

Chapter 7

Chippewa Bay Cabin Buster

How could I get so stupid so quickly? Certainly, this is no place to be tonight. I can see the headline in the local newspaper: “Boater Missing on Powell Lake.” The rest of the newspaper article goes on to outline how this relatively unknown American launched from the Shinglemill dock near sunset on Monday during a developing north wind.

The few locals who knew the missing man note that he loved the lake but was relatively new to the region. He possessed little boating experience and probably didn’t understand the hazards of this lake at night. Errant logs had pushed south from the Head during a recent March storm, so collision hazards may have played a role in the American’s disappearance. Reports indicate that the 18-foot bowrider was brand new, purchased earlier that same day in Port Alberni and trailered to Powell Lake with help from a friend, using the Comox ferry for the last leg of the trip. Mysterious circumstances: Why would this inexperienced boater purchase a bowrider in Port Alberni and then depart up the lake at night in bad weather?

The newspaper article would struggle for quotes from those who knew the American: “He really didn’t know boats,” says his friend John. “I helped him trailer it back with my sister’s truck. He thought he could pull it with his old Ford Tempo, but I convinced him that was suicide.”

Maybe this is suicide. John helped me launch at the south end of the lake a half hour ago. During the boat’s purchase at Port Alberni, I insisted that John test-drive the new bowrider. What do I know about boats anyway? John wheeled the Champion stern-drive in high-speed circles and reported that it handled terrific – no cavitation on those dual counter-rotating props even in tight turns. But he wasn’t

impressed with my Internet purchase. Had I really thought about those dual props? And what about fuel consumption? Answer: Of course not.

That was one of the few times that John remained silent while I hung myself. I guess he didn't feel he knew me well enough. Since then, he has spoken up as soon as I come up with stupid ideas. And now I *always* listen, but it was a slow learning process.

On the trip home from Port Alberni, we stayed with the boat below the ferry deck, primarily because Bro was with us. I was proud to greet an admirer eyeballing my new boat during the ferry ride, and he seemed to know boats, proving the wisdom of my purchase. This fellow was particularly impressed with the dual props, the blades gleaming in the stark lighting of the bowels of the *Queen of Burnaby*. He did note, however, that one problem with dual props involves boating in areas with lots of flotsam to jam between the counter-rotating propellers. In such instances, the drive shaft could immediately be destroyed. I decided not to mention that this boat was destined for Powell Lake, flotsam capital of the world.

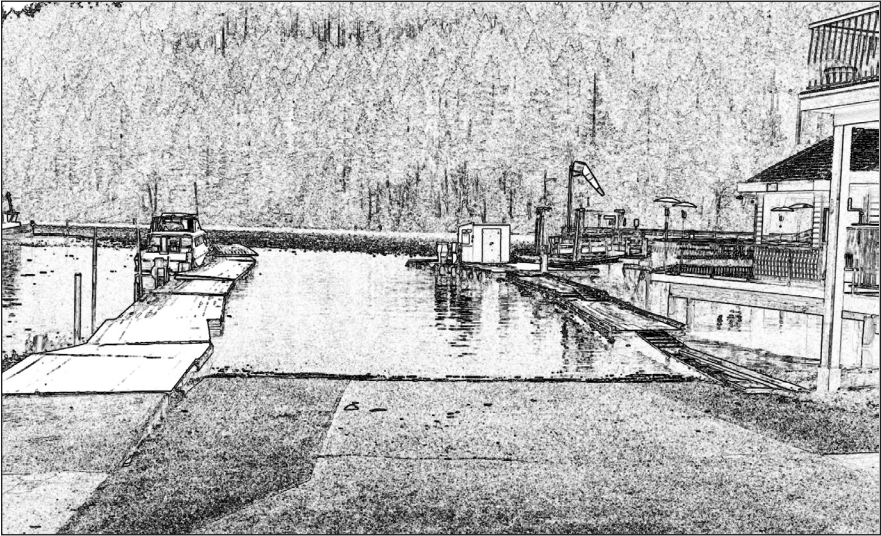
I also soon learn that there is no way to slow the dual props to a crawl when approaching a dock. Just keep on driving – a rule-of-thumb for an amateur like me that leads to a lot of scrapes and profanity during the docking process over the next few months.

