

## A MARINER'S NIGHTMARE

by  
Henri d'Entremont



*Sealife 3* was sold and renamed *Lady Janice*. All three Sea Life Fisheries boats are still in operation since 1970. Photo courtesy of the author.

I grew up in West Pubnico, Nova Scotia during the 1950s. I studied to be a machinist for two years after high school. During the 1970s I began working for a company called Sea Life fisheries in East Pubnico, Nova Scotia. They were owned by Salvesen from Scotland. My work quickly changed from the machine shop to doing maintenance on the fishing boats including repairs to hydraulics, pumping systems, engines etc. It was a great learning experience for me because I had access to every manual and schematic that I needed and I loved to learn. I spent many evenings going through manuals preparing for next day's work because I didn't have any courses in mechanics nor any guidance from other senior workers.

Sea Life Fisheries was one of many companies that processed large amounts of herring which was used to make animal feed and fish feed after the oil was separated. The fish scales were used to make cosmetics. They owned 12 fishing vessels, known as seiners, ranging from 90 to 110 feet in length. Most of my work was maintenance on the three largest fishing vessels known as the *Sealife 1*, *Sealife 2*, and *Sealife 3* which were new when I first began. The other boats were older wooden boats which were named the *Endeavor*, *Centennial*, *Gemini*, *Taurus*, *Virgo*, *Nova Star*, *Libra*, *Stuart* and *Lynne*, and the *Hansen* on which I worked sometimes also. The total load-carrying

capacity of all the vessels was over 1,500 tons. It was not uncommon to see a thousand tons of herring had arrived by morning after a night of fishing. The boats were tied up for the day and the crews went home. The pump crew emptied the boats with the use of a huge piston pump which took all day, and the processing went all night as well. I worked often on the boats when they were being unloaded, sometimes in hot and noisy engine rooms, as well as on deck equipment. The *Sealife* boats had one main propulsion engine of 1,000 horsepower as well as two 50 kilowatt generators powered by two diesel engines of 170 horsepower. There were numerous pumps, a complex hydraulic system, refrigeration system, and a lot of electrical components. Because the main engines were shut off when they arrived at the wharf the hot engines kept the engine rooms hot for a long time. One had to be careful not to burn your fingers on hot engine parts. Not all the boats were fully loaded each night. They fished through the night when the weather was favorable.

This was a large operation which employed approximately 90 people to run and maintain the boats, plus many more who worked in the processing plant in shifts. During the summer they fished in the southwest Nova Scotia waters, but at other times of the year they traveled to other areas of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland. The boats and crews were often away for long periods of time. I often had to travel to different locations in the Atlantic region to do repairs or deliver various components.

On one occasion I was asked to replace the engineer on the *Sealife 3* for approximately a month. That was a steel vessel 110 feet long and 32 feet wide. It is still a very seaworthy boat that was about five years old at the time. The captain, the cook and the engineer each had their own room and there were two other rooms for the crew. Having done much maintenance on those, I was quite familiar with the equipment on board. That was in January of 1975, so the weather was very cold. I had to drive for eight hours to Canso where the boat was tied. After a brief meeting with the crew, I went into the engine room to check on the operating machinery and noticed that we could take a truckload of fuel, which the captain ordered for me. We left port on that calm afternoon and quickly found a lot of herring. There were many boats out there that evening and they all did very well. After setting our net three times we were loaded to capacity at 300 tons. It was time to secure the equipment on deck, fasten the hatches and head in to market to unload our catch. We were happy to be heading in with a full load, as the wind was increasing from the east because there was an approaching storm on the way.



Henri d'Entremont on one of the vessels. They were pumping herring on board. Photo courtesy of the author.

