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Survivor
lives to tell
gripping yarn;
author writes
riveting account
of maritime
disaster

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

Lochlin Reidy can joke about his hallucinations now, nearly five years after a 50-foot rogue wave hurled him from the pleasure-seeking sailboat on its long voyage from Long Island Sound to Bermuda.

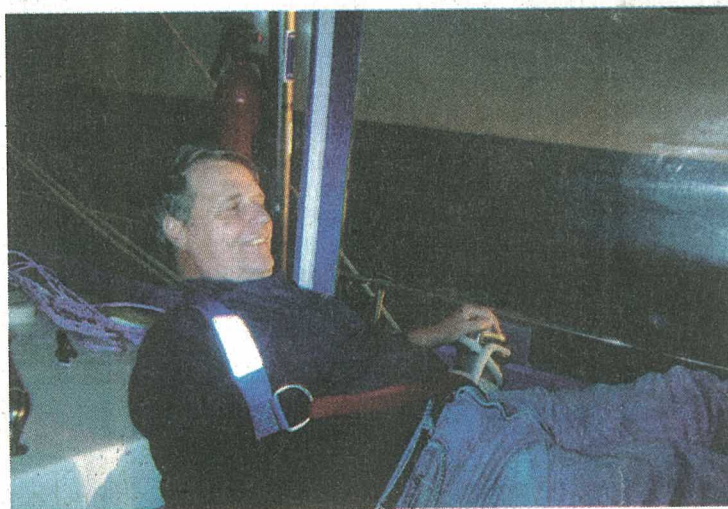
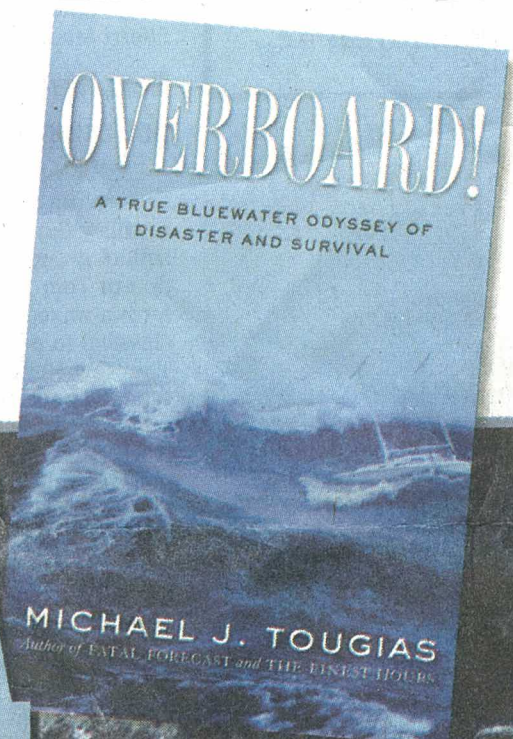
For 26 hours, the seasoned sailor was adrift in a battering storm in the Atlantic 400 miles east of Virginia Beach with only his life jacket for support. He was blinded by salt water, without food and potable water, sleep-deprived, and relentlessly pounded by towering waves.

During those interminable 26 hours, he'd been tethered to his close friend and captain, Tom Tighe, having clipped their safety harnesses together, the last 18 of which Tighe, whose heart gave out in the violent swells, floated dead beside him. (Tighe had made the Bermuda trip 46 times.)

Worse, the D batteries powering his strobe light — his only means to signal for aid in the pitch blackness — were failing. Not that his odds of survival were good in any event. Even with his sighting of a Coast Guard helicopter that had swooped in, banked, and then flown off, the likelihood that he and Tighe would be spotted was slim.

As the stocky, preppily clad Reidy told the audience of 75 at R.J. Julia Booksellers: "Imagine a plane dropping two coconuts in the middle of the

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ocean. Then try to find them in the middle of a storm."

And this wasn't any ordinary storm. Coast Guard rescu-

Veteran first mate Lochlin Reidy joke about his hallucinations now, nearly five years after a 50-foot rogue wave hurled him from the pleasure boat, on its long voyage from Long Island Sound to Bermuda. Left he is seen in his safety harness in the cockpit. Center photo, the battered Almeisan as seen from the rescue ship after its bluewater odyssey.

ers said later it was the worst weather they had ever encountered. The reason: gale-force winds from a low-pressure system colliding with the north-flowing Gulf Stream, creating, literally, walls of water. The 62-year-old described the so-called rogue waves as "waves breaking and rolling like beach waves but in the middle of the ocean, waves on top of waves, breaking over you."

A helicopter pilot in Michael Tougias' "Overboard!," a non-fiction account of the May

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Overboard: Gripping sea story

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2005 maritime disaster, likens their roar to "the revving engines of his Black Hawk chopper at take-off." Battling them, according to the pilot, was unlike any combat he had ever seen.

On top of that, hypothermia was robbing Reidy, a retired business manager, of his hold on reality. Being on the other side of the Gulf Stream meant that the water was more temperate than it otherwise might have been, he said. The water temperature was about 74 degrees. That might sound warm. But after hours of his energy sapped by the battering storm and days without food, sleep, and water, "it didn't feel that way." Which was when his mind started playing tricks on him.