This evening, on the southern finger of Powell Lake, the newness of the boat is wearing off fast. The waves have whitecaps pushed by strong winds from the north, and that is the direction I'm heading. My float cabin is not far away, less than four miles remain, but the wind-swept waves have developed very suddenly.

Leaving the Shinglemill nearly an hour ago, John waved me away after launching the new boat from its trailer. Although he warned me about the typical trailer launching errors, I immediately tried to start the engine with the stern-drive leg still raised. The overwhelming noise of the prop whirling in the air got my attention, but not before the locals, drinking beer in the pub overlooking the docks, witnessed an amateur in action. (Maybe they'll be quoted in the newspaper too.)

I quickly lowered the leg (throttle thumb-switch) and glanced back at John, who was shaking his head in horror. Nothing bothers John more than equipment abuse, and he sees a lot of it from me. But

certainly, he wouldn't send me off into approaching darkness with a new boat that could kill me. Or would he? What do I really know about John anyway? He has a nice dog.



For the first few miles, it is a piece of cake. But darkness is waging stiff competition after that long haul from Port Alberni, and this boat is completely foreign to me. I should have at least sat in the driver's seat in Port Alberni. Yet I feel relatively comfortable in this (to me) big boat.

The complete blue canvas package is installed – the cabin is completely enclosed. The plastic windows to the sides and rear distort my view. I can't see well in any direction except straight ahead. But the steady rain makes the canvas covering a reasonable decision. In fact, the rain is starting to become a real problem.

Seeing straight ahead is increasingly difficult. There was a minor lack of communication during the Internet purchase of this boat regarding the equipment list, and the all-essential windshield wiper is missing. The boat is now plowing into heavy waves, water splashing over the bow onto the windshield, further reducing the already low visibility.

John explained this type of storm to me months ago. He calls them CB CB'ers – Chippewa Bay Cabin Busters. The winds blow strong from Chippewa Bay (northwest of my current position), across

several miles of open water. The east shore of the lower lake (current location of an American in a new bowrider) is ravaged by the winds and accompanying waves. Float cabins on the lower east shoreline are directly in the path of devastation.