After a short while when we were still finishing up on the deck the generator engine on the port side (left side) stopped and all the lights went out. I ran down into the engine room and started the generator engine on the starboard side (right side) and went back on deck to finish the last few minutes of work with the intent to then go fix the generator engine issue after. Little did I know that in a few minutes the generator on the starboard side would quit as well, putting us totally in the dark. This was serious and after examining the situation I realized that the reason the engines stopped was because there was a lot of water in our fuel. I could not understand why we had water in the fuel tanks unless it entered through the fuel vents because we were so low in the water, but the seas were not rough yet. It didn't make sense because it had never happened before, and these boats were in operation for a few years in all kinds of weather, summer and winter. The main engine finally began losing power one cylinder at a time until the last cylinder finally shut down. It operated on that last cylinder for almost a minute which sounded really strange. I had changed the fuel filters and restarted the generator on the port side, but it only ran for a few minutes and stopped again because of the water in the filters.

These engines were started by compressed air which came from an air compressor that ran automatically when the electricity was on. Since there was no electricity from the generators, the air compressor was not running either, so I had not enough air pressure left in the air receivers (tanks) to restart the engines. Things were worsening by the minute. The wind was increasing, and we were now dead in the water. The only communication equipment that didn't need electricity was a CB set, which two brothers, Beer (Delphis) and Kush (Kenneth), connected to a battery. Few boats used those anymore, so even though we tried calling, there was no answer. They sent Mayday messages until the battery eventually died.

On board in the engine room, we had an emergency air compressor which was a two-cylinder engine. One cylinder was the power cylinder while the other was to compress the air which was stored in a large air receiver at approximately 280 pounds per square inch (PSI). It was a small crank-start diesel engine and when I tried to crank it, I quickly realized that I could not turn the engine over because it was seized up. The captain came down into the engine room with me, and between he and I and the great big pipe wrench, we managed to rotate the engine a little each time. It took a lot of effort and a lot of time before we could get it to crank properly. I cranked with all my strength fast enough to start it up, and when Captain Wayne hit the compression lever, it ran really well. Hooray. I thought we had it made, but I was in for a shock. Although the engine worked, the air compressor cylinder did not. We only managed to get about 20 PSI of pressure and that was it. No more. It was one disappointment after another, which was very discouraging. There was only one thing to do and that was to start dismantling the air compressor.

Now the situation had gone from serious to desperate. We were getting doubtful that we would ever see home again. The sea was really rough and to make things worse my stomach was getting rough also. Seasickness is a terrible feeling. The storm was on our back and the wind was getting stronger by the hour. We were on the open ocean. The ocean depth where we were was 70 fathoms. (A fathom equals 6 feet). The captain studying the marine navigation chart could see that behind us towards the shore was a 40-fathom section in the direction in which we were drifting, and therefore a ledge that our anchor could hook onto. The captain decided to drop the anchor to 70 fathoms and so it hooked on the edge of the 40-fathom section. We then released another 30 fathoms of cable to make sure that the anchor remained secured to the bottom. That was very good planning on the captain's behalf. The anchor was fastened by a large chain attached to many feet of one inch steel cable on a winch that had a manually operated brake. The anchor was certainly our lifeline.

This was all during the night, therefore we had to use flashlights. We had many on board because we used them to fish at night. Everything on the boat was operated electrically, so without electricity, we had no way to cook food or run water, etc. There was plenty of cable left on the winch drum, so every half hour or so Beer and Kush would slacken it a few fathoms, so that it would not chafe off, or we would have lost the anchor. They were the two senior crewmen, and they were brothers. They are the ones who took on the task of monitoring the anchor cable known as the "rode." One of the two men had worked for years on the *Lurcher* light ship which was located some miles offshore to the south of Nova Scotia. They both had a lot of experience at sea and therefore valuable knowledge in our situation. They would use a flashlight to be able to inspect the cable during the night. I did go in the pilot house for a few minutes and saw them dressed in rubber oil clothes tied to each other and to the rail, to go out to the winch to slacken the cable to the anchor a little bit each time. We would lose sight of them when the waves would hit, due to it being nighttime, and with water flying and the blinding snowstorm. They were only 10 feet from the pilot house windows.

I will never forget the noise in the rigging from the harmonic vibration in the cables overhead. This went on all night long in gale force winds with lots of snow. The boat was loaded very heavy; therefore, it did not bounce around like it would have had it been empty, which was possibly a good thing for the anchor. A lot of water came over the vessel when the waves would hit. We could hear the terrifying sound of the ocean pounding on the reef between us and the shore at Bad Neighbour Shoal, Cape Breton.

I hardly ever came out of the engine room, so it didn't matter if it was daylight or dark because I had to work with a flashlight as the engine room was totally dark. There was less movement down in the engine room and therefore my seasickness got a little better after some time. Upon dismantling the air compressor cylinder head, I found it to be very rusty, indicating that it had not been used for a long time. Using sandpaper and a wire brush I cleaned all the parts as best as I could. There was a round disc with a lot of springs that was badly rusted. I had to throw away some of the small springs that were in pieces and use the remaining springs, distributed evenly around the air delivery valve. I covered everything with oil and reassembled. Then I started up the engine and was able to gain approximately 30 PSI each time. I don't know how many times I took it

apart, reoiled and reassembled it, which finally got up to 240 lb of pressure in the air tanks (reservoir). It was time to try to start the generator engine again and it did start, but again the water got the best of me in the fuel filters, and it was time to start all over again.

From time to time, I would look throughout the boat and examine how much water was in the bilge, check the valves to make sure nothing was allowing sea water to enter, and go check various compartments throughout the boat. At one point I went to the lazarette, which is the rear compartment at the stern (back end) of the vessel, which is to provide flotation for the back end. When I got there, I realized that the water was coming out of what was supposed to be the watertight door, which was a big steel door with a rubber gasket. Approximately a foot from the bottom of the door I could see water coming in. If the lazarette fills with water, the stern (back) of the boat would sink, which would be the end of us. I decided it was best to let the water come into the center of the boat and I went immediately to see what was wrong. When I opened the door a big gush of water came down into the shaft tunnel, but that was okay. The cause of the water, I quickly found to be the gland that is supposed to keep the water from coming up around the rudder shaft, and after a few minutes of tightening the four bolts I quickly had it secured. The waves pounding on the rudder had loosened the gland packing. Back to the air compressor I went. I don't think I mentioned that to anyone except the captain years later.

Marine engineers listen to the sound of the engines, which becomes familiar, and therefore they can possibly notice a change in sound when something is not functioning properly. The engine room becomes a comforting place when engines run well, and it is warm and well lit. It was not comfortable in a black and cold engine room with the sound of waves crashing around and over the hull. The most frightening thing was the thought that it could have been something I would have been responsible for that I didn't do or notice that could cause the loss of all the crew. The minutes ticked by very slowly and one had too much time to think. I tried to remain focused on the most important things. The minutes did turn to hours. The other frightening thing was the lack of the kronk, kronk, kronk, kronk each time the anchor cable would tighten on the waves. On most waves the anchor cable made a loud noise, but on some waves it did not, and I thought we had lost the anchor, but on the next wave the reassuring kronk, kronk, kronk was back, to my relief.

At one point after daylight, I could hear some loud thumping overhead on deck and went up in the galley to see a barrel full of oil floating around on the deck. It was quite gloomy up in the galley. Spirits among the crew were very low. I don't know if they ate or slept, but the time must have passed very slowly for them as they had nothing to do, but I did. I felt more comfortable on my own in the engine room where the captain often came to my assistance. He never said a negative word which was very important to me. I requested that we go secure the oil drum, as it would have broken the hydraulic pipes which were needed, should we be able to get the engines going again.

By afternoon the wind swung to the opposite direction, and we were in the lee of land which was much better. It was still very rough, and the anchor cable watch went on. Then we finally got some good news. We could see a boat coming. In the morning the fishermen who had gone to Canso to unload their herring realized that the *Sealife 3* had not arrived with the others. After discussions with the group of fishermen, someone contacted Search and Rescue, and they had received a message from a taxi driver who had reported hearing a Mayday on his CB set the night before while driving near St. Esprit. That's when a plan was put into action. They knew where we had fished the night before. The first one to find us was the *Matuna Maid*. When it came near, it was too rough to get close to us, but we could communicate with them. That boat was 115 feet long and you could see half of the hull come out of the water as a speed boat would, and down with a huge splash, compared to us, who were sitting very low in the water.

They asked what they could do for us. My response was that I needed the air cylinder head from the emergency air compressor on the sister ship *Sealife2*. The air compressor cylinder head had to be removed from their compressor on their way out. A while later the *Sealife2* arrived and dropped off the skiff with the skiff man Glen d'Eon at the wheel in his scuba diving suit. He had told Captain Edward LeBlanc that if the skiff didn't make it, he could be saved in his scuba suit.

This time it was hooray! The air compressor head was wrapped in rags and plastic with a rope attached, to prevent it from being dropped overboard. It was so nice, lubricated and clean, that it looked like new. Also in the package was a bottle of liquor, I was told much later. Certainly not anything that I was interested in.

It took little time to install the head on the compressor and get the port generator engine going. Now we had air and lights and heat. There were transfer filters, generator filters, and main engine filters to change. We had to drain water from the bottom of the day tank. I elected one of the crew to hold a five-gallon can under the generator filter drain to keep water running out. Before I could finish with the filters a stranger arrived from another boat. He was the shore engineer from the Canso fish plant. That was certainly appreciated as he knew just what to do to help. The first thing he did was to ask me if we had gotten fuel the day before, which we had. He said that the valve on the big pipe that the tanker connected to at the harbor leaked and that the tanker would pump sea water up the long pipe to push the fuel into the storage tanks to keep the fuel in the pipe from leaking back into the harbour. Therefore, some water had to be drained from the storage tanks afterwards when it had settled to the bottom.

I then realized that there were two things that caused the dilemma, water in the fuel and a rusty air compressor. There was no way that we could have avoided the water situation when we didn't know. I didn't think of trying out the emergency air compressor before departure from port. We later decided that the shore engineer's duty would be to see that all the equipment on every vessel would be periodically operated to avoid such a situation in the future. In those early years of that fishery there were many problems which we were able to avoid as time went on.

We soon had the filters changed, the main engine going, and we were able to haul up the anchor and were on our way back to port. I was told recently that there were media people on the wharf and lots of people awaiting our arrival. I missed that for I was again in the engine room. Back in port we noticed that there was not a thing left on deck that was not tied down. When we were finally tied to the wharf, I realized that I had not slept in approximately 60 hours. I just wanted to lie down and sleep, but sleep would not come. I got up again and went to the galley. Someone had brought some whiskey. I poured a large drink and went back in the bunk. When I awoke many hours later the boat was moved and empty. I asked who had started the engine and they said, you, and you went back to bed so we had to shut it off. I didn't remember any of that. Some of the crew apparently had many more drinks than me that day.

I remember how shiny the anchor and the anchor chain were when I went out to examine the boat. There wasn't a bit of paint or rust left on it. It looked like stainless steel. Obviously, it had been dragged on the bottom many times during the storm.

I was recently asked by some friends to write this. It is now 2024 and nearly 50 years have gone by. Four of the crew members have since passed away and it is very unlikely that any of the remaining crew members other than me would have recorded the event. It is difficult to find words to express the feelings in such a situation. I certainly want to thank those who came to our rescue. A special thanks to the captains and crews of the *Matuna Maid* and *Sealife2*.

[Editor's note: We were saddened to hear that Captain Wayne Thorbourne recently passed away, in March 2025, bringing this to five crew members who have passed away. Sadly, Captain Wayne did not get to read Henri's account of their "Mariner's Nightmare".]

**CREW MEMBERS:**

**Captain:** Wayne Thorbourne

**Mate:** Arthur d'Entremont

**Cook:** Kenneth d'Entremont (Kush)

**Deck hands:** Delphis d'Entremont (Beer); Raymond d'Eon; Bradford Belliveau (Chumly)

**Engineer:** Henri d'Entremont

These photos have been provided to us by the author, Henri d'Entremont. Henri advised that the photographs have been obtained from friends and fellow fishers.

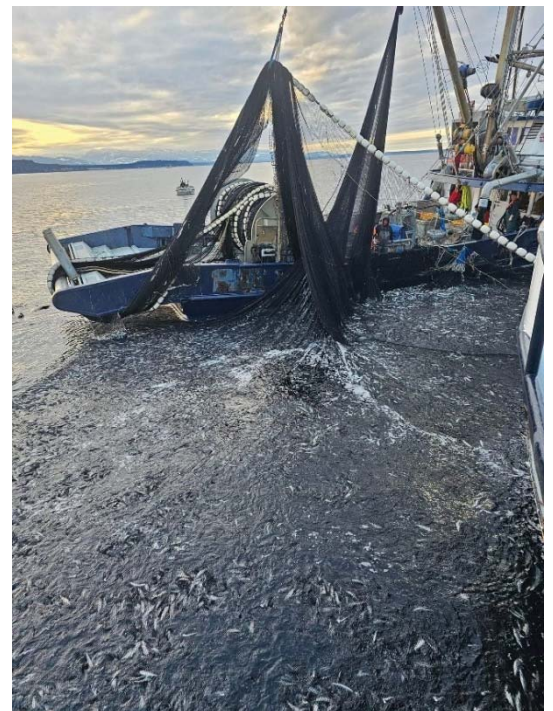


Above: Power skiff pulling a boat out of the seine.

Below: *Sealife 2* – loaded and at the pump, ready to unload. Note the deck at water level. Also, the fuel storage tanks on the hill above.



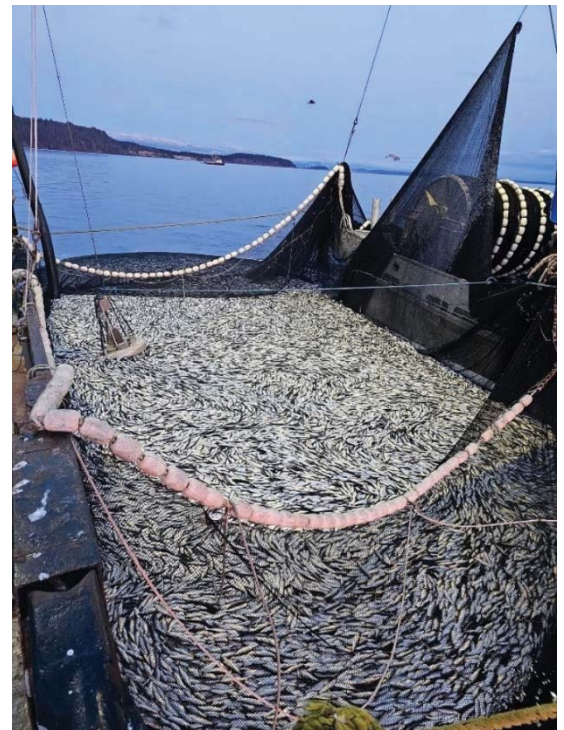
Above: This is a herring seiner, one of the three *Sealife* fishing vessels with the seine out and a full load, so the deck is at water level.



Above: A good catch. Note the power skiff keeping the seiner out of the seine.



Left: "Seine out". A nice set for the *Canada 100*.



Right: Two seiners sharing a catch.



Henri d'Entremont, resident of West Pubnico, was a marine engineer and mechanic for eight years, a fisherman for five years, a teacher in mechanical trades for eleven years, then was in electronic sales for 15-plus years. Henri retired 20 years ago for health reasons. This is Henri's first submission to *The Argus*.

Photo at right shows Henri enjoying his best hobby.

