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BOATING

June 2002

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BY DANIEL W. LONG

We Steal Your Boat.

We're out to steal a boat, any boat. Maybe your boat. My less-than-reputable cohort on this mission, Rich, has a long employment history on the water. He's an ex-clammer, ex-lobsterman, ex-swordfisherman (and some say, ex-con)—the perfect accomplice. Our first obstacle is the marina's outer fence, which is chained closed. Game over. But on closer inspection, I see that the chain is only wrapped to give the appearance of being locked. We unravel it and drive in.

I park my truck and as we walk to the docks, Rich gives a friendly nod to the straddle-lift handler who looks in our direction. After that, no one gives us a second glance.

The gate to the dock has a coded lock, but we slip in behind a large group. At the target, Rich goes aboard. I



THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

Time Elapsed: 4 minutes, 4 seconds

TO TEACH YOU A LESSON



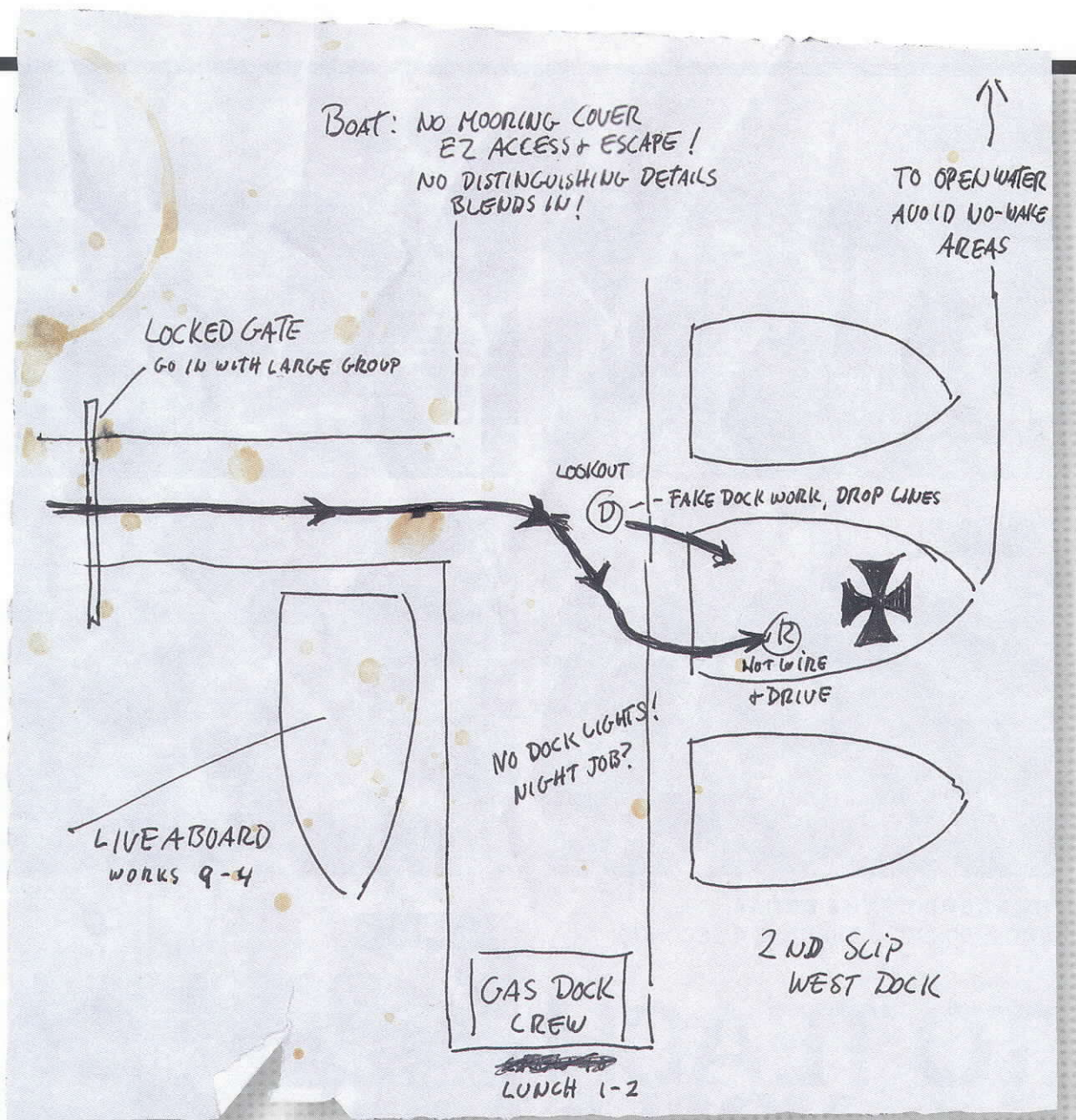
keep lookout and free all but two docklines while keeping my eyes peeled on the gate.

All's well until a voice sends a lump to my throat. "Is Eric going to be around today?" asks a ponytailed blonde. Sweat pours from under my arms as I start to wonder if my lawyer works on Saturdays. I assume Eric owns the boat Rich is in the process of hot-wiring. My response? A brilliant "Nope." Luckily, that's all the explanation necessary.