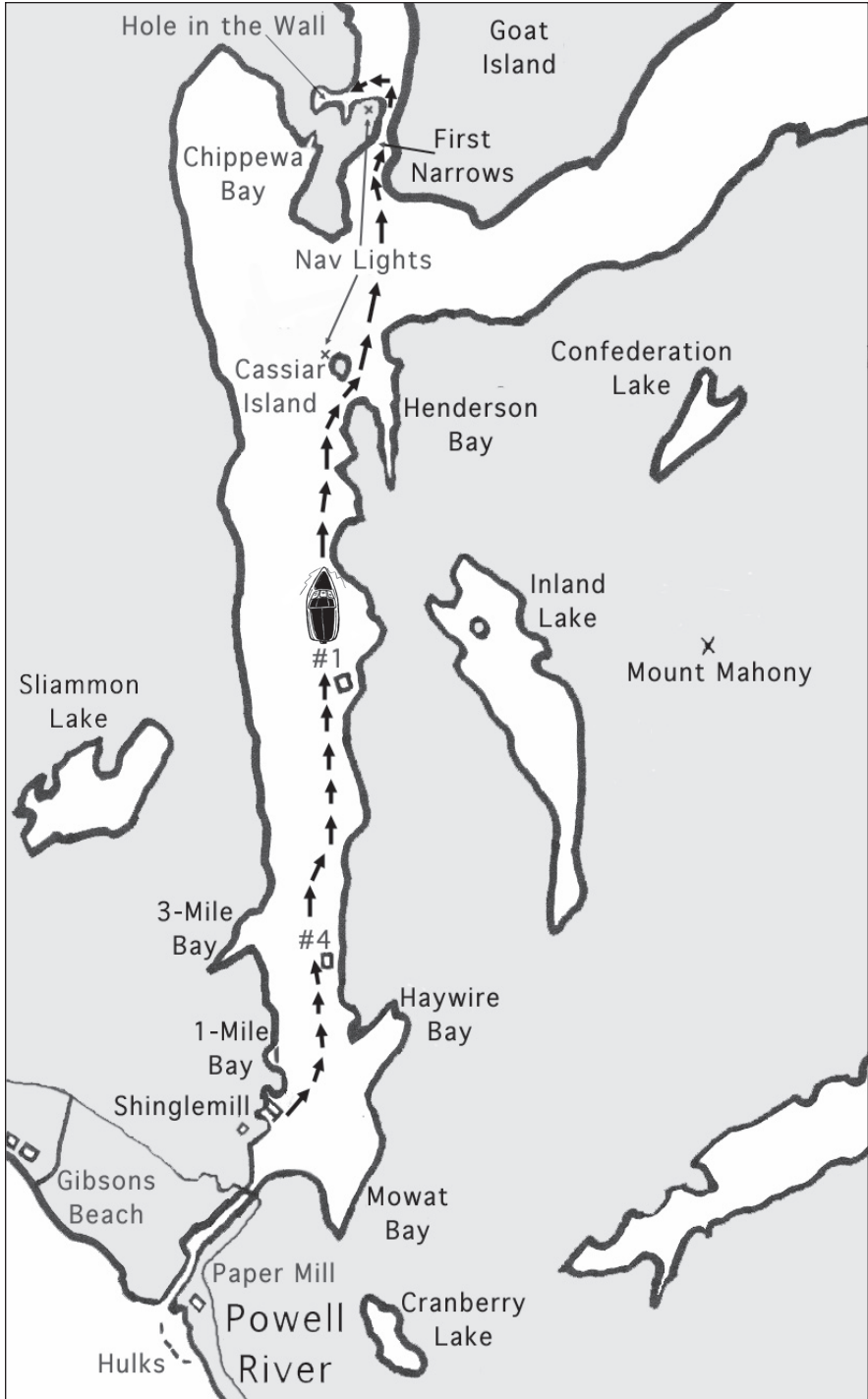
This is my first CB CB'er, and it is on my first night trip on this lake. And this is a brand new boat. And, just to increase my tension a bit further, the worst is straight ahead – the confluence of lower Powell Lake with First Narrows and Chippewa Bay. The north wind blows downslope across Chippewa Bay, with nothing to stop the blast except float cabins and Americans in Campion bowriders. John refers to this area of the lake as the North Sea, an apt thought tonight.

The east shore of the lower lake is almost always the tranquil side. This is normally the route to take, unless there is dead calm. The lack of cabins on the west shore is evidence of this weather trend. But when CB CB'ers blow, there are few safe spots on the lower lake. The east shore takes the direct blast.

Being alone on this lake at night reminds me of flight in the clouds. Flying is a very exact (and safe) science, but everything seems more challenging when you are alone in the clouds. Even a non-pilot in the other seat adds to the sense of safety. There are times alone in the clouds when it is easy to question your sanity. Why would a logical human being accept this act of defiance, regardless of level of experience? Hurtling through a cloud in a metal vessel at three times highway speed makes little sense. The same holds true tonight. Alone in this boat at night, in this storm, is very alone.

The waves have about three miles to build from the head of Chippewa Bay, and I estimate their height here as three feet, but what do I know about waves? I know that this lake is large enough to form wind waves that are too big for this boat.

