

tanks, 100mm artillery, anti-tank missiles and 18 troop-carrying helicopters.

Okinawa in about two weeks in an emergency.

of 20 ships generally in the Arabian

Officials said the Marines will

Turn to Page A-4, Col. 6

Trio Survives 40 Terrifying Days Lost and Adrift in the 'Little Ark'

By Murry Engle
Star-Bulletin Writer

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K2

A Honolulu man who, with his son and a crewman, survived 40 harrowing days lost at sea aboard a 35-foot converted Navy lifeboat, says the Coast Guard did not conduct an adequate search and treated his distress calls like a "hoax."

The Coast Guard conceded it did suspect the calls were a hoax because they contained improper terminology and conflicting position reports, but a spokesman in Honolulu said a "more than adequate" search was conducted.

John Liebespeck, skipper of the Little Ark, said in an interview that he and his son Martin, 19, had set out from Honolulu (Nov. 24) with a French crewman, Christian Gullmotto, on what was to be an 18-day trip to Majuro Atoll, by way of Johnston Island.

Marshallese President Amata Kabua and his nephew Michael Kabua of Kabua-Runyon Inc. had asked the senior Liebespeck and his associate, Berlin Blair, president of the Hawaiian and International Seafood Co. of Hawaii, to help develop the Marshallese economy.

IT WAS THE younger Liebespeck's first sea voyage and he enjoyed it — until the first storm hit Nov. 30.

That night at 8:30, as his father and Gullmotto slept below, the seas were running 20 feet. Martin Liebespeck was fighting the wheel when suddenly it spun easily in his hands and the boat ran wild.

Minutes later, all three men were on the pitching stern with flashlights.

Inside the Bulletin

| | | | |
|-----------------|-----|-------------------|------|
| Amusements ... | H-8 | Editorials..... | A-14 |
| Astrology | E-5 | Food | I-1 |
| Bridge | E-5 | Kokus Line | A-3 |
| Business | E-1 | News Briefs | B-8 |
| Stock List..... | E-2 | Obituaries..... | E-6 |
| Calendar | A-9 | People | B-6 |
| Classified..... | E-6 | Pulse | H-6 |
| Comics | E-5 | Sports | F-1 |
| Crossword | E-5 | Today | H-1 |
| Donnelly | H-2 | TV Logs | E-5 |
| Dear Abby | H-2 | Weather | A-3 |

"Couldn't see a damn thing," John Liebespeck said, "but I knew we were in real trouble," which was confirmed in the morning. The rudder was gone.

"It was catastrophe, the worst thing that can happen to a boat," the skipper said. He had confidence in the Little Ark, however. The 18-inch space between its double-wall construction was filled with polyurethane foam when it was built for the Navy, and before the trip, they'd added four inches of styrofoam insulation throughout the deck for extra buoyancy in case of emergencies.

"We were where we should be, 450 to 550 miles from Johnston Island, but drifting off course," skipper Liebespeck said. "The engine was useless because we couldn't steer."

THEY IMMEDIATELY went on tight rations and the skipper started signaling on a Position Indicator Radio, but it was malfunctioning. He also began transmitting radio Mayday calls "and did every day thereafter," he said, "in the beginning, several hours a day and then three times a day. I always knew where we were."

The Little Ark was due at Johnston Island. Turn to Page A-2, Col. 1

NOTICES
SEEN
4/24/80

836-1131
8332

13 FEB 1980

-REFER TO P34 PA. 4 LOG A-1

A-2

STAR-BULLETIN

Lost and

Continued from Page One

ston Island Dec. 2. On Dec. 3, Blair, in Honolulu, called the Coast Guard and asked them to check with Johnston.

Blair said the Coast Guard had received CB messages from two different operators — one from Ogden, Utah, and another from Paradise Park, Calif. The boat's name was misunderstood. But the Ogden operator got the boat's registration numbers right and misunderstood HA for Hawaii to be AK.

Blair has copies of the messages and said they were "close enough but the Coast Guard was treating the messages as a hoax."

Coast Guard spokesman Bob Baeten in Honolulu said the Coast Guard in San Francisco "decided the calls might be a hoax" because of the wrong terminology and conflicts in the position reports.