"Okay. Tell him Cathy stopped by," she says, and walks off.

"Sure," I barely get out, as Rich gets the blower going and then the engine. I free the last lines and hop aboard. Rich takes us out of the harbor, I take inventory. Brand-new Chris-Craft express cruiser, street value \$140,000. The key to the cabin is in a drinkholder. Down below is a VHF, GPS, TV, microwave, and two Penn 5500 SS reels. The spoils in here alone are worth the effort. Haul for the day: \$142,220.

Rick Diaz, South Florida Yachtis, Miami



SKETCH OF A HEIST

To Stop a Thief

THE GATE Tell the marina you want the code changed at least once during the season. When you see someone you don't know, ask him what boat he's on. Explain, in a friendly way, that there have been security problems. A good guy will answer fast, a bad guy will get squirrely. Watch him.

SLIP LOCATION Keep your boat near where people hang out and in a well-lit area. If the boat next to yours is in bad shape or has the list of drunkard, move your boat. A neglected boat means less activity on the dock. How close is your slip to open water? Can a thief be on plane five feet from your slip? A bad guy will avoid no-wake zones like the plague.

DOCKLINES We lock our \$500 bicycles wherever we go, but not our boats. It doesn't make sense. All that's required to secure your boat to the dock is a stainless-steel cable and a padlock. The more obstacles for a thief, the less likely your boat will be targeted.

THE BOAT There are plenty of security devices out there, even the most primitive puts the odds back in your favor. Put the warning decal that came with it on your windshield. A hidden fuel cutoff or electric power cutoff is always a good idea. Some folks remove a spark plug. Whatever you do, please, if nothing else: Take the keys with you when you leave.

I am not a crook.

Well, I wasn't until now. I've come to this Long Island, New York, marina on a crowded weekend to steal a boat. Anybody's boat. Maybe yours. I don't care. Never having attempted this before, I could end up in the hoosegow, boyfriend to some tattooed Mike Tyson. But for your benefit, I'm willing to take that chance. You can thank me later. Besides, it may go off without a hitch and I'll clear the inlet with a new boat and a smile. In fact, odds are that I will.

I'm putting myself at risk to prove a point. According to law enforcement records, boats are being stolen at an alarming rate. More often than not, it's our own fault. Most of our boats are sitting ducks, waiting to be plucked. Easy targets with nothing but a few docklines to stave off criminals.

According to Boat/U.S., an average of 1,000 boats a month are stolen in this country, costing insurance companies close to \$100 million per year. The totals for stolen gear and electronics exceed \$45 million per year. And if insurance companies have to pay, they're kind enough to share those expenses with us in the form of higher premiums.

In 2001 the FBI's stolen boats file had 30,000 boats on record. That doesn't account for unreported crimes or mistakes in entering data in the file, which some law enforcement officers say would double that figure. In order, the five states where you're most likely to have your boat pilfered are: Florida, California, Texas, Michigan, and New York. Waterbikes alone account for close to 8,000 thefts per year. To make matters worse, if someone does rob you, the chances of recovery are pretty slim—about 1 in 10.

These statistics don't even begin to touch on engine theft. Engines can demand as much as three times their retail value in places like Mexico and Puerto Rico, where getting parts is difficult. Recognizing the value of these items, crooks set up networks, or rings, to steal, then sell, the stolen goods.

One such ring was recently foiled—but only after banking millions of dollars. Over a period of three years, more than 300 waterbikes were reported stolen from the waters around New York City. A break in the case came when patrol officers noticed four waterbikes being loaded onto a rental truck at a local ramp. After determining that the waterbikes were in fact stolen, they arrested the perps for grand larceny and stolen property. Apparently, the criminals sang like canaries. The police learned that the waterbikes were being shipped legitimately to Puerto Rico on container ships. When they arrived, the waterbikes were then registered legally because hull identification number searches aren't conducted there. Puerto Rico also isn't connected to the FBI's stolen-boat database. With the cooperation of Puerto Rico's Department of Navigation, NYPD cops matched a list of hull identification numbers from stolen waterbikes to a list of waterbikes that had been registered in Puerto Rico. Bingo. As a result, five people in Puerto Rico and more than 50 people in the United States were thrown in the slammer.

If it hadn't been for the clown who pulled away from the launch ramp in a Ryder truck, however, the ring would still be operational. Let's face it, the guys stealing boats aren't the brightest bulbs, yet 9 out of 10 get away with it. So, with the numbers on my side, I decide to give it a try. If the statistics are accurate, this marina—like yours—is ready to be raided.

Too Quiet for Comfort

Okay, time for a straight-up confession. We were given permission to "steal" the boat. But the owner didn't go out of his way to make it easy—yet it was.

Why are boats so susceptible? Like I said, most of the fault is our own. But marinas can't escape blame. Boat theft rings often establish patterns of activity—stealing specific boats or engines, striking at the same time of the week, even using similar weather conditions as cover. Yet this information often doesn't get to the cops because marinas don't want the word to get out that they've been hit. There's a trend where marina owners don't let on about what's happening on their grounds. But if they did communicate with other marinas and law enforcement about theft on their properties, patterns could be revealed and boats saved.