Darkness makes the waves seem even bigger. My docking lights illuminate the waves as they crest and crash across the bow. I consider turning off the lights to prevent viewing this power of nature. There is little danger of collision with other boats, so the lights are of little value in that respect. Experienced local boaters are at home in front of their televisions tonight, and the logging workboats (with the luxury of radar and all-weather hulls) are done for the day. But I leave the docking lights on – there is plenty of flotsam in this lake tonight.



I unzip the blue overhead canvas panel and flop open the walk-through windshield so that I can stand and see the waves ahead without interference from the glass. I've seen John do this. In fact, he drives more standing than sitting most of the time, especially in tight situations.

I meet the waves head-on, and that seems best. But it also results in laborious forward progress. It is now so dark that I need my glasses, but they don't have windshield wipers either. As soon as my glasses encounter the rain through the overhead hatch, they are splattered with water and fog up instantly, so I pull them off and put them in my pocket.

It is getting noticeably colder as the March darkness sets in. I weighed some of the effects of the darkness and cold before launching. The moon is nearly full, a favorable factor that I proudly considered during this evening launch. However, total cloud cover completely negates that major benefit.

In my considerations, I didn't properly evaluate the effects of the wind and wiperless rain. This lake is to be respected after dark on the best of nights, and during storms there are floating logs that spontaneously generate. They are hidden in the wave troughs during rough water like tonight. My thoughts turn to the dual props. I wonder if my insurance covers the props and driveshaft. I wonder if I even have insurance.

By the time the biggest waves begin to flow from the mouth of Chippewa Bay, I am well past John's oldest cabin (the address he calls Number 1). I could have tied up there at a familiar dock and spent the night in safety, but the waves didn't seem so big then.

I really want to get to my cabin at Hole in the Wall tonight. Pilots have a name for this – it's called get-home-itis. Mountains and valleys are strewn with wreckage from this common pilot disease. Much of that wreckage occurs suddenly in the dark.

Hole in the Wall isn't very far past Chippewa Bay, and turning back to John's cabin seems out of the question. I wonder if turning around and running with the waves is easier or worse? (I later learn that travel in following seas improves handling for this V-hull design and obviously speeds forward progress.) Hugging the shore, I don't want to turn this boat around tonight, with logs and hidden snags

seemingly everywhere. Nor do I like the thought of turning broadside to these waves, even momentarily, during a course reversal.

There are land cabins immediately to my right. I could find shelter there – some are probably unlocked. Just being on shore would be a relief. That is, if I don't demolish the boat making landfall in the dark in an area that is littered with killer obstacles. At least I'm wearing my life vest. I'd last a few minutes in the frigid water, deeper than Loch Ness.

I think through the scenario of going to shore at one of these nearby cabin docks. Docking is something I haven't done yet in this boat, and I'm not confident the *Campion* will survive my docking in these conditions.

I recognize the luxurious land cabin on my right that marks the last structure before the open stretch of water leading to First Narrows. There's usually a large Canadian flag flying here, but the cabin is dark tonight.

I'm eager for the green flashing light that marks the west side of the Narrows, but the rain is too heavy and the visibility too low to see it. I continue northward at near-idle, wondering if I should try meeting these waves at a faster speed. I throttle up slightly, and all seems instantly worse. I reduce power to the previous setting, and the blasts of water over the bow decrease, but my forward progress is only a crawl. The last cabin slips behind me. I am in the open water.

I entertain one more thought of turning around, since I know that Henderson Bay juts back to my right. It will slide farther behind if I proceed, but I can still make a hard right turn (150 degrees) and slip into the bay. There are many cabins there, but Henderson Bay is oriented nearly directly in line with Chippewa, so the waves will be large. And turning into Henderson Bay will mean turning downwind. In an airplane, that can be deadly, since stall-spin accidents are common during such turns at low altitudes, with visual references that cause pilots to slow unsafely as the groundspeed increases during the turn. Airplanes fly by airspeed alone, not groundspeed. What about boats in rolling waves?

