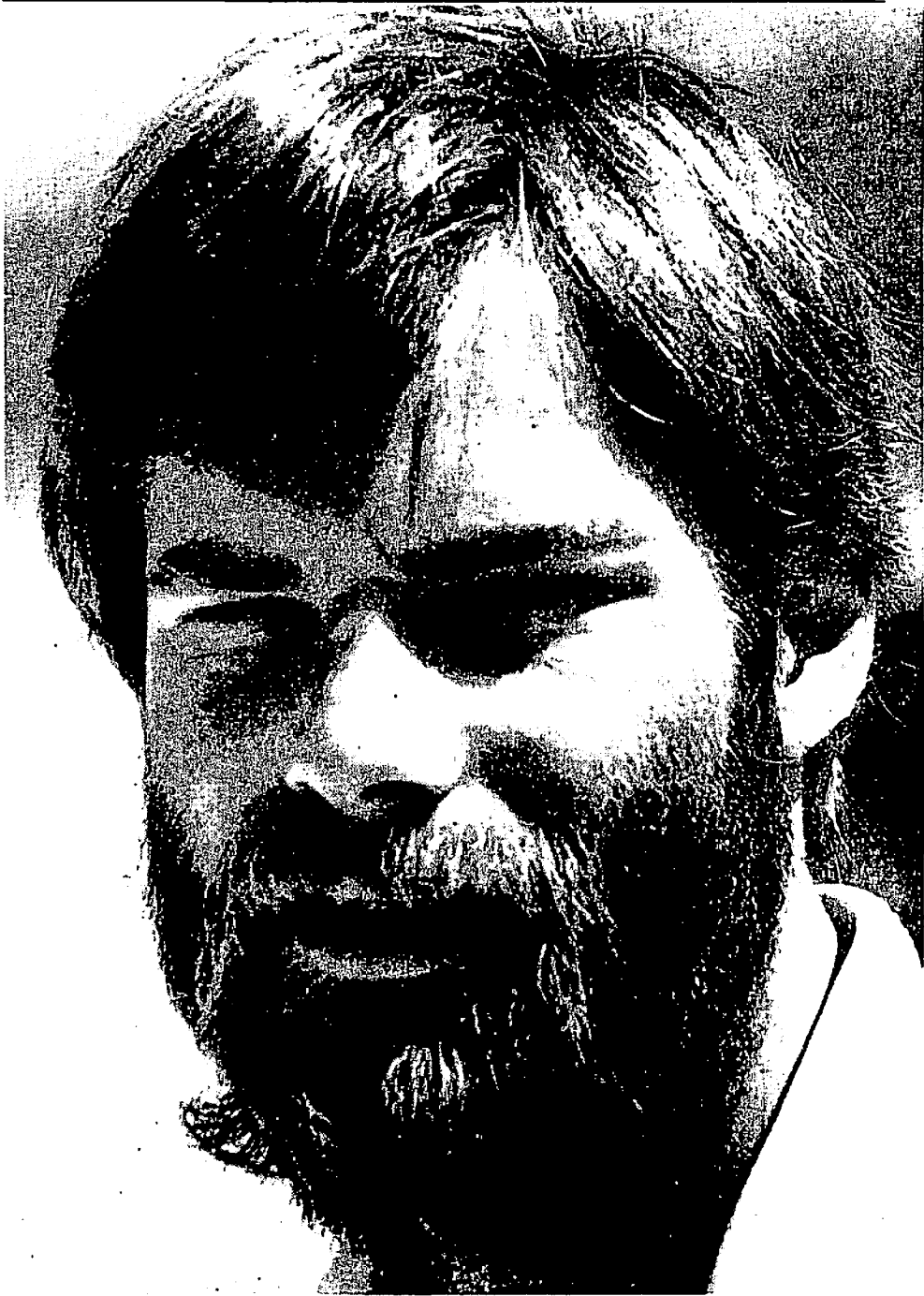
We're making 6½ knots, just cracked off and on course. The seas are mostly southerly, but confused and about 5-ft. We see two big boats with blown out jibs. At 12:15 we round the northeast corner of the island. By 1300 we are around and clear. Now the wind seems to be a steady 25 knots, and the seas are starting to build. Although the rhumb line back is about 70°, we feel that we'll need a heading above 90° because we just don't believe that the wind will still be from the east when we get in. A quick bearing check on the island confirms that there is still a strong northerly current and that our course looks good.