Pea-size blips of phosphorescence atop the water assumed the shape of approaching ships. The black and gray of the night inexplicably turned into a Nautilus machine. A front porch appeared, teasing him with its offer of shelter. Tiny yellow scraps floated from his body, leading him to imagine, with horror, that leeches were crawling over his body. They turned out to be pieces of lining from the inside of his foul-weather jacket that had been shredded by the waves. It occurred to Reidy that the yellow color of his jacket might attract sharks until he realized, Tougias writes, "no shark in its right mind would be swimming near the surface in these conditions."

"At one point, I started talking to the waves," said Reidy. "I'd just gotten rolled. I was saying, 'Enough, you can leave me alone.' As soon as I said that, I got whapped again." He was hit twice more in succession. "Right then and there I decided I wasn't going to talk to the waves anymore."

That Reidy lived through the ordeal is no doubt testament to an uncommon stamina and will, said "Overboard!" author Tougias, who was present for the event. But there was another factor underlying his determination to go on, he told the rapt crowd. As the 65-year-old Tom Tighe labored and wheezed his last breaths, Reidy, his trusted mate, promised his captain that he would get him home to his family. In order to get him home, Reidy himself had to stay alive.

The key, he said, was to withstand the impulse to dwell on the negative, to resist the despair of hearing a plane overhead unable to see him, to stay focused and positive.

"I would catch myself thinking I was going to miss this or that, but then I wouldn't let myself go down that road," said the Woodbridge resident. He concentrated on his wife Sandra and his 13-year old Ashley's upcoming softball schedule. He thought of his mother. "I gotta be home for Mom, I told myself." He developed a breathing rhythm to ride each monster wave. After each beat-down, he forced himself to come back up and turn himself around so the next wave wouldn't hit him face-first. After a certain point, he realized he couldn't fight the raging elements.

"There wasn't a thing I could do," he said, "except to make sure I kept coming back up."

Above all, he held fast to an unshakable trust that, as long as he hung on, help would arrive. Captain Tighe had activated the boat's radio distress signal before going overboard, setting off a satellite that relayed the location of the emergency to the Coast Guard. The fleeting appearances of the helicopter meant that the signal had been received. For a rescue to be effected, the one thing he had to do was to remain alive.

To hear Reidy tell it, his ability to keep himself going was of far less consequence than the actions of those who saved him. Indeed, despite the magnitude of the forces he ultimately faced down, Reidy was unwilling to call his survival a miracle. "I wouldn't be here today without all the folks risking their lives for me," he insisted.

There was the Coast Guard personnel in Virginia that, having received the distress signal, dispatched the search-and-rescue plane from

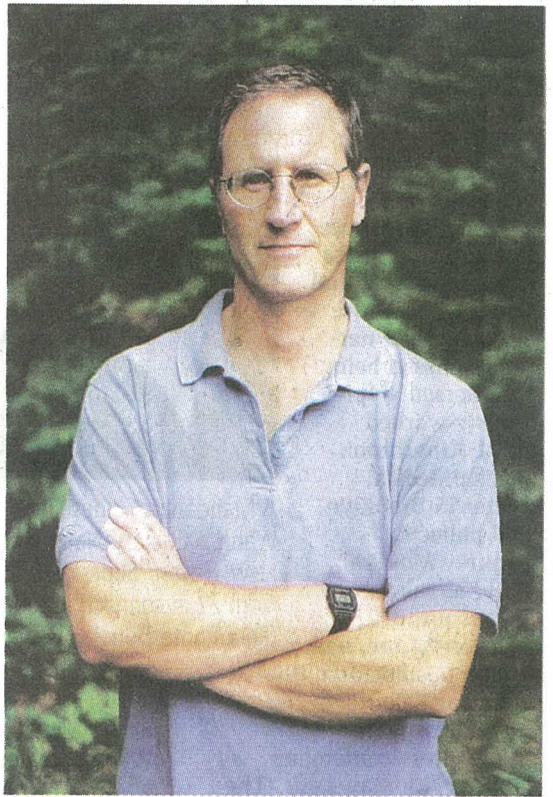
North Carolina. There was its Operations System Center in West Virginia which, through a computer-based voluntary global ship reporting system, identified participating ships in the area of distress. And there was the Sakura Express, one of four vessels to respond, whose crew devoted nearly 24 hours to the search at its own expense in extremely rough seas.

It was the Coast Guard plane that, about 4 a.m. on the morning of May 10, 2005, nearly 26 hours after he was washed overboard, caught sight of Reidy's flickering strobe, and it was the Sakura Express that, not long after, pulled him to safety. When the merchant ship arrived in Boston, he walked off the boat, thanking every person who assisted in the search. "I'll never forget them," he said, his voice wavering.

Asked how the experience had changed him, Reidy

paused. "I guess I'm better at letting little things go," he said. "And I'm more grateful for what I have."

He also bought himself a Bowflex machine when he got home. "I figured maybe that fitness-gear hallucination was a sign for me to get in shape,"



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he said. "But clearly I haven't made much use of it," he added, patting his midsection with a rakish grin.