There are so many things familiar to me from flying. Boating and flying, in fact, have so many things in common that the transition

seems too easy. Navigation, weather, air (water) flow, mechanical systems, and safety – all possess similarities. But the transition tonight isn't working very well. How could I get so stupid so quickly?

Where's the portable spotlight? It plugs into the DC socket, and I can see the receptacle directly in front of me. Rain is spraying down through the overhead canvas hatch and through the open windshield. It soaks my jacket and pants. They are not waterproof, so now I'm simultaneously wet, cold, scared, and exhausted.

I'm wearing my life vest, and that's a plus. How many boaters actually wear their life vests? Answer: Not many. They feel they can put it on quickly during an emergency. How many emergencies provide time to don a life vest in advance? Answer: Very few. An accident in Oregon in 2003 killed nearly all aboard a tour boat that launched from a tricky ocean harbor during a developing storm. The few passengers wearing life vests were saved. Those without drowned. No surprise – the boat's captain was one of those who drowned without his vest.

Related things to think about right now: Life vests should be purchased for their heavy-duty flotation properties, and a bright color helps find you in the waves. Of course, my tightly zipped vest is very sporty – olive green (practically invisible at night) and so thin and comfortable that I doubt it would keep me afloat. My body will be very stylish when it is found washed up on the rocky shore.

The portable spotlight is in the cloth bag somewhere behind me. I reach back, groping in the dark. Nothing. I'm tempted to shift the engine into neutral, and then scurry to the back of the boat to find the bag. But I must remain headed into these waves – this much I know. I'm not sure I'll survive sideways in these troughs.

The waves are growing ever larger. The bow thrusts up and then crashes down with a major whack, and water sprays through the open windshield, the overhead hatch, and all over me. I can't reduce speed even a little without losing my forward progress. Should I go faster? I'm hardly moving, but the waves are already crashing over the bow.

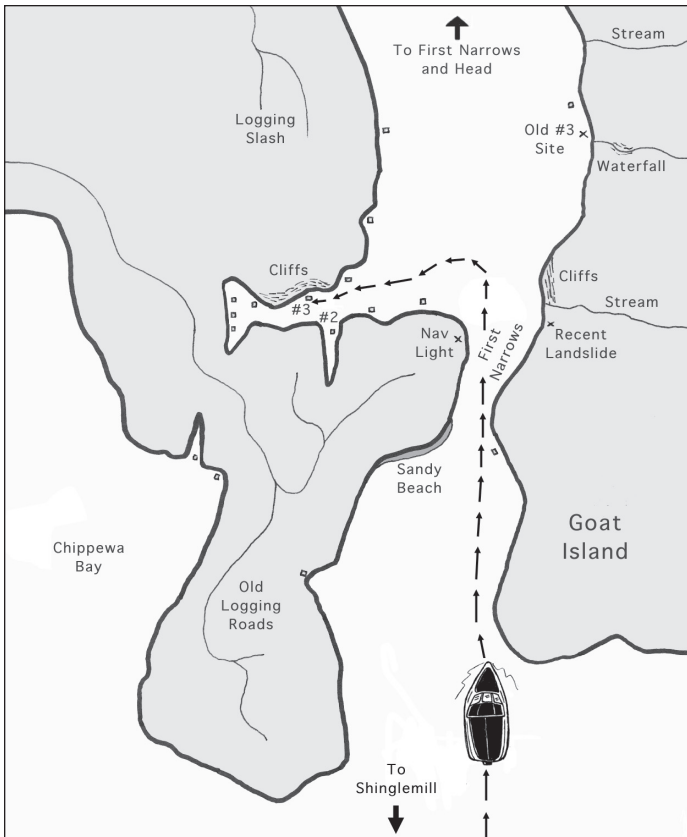
It's certain now: I should not be here. I am way over my head (too literal to laugh). Who would even know I'm missing? Only John.