One by one all the boats that have rounded near us are dropping below us. It's a little disconcerting to see the fleet sailing away, but we just can't believe that they're doing the right thing. At 1500 we get a Loran position which puts us midway between separation buoys B & C, right on the rhumb line. We're pretty near close hauled. The wind and seas are up a little, and the boat is a bit overpowered. We think that carrying on with just one sail would be slow and regret that there is not a 4th reef. Another 2-3 foot mainsail reduction would be perfect.

We pass the temporary Lightbucket smack on course. The seas are squaring up and becoming a problem since they are hitting us right on the beam. It's gusting to 35 knots and as the boat takes occasional 50° rolls, we check out the rig, it looks great — no apprehension there. Keith says that he's having trouble holding the boat down. We begin rounding up and going sideways. We are clearly being blown below our course.

The problem is that each time we dump the main in a puff, the boom trips in the water, and this has the effect of sheeting in and causes the boat to round up. We lower and secure the main. Now we have nothing but a reefed No. 4 jib up and are approaching buoys 5 & 6 making 5-6 knots indicated. We shake the reef out of the jib and can see ourselves climbing to weather, but we also know that the boat is a little underpowered. The seas still make the boat want to round up sometimes, but it responds well to the helm.

**1640:** We are high of the rhumb base and



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Left: William; Above: Keith.

inside the Bar Channel. We can see some boats coming in from the north and rounding Pt. Bonita. The boats that are along the south shore appear to be carrying a lot of sail and sitting up pretty straight. What the hell — let's go for it! The main goes back up with 3 reefs. We bear off and head for Bonita Cove; the boat starts doing 14's and 15's.

The boat is jamming with no bow buries and smooth helm. All right — this is what we came out here for.

As we start to close on Pt. Bonita we can see that the ebb is doing us no good. We're beam reaching and getting 12s on the waves but not making it. Keith expresses concern that we won't clear Pt. Bonita. Each time I

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try to come up a little, the boom trips and we round up. Keith drops the jib decreasing our heeling moment a little. The boat sits up a bit and we are able to head up some without go-

I don't see Keith  
and shout for him.  
No answer.  
This is  
getting serious.

ing sideways. We pass the outer rock of Bonita about 40 yards abeam. It's about 1705 and I hear Keith say, "This wave looks like it might break". I look over my right shoulder, and — yikes! — 'it' is about 7 or 8-ft. and it really does look as if it might break.

The wave is directly on our beam and steep, and knocks us both overboard on the port side as the boat spins and heels. I can't believe that I'm in the water looking at the transom tilted 90°. I reach up and pull the release for the horseshoe buoy, and it falls in the water. The boat hangs at 90°. I can't see Keith and yell for him and he shouts back. I look up and am thoroughly surprised to see the boat slowly and smoothly turn turtle. I realize immediately that the boat is a goner. The water does not feel cold and I have no feeling of panic or loss.

So this is what a 30-footer looks like upside down. As I hold on to the outboard bracket, I look around and see that we definitely are drifting to the inside of the surf line. The sets are about 6 to 8-ft. This is fucked. The boat begins to jolt as the mast is starting to grind on the bottom 45-ft. below. The horseshoe buoy is nearly pulled out of my hand and I remember that it's drogue was all tangled in the rigging.

I hear Keith "We're going to have to swim for it." As we get sucked further out toward the Point, the waves become bigger and steeper and the mast grinds harder. The boat is righting itself. Wonderful, wonderful — it's



## FELONY

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coming back up. It's on its feet; the Farr out cockpit is dry. The boat's recovery has pulled Keith aboard, but I'm still in the water looking at the mast broken at the upper spreaders. The temptation to climb aboard is great, but I know the boat is crippled and still doomed. In a minute we'll be on the rocks.

"We're in a totally fucked position."  
"We've got to get away from the boat."

"Hey, this is fucked."

"We're fucked."

A wave breaks just astern of us and steams into the rocks.

"What are we going to do?"

# ONCE TOO OFTEN

"Get some lifejackets."

"Where are they?"

"Over the quarter berths."

Keith is on deck with 2 lifejackets in about 2 seconds. He throws one to me, and I gratefully abandon the entangled horseshoe ring. Keith jumps over the weather side.