Understandably, marinas don't want to alarm customers, but unless information is disseminated properly, we all suffer. Ask other boaters if they've had any gear stolen, no matter how small or inexpensive. If you come across evidence of theft, tell the marina manager; have him make the proper authorities aware. Finally, stop by your local precinct to ask if there have been any reports of stolen boats at your marina.

As owners, however, we shouldn't be too hard on marinas. From those running the yards we hear that it's often

Smart Alarms

The new generation of marine security systems is a lot better than the typical home system adapted for boats. Laser Plot's BoatRemote system monitors 10 functions, including an intrusion alarm, cabin noise, bilge activity, battery functions, dockside power, and air or water temperatures. If any of these goes askew, the microprocessor automatically dials eight numbers until someone answers, at which point a recording explains in plain language what's wrong. Price: \$2,000. Contact Laser Plot at 508/757-2831, www.laserplot.com.

LoJack has come to boating. Now you never have to lose sight of your pride and joy. Using GPS technology, this state-of-the-art tracking system offers real-time location (updated every five minutes) of your boat. Past movements over a specified period of time can also be traced by querying the company's database. The device creates a "geo-fence" around your boat, which, if crossed, sends an automatic notification to your phone, Web browser, Web phone, or pager. Price: \$550, plus a nonrefundable \$50 activation fee and \$10 monthly plan. Contact SecuraTrak at 888/840-6060, www.securatrak.com. —D.L.

boaters themselves who steal. Boat-to-boat theft of gear and electronics is a real issue.

If we cannibalize ourselves, how can we expect the marina to help? Would you like it if the marina hired a task force of nosy guards? Or what about the prospect of checking in every guest?

"It's a general attitude in the boating community. A kind of laid-back, ho-hum attitude toward security," says Brian Ripley, former president of the International Association of Marine Investigators (IAMI).

We have found the enemy, and it is us. Now what?

On the Case

If we refuse to do anything about it, at least there are people looking out for us. Local authorities, which used to be on their own, each working independent of the other, are now organized on an international level. IAMI is a non-profit volunteer organization of marine law enforcement, insurance investigators, industry investigators, and surveyors from around the world.

Lieutenant Al Smith of the Alabama Marine Patrol gives the organization credit for aiding him in a recent sting operation that resulted in a crime-ring bust. Sixty-five cases were cleared in two states as a result of Smith's operations, with more charges pending. "The factors that led to the arrest were cooperation between state and local law enforcement across hundreds of miles and two states, and training and information from IAMI," says Smith.

These are the good guys, and we can help them help us. In British Columbia one IAMI member—with cooperation from concerned boaters—helped set up a Hands Off Marine Identification Program. Multiple identifiers such as microdots, which are miniature chips with unique security codes, are

attached to your boat, engine, and trailer. This increases the chances of recovery. The program also supplies Hands Off warning decals. Count on your insurance company's thumbs up. It may even offer a discount. Contact IAMI at www.iamimarine.com.

If You Want It Done Right

How can we help ourselves? Boat thieves are a nefarious breed not easily defined. They span the gamut from two-bit hoodlums looking for a quick electronics score to steal-to-order organizations selling hot boats to drug runners. But in one way they're all the same—they look for the easy target. And there's no limit of those. Which is good for you, as all it takes to make your boat unappealing to the bad guys are simple things such as locks, alarm systems, and theft warning decals. Take it up a notch and install lockable battery switches and ignition bypass switches in hidden areas. Close your cabin curtains before locking up. Take your valuables with you, especially if you're going to be away awhile. Dumb and obvious? Yup. But most boaters don't even do this.

"A large percentage of boats are stolen because people leave them on trailers, facing the road, with no locks," says Ripley. He suggests making the boat less visible, locking the hitch, and using a wheel lock. Keep serial numbers of your boat, motor, trailer, and electronics. Take photos of your boat and its equipment.

One boater we know leaves a line dangling overboard—easily overlooked by thieves, it will foul the prop as soon as the boat is put in gear. The owner of our "stolen" boat made no such attempt. It was almost too easy. Heading back to return the boat to its slip, a disturbing thought comes to mind: This could have been your boat. Or worse, it could have been mine. ⚓

Bring 'em Back Alive

Cops don't have a good record of finding and returning stolen boats. Once your boat is gone, you can up your chances of getting it back by contacting Todd and Associates at 800/325-8061. In six years of operation, this headhunter for missing boats has a 64 percent recovery rate. By faxing more than 7,000 marine-related businesses, including law enforcement agencies, highway patrol, U.S. Customs, the U.S. Coast Guard, immigration, parks services, marinas, launch ramps, fuel stations, and marine stores, Todd and Associates gets your info into the right hands. The cost? \$1 per fax for domestic, \$2.50 for international.

The company also maintains a have-you-seen-this-boat-style Web site at www.boatman.com—it displays photos of stolen boats, pertinent data, and whether any reward is offered. It receives more than 4,000 hits a day. —D.L.