THE SEARCH didn't begin until after Blair's call to the Coast Guard.

"Seven days before, we tried to file a float plan with them," Blair said. "They said to file it with relatives or friends." Baeten agreed that this was the "proper procedure."

Baeten said "more than an adequate area was covered" in the Dec. 3 and 4 search — 19,500 square miles the first day and 135,000 the second day.

The search was in three areas, one west of Honolulu and south of Midway, one between Honolulu and



FORTY DAYS ON THE ARK—Skipper John Liebespeck and his son, Martin, 19, were lost in the Pacific with another crewman for 40 days aboard the disabled Little Ark, a converted Navy lifeboat. —Star-Bulletin Photo by Alexis Higdon.

Adrift for 40 Terrifying Days

Johnston, and one south of Honolulu, but closer to Palmyra — all "above the clouds," Baeten said, "trying to pick up the Emergency Position Indicator," which was malfunctioning.

The senior Liebespeck criticized the Coast Guard for dropping its search so soon. He said he was sure there would be a search of "at least seven days. I knew they knew, this being a naval lifeboat, that it wouldn't sink that easy," he said.

"I THOUGHT they might even continue to search longer. I would have searched harder for a lost hound dog. I'm not happy at all. If they had done low-level flying below the clouds I know they would've found us," he said.

Baeten said the two-day search limit was due to the "errors in positions in which computers were used to account for drift."

"Based on the information we had, they should have been there," Baeten said. He said the Coast Guard also monitored three CB channels and two VHF channels as late as Dec. 2.

A Coast Guard news release dated Jan. 2 also noted that a C-130 conducted a day-long search Dec. 5 and another Dec. 6 on the way back to Honolulu.

A Coast Guard study will be made later, Baeten said.

John Liebespeck is angry, nevertheless, because his son had to take many dangerous risks, including

nailing 10-foot long 2-by-4s to the deck to extend over the "thundering water," then crawling to the end to tie the jib to catch the wind.

"WHEN THE WIND changed, he had to do the same thing on the other side," the elder Liebespeck said. "Never sailed before, but he rigged all that up himself. It was quite a thing."

They ran out of the storm pretty well and tried to head southwest, in the direction of the Gilbert, Phoenix and Society islands, a direction in which there was heavy shipping.

But another storm with higher seas hit Dec. 9. The boat started taking on water. Martin discovered an 18-inch gash where rivets holding the keel under the mast ripped loose.

The three took turns bailing 24 hours a day, only to be hit by a third storm Dec. 15, which opened the 18-inch gash to four feet.

ALL THE FOOD and clothes were lost and the boat sank to deck level.

The skipper saved one chart, his log, a plastic bag to keep them in and a kerosene stove.

"We held hands and huddled close together in our life preservers on a little spot on the bow that surfaced every once in a while as the boat rolled. She set down at an angle and we realized she was going to float," John said.

The only food they had were flying fish that landed on the wet deck and sharks that they caught with the fish heads.

They were in stormy weather from the time of the first disaster until early January, always cold, always wet, but praying for wind for their sails and rain for drinking and fresh water baths.

CHRISTMAS WAS "hilarious," the skipper said with no trace of a smile. The three drank a can of beer that Martin Liebespeck dove six feet below deck to get.

"Somehow we never gave up, despite knowing we couldn't survive any more storms," the skipper said. "Martin sometimes saw airplanes in the sky where there were none. We slept close to keep warm, but still almost froze to death."

One morning, the Peruvian cargo ship Tello, off course herself to avoid the last storm the Little Ark had encountered, came over the horizon and the captain saw a life vest they'd hoisted to replace the tattered distress flag.

John Liebespeck almost collapsed on the cargo ship's ladder but made it up.

After they had hot coffee and soup, the ship's doctor examined them.

John Liebespeck, who started the trip weighing 175 pounds, was down to 120. His son had gone from 140 pounds to 118.

The rescue took place 1,400 miles south of Honolulu on Jan. 10, 40 days after the Little Ark had lost its rudder. As far as the crew knows, she's still out there fighting her storms.