"Get your boots off." The left comes off easily, but the right won't budge. Adrenelin accomplishes the job.

"We've got to get away from the boat."

"We're going to have to swim for it."

The boat is now surging strongly, and there is a good chance of serious injury by banging against it. A big set is forming outside. The first wave washes the boat away from us and pushes it toward two rocks about 10-ft. from a vertical cliff.

"We've got to get to the right. Around the cliff, around the cliff."

The boat is now on the rocks. We can hear it crunching. Successive waves leave it high and dry and then drag it back into the water. I try to get under the white water of the waves coming at me, but I know that I'm going to be bashing into the rocks below. I keep my eyes on both Keith and the outside of the break so that no wave will sneak up on me. A big one comes, and I know it's rock time. My right arm gives the life jacket a never-let-go hug, and my left arm comes up to protect my head. I take a deep breath.

The next thing I know is that I'm totally out of the water on top of a rock which is covered with seaweed and actually quite soft. My left arm is pinned to the rock at the shoulder by the three shrouds of the rig. The boat is to my left in two pieces. I pull my arm free, turn around, and see Keith in the water below me as another wave knocks me off the rock. We both see that we have to get to 20-ft. to the east where there is a chance we will be pushed between the cliff and a big rock, around the Point and into an area of smooth water. We keep shouting instructions to each other about how to do this. "We have to get away from the boat."

To get mixed up with the boat in this surf would certainly result in injury, and injury would severely limit survival chances. Swim away, swim away. I can only think of swimming away and getting into the narrow channel between the cliff and the big rock. I see another big wave break outside. I take a breath, and when I come up, I am in smooth

water, slowly moving north alongside a sheer cliff. I don't see Keith, and shout for



Left: Bill and Keith under spinnaker heading out the Gate in the rain. Above: Point Bonita, site of the crash.

him. No answer. This is serious. I see another big wave break and come crashing through the channel I have just transited. It rolls out, and there's Keith.

"We made it — we made it!" This is true relief. The water even feels warm. We are now out of danger of breaking our bodies and into an area where hypothermia could be a problem. But is not. After we begin the 1/4-mile swim to a small beach, a fierce squall line comes up. Visibility drops to zero and the dividing line between water and air becomes ambiguous. Locally it is blowing at least 60 knots, maybe 70. We cannot face into it.

Little, red pieces of foam core of the boat start to blow past us in a bizarre *Star Wars* in reverse type sequence. The strobe light powers by. A buoyant cushion and a fender appear to literally plane past us. We don't care; we know we'll make it. Both of us continually fall down as we climb out of the modest surf, and I am embarrassed that I have trouble standing up. Somebody watching might think that I'm over-dramatizing. Neither of us are terribly tired, but 30-lbs. of water in your clothes makes you awkward. We are glad to be alive and embrace. With our foulies breaking the wind we have only to hike barefoot up to the ridge and find a telephone with which to call the Coast Guard and end the search which must surely be starting.

As Keith and I discussed this incident afterwards, we were in agreement that there

were several factors which contributed a lot to our escaping almost uninjured (I did have a small head laceration). They are:

1. Familiarity with capsizes and turtles in

dinghies and knockdowns in larger boats. We weren't really panicked to see *Felony* upside down. It wasn't an entirely foreign view.

2. We have both had a lot of experience swimming in surf. It was just like being caught inside a few big sets.

3. We had long, wool underwear on which substantially reduced the effects of cold water.

4. We were able to grab life jackets to offset the weight of wet clothes. Even though we wouldn't get them on, their buoyancy was of paramount importance.

In answer to several questions which have already come up, I give the following responses:

1. More lead in the keel might have prevented the inversion. I don't know. If we had not lost the rig, I'm confident that we could have sailed the boat off. It had positive flotation compartments and there was not much water below after recovery.

2. I don't know if an inboard motor would have helped us. It would have had to have started immediately and run without fouling in our downed rigging. It might have been helpful.

3. This was the *exception* to the rule about staying with the boat. In this case staying with the boat was death. After all, it ended up in pieces no larger than *Latitude 38*.

4. Although *Felony* was an ultralight, I don't blame her design or construction for the accident. I blame myself. I still like ultralights. I would certainly sail *Felony* again in similar conditions without fear.

— William Mittendorf