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By Paul Tough

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A Speck in the Sea



John Aldridge on the deck of the Anna Mary. Credit... Daniel Shea for The New York Times

Looking back, John Aldridge knew it was a stupid move. When you're alone on the deck of a lobster boat in the middle of the night, 40 miles off the tip of Long Island, you don't take chances. But he had work to do: He needed to start pumping water into the Anna Mary's holding tanks to chill, so that when he and his partner, Anthony Sosinski, reached their first string of traps a few miles farther south, the water would be cold enough to keep the lobsters alive for the return trip. In order to get to the tanks, he had to open a metal hatch on the deck. And the hatch was covered by two 35-gallon Coleman coolers, giant plastic insulated ice chests that he and Sosinski filled before leaving the dock in Montauk harbor seven hours earlier. The coolers, full, weighed about 200 pounds, and the only way for Aldridge to move them alone was to snag a box hook onto the plastic handle of the bottom one, brace his legs, lean back and pull with all his might.

And then the handle snapped.

Suddenly Aldridge was flying backward, tumbling across the deck toward the back of the boat, which was wide open, just a flat, slick ramp leading straight into the black ocean a few inches below. Aldridge grabbed for the side of the boat as it went past, his fingertips missing it by inches. The water hit him like a slap. He went under, took in a mouthful of Atlantic Ocean and then surfaced, sputtering. He yelled as loud as he could, hoping to wake Sosinski, who was asleep on a bunk below the front deck. But the diesel engine was too loud, and the Anna Mary, on autopilot, moving due south at six and a half knots, was already out of reach, its navigation lights receding into the night. Aldridge shouted once more, panic rising in his throat, and then silence descended. He was alone in the darkness. A single thought gripped his mind: This is how I'm going to die.

Aldridge was 45, a fisherman for almost two decades. Most commercial fishermen in Montauk were born to the work, the sons and sometimes the grandsons of Montauk fishermen. But Aldridge was different — he chose fishing in his mid-20s, moving east on Long Island from the suburban sprawl where he grew up to be closer to something that felt real to him. He found work on a dragger and then on a lobster boat, and then, in 2006, he bought the Anna Mary with Sosinski, his best friend since grade school. Now they had a thriving business, 800 traps sitting on the bottom of the Atlantic, and two times a week they'd take the boat out overnight, spend an 18-hour day hauling in their catch and return the next morning to Montauk loaded down with lobster and crab.

Sosinski had a reputation on the docks as a fun-loving loudmouth, a bit of a clown — he actually rode a unicycle — but Aldridge was the opposite: quiet, intense, determined. Work on the Anna Mary was physically demanding, and Aldridge, who was lean but strong, drew a sense of accomplishment, even pride, in how much he was able to endure each trip — how long he could keep working without sleep, how many heavy traps he pulled out of the

water, how quickly and precisely he and Sosinski were able to unload them, restock them with bait and toss them back in. Now, alone in the water, he tried to use that strength to push down the fear that was threatening to overtake him. *No negative thoughts*, he told himself. *Stay positive. Stay strong.*

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The first thing you're supposed to do, if you're a fisherman and you fall in the ocean, is to kick off your boots. They're dead weight that will pull you down. But as Aldridge treaded water, he realized that his boots were not pulling him down; in fact, they were lifting him up, weirdly elevating his feet and tipping him backward. Aldridge's boots were an oddity among the members of Montauk's commercial fishing fleet: thick green rubber monstrosities that were guaranteed to keep your feet warm down to minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit, a temperature Montauk had not experienced since the ice age. Sosinski made fun of the boots, but Aldridge liked them: they were comfortable and sturdy and easy to slip on and off. And now, as he bobbed in the Atlantic, he had an idea of how they might save his life.

Treading water awkwardly, Aldridge reached down and pulled off his left boot. Straining, he turned it upside down, raised it up until it cleared the waves, then plunged it back into the water, trapping a boot-size bubble of air inside. He tucked the inverted boot under his left armpit. Then he did the same thing with the right boot. It worked; they were like twin pontoons, and treading water with his feet alone was now enough to keep him stable and afloat.

The boots gave Aldridge a chance to think. He wasn't going to sink — not right away, anyway. But he was still in a very bad situation. He tried to take stock: It was about 3:30 a.m. on July 24, a clear, starry night lit by a full moon. The wind was calm, but there was a five-foot swell, a remnant of a storm that blew through a couple of days earlier. The North Atlantic water was chilly — 72 degrees — but bearable, for now. Dawn was still two hours away. Aldridge set a goal, the first of many he would assign himself that day: Just stay afloat till sunrise.

Once the sun came up, Aldridge knew, someone was bound to start searching for him, and he could begin to look for something bigger and more stable to hold on to. For now, though, there was nothing to do but scan the horizon for daylight and watch the water for predators. For the first hour, the sea life mostly left him alone. But then, in the moonlight, he saw two shark fins circling him, less than 10 feet away — blue sharks, they looked like, 350 pounds or so. Aldridge pulled his buck knife out of his pocket, snapped it open and gripped it tightly, ready to slash or stab if the sharks tried to attack. Eventually, though, they swam

away, and Aldridge was alone again, rising and falling with the ocean's swell. He kept trying to drive away those negative thoughts, but he couldn't help it: Who would get his apartment if he didn't make it back? Who would take care of his dog? He thought about fisherman friends who died, funerals he'd been to at St. Therese, the Catholic church in Montauk. He thought about who would come to his own funeral if he didn't make it.

But mostly he thought about his family back in Oakdale, the Long Island town where he grew up: his parents, who had been married for almost 50 years and still lived in the house where Aldridge was born; his brother; his sister; his little nephew, Jake. It was a close-knit, middle-class, Italian-and-Irish family. His father was retired from the Oldsmobile dealership in Queens where he commuted to work for decades. Aldridge pictured them all, asleep in their beds, and thought about the phone calls they would soon be getting.

His family didn't bring it up much anymore, but Aldridge knew that none of them liked the fact that he had taken up such a dangerous profession. In