There's a faint green flashing light ahead, slightly to my left. But it is moving all over the place (must be the waves). Red-right-returning.

I wonder if I'm returning? Up-lake, in this case, means I'm returning, I think. So a green light on the left is good.

There are no lights except the flashing green beacon in any direction. Wait, there's a dimly flashing white light on the small inland sliping behind me to the left. The rain seems even worse in that direction, so maybe I am closer to the island (Cassiar Island) and the white light than I think. So what does a flashing white light mean?

I know the green light. It sits on a rocky bluff just after the sandy beach and just before Hole in the Wall. The white light means I'm past Cassiar Island and its numerous snags. Maybe.



That puts me into the wide area just south of First Narrows – the North Sea. There's nothing to hit here – except floating logs, of course. This water is nearly a thousand feet deep, and wind waves are

unhindered by the wide-open expanses in all directions. Even with light winds, this area is usually chopped by swirling flows from all points of the compass. Tonight it is a torrent. It's raining even harder now – pouring, to be more precise. And it is very dark.

This lake is an ancient fjord, once connected to the ocean at the south end. The depths are enormous. (It's not a pleasant night to think about that!) The water below me goes so far down that there is evidence of prehistoric salt water near the bottom. I've plumbed the bottom near my float cabin using a fishing line and sinker. Even at the corner of my cabin deck closest to shore (20 feet from the shore), the depth is over 50 feet. The lake bottom drops off from the shore in a nearly vertical descent at practically all locations on this lake. I bought an anchor for my previous boat because it's on the Canadian Coast Guard's recommended equipment list, and John laughed: "What do you plan to do with that? You'll need at least 500 feet of rope to reach bottom."

Suddenly, the weather starts to get better. It could be my imagination. No, it's really getting better. The waves are noticeably smaller, barely whitecaps. The protection of the headlands is becoming a factor (good ol' Goat Island, known to me as Goat Mountain). The rain is letting up, and I can see again. I pull my smeared glasses from my pocket, wipe them off (on my wet jacket cuff), put them on, and discover an instant total fog. Back in my pocket they go.

There is a float cabin ahead and slightly to the right. I know that one. The flashing green light is clearly to my left, and even in the dark, I can see the light-colored sand of the beach (one of the few on this lake) on the left side of the boat. I'm home, or almost so.

Over the next mile, the waves trickle away to almost nothing, and I am able to add throttle for normal cruise. First Narrows is nearly calm by comparison to what is behind me. Hole in the Wall is so placid that the biggest danger is hitting the floating pieces of wood caught in the stillness.

Entering the Hole, I pull the throttle back to idle and wait for the boat to decelerate. It's noticeably quieter under these calm conditions at this low RPM, and that relaxes my heart. I shift into neutral, slip to the back of the boat, find the spotlight in the bag, and plug it in. Light

is directed wherever I desire. No longer is the darkness in command. I scan across the Hole, identifying floating obstacles that I'll need to avoid. I'm in charge again.

Small logs and sticks float everywhere, but I can proceed safely through the calm water. Slow forward. No shore lights anywhere, but my spotlight reflects suddenly bright against my cabin's sliding glass door nearly straight ahead. I hold the spotlight there. It calms me. I pull the throttle back to idle again, and then switch into neutral about 100 feet offshore of the log breakwater that marks my cabin entrance. Ignition off.

The engine blower is still on – I forgot to turn it off nearly an hour ago when leaving the Shinglemill. I switch the blower off, and there is total silence. My navigation and docking lights are bright in the darkness, but the quiet is all encompassing. Like flying, when you are struggling in turbulence, smooth air seems incomprehensible. During those moments of rough air, it seems that you've never previously encountered calm conditions. But when you again find smooth skies, you wonder why you were so scared by the turbulence.

It is calm now, and all the terror is behind. But the power of this environment lurks in the background – always there, always to be respected.

I savor the moment, for all is well. I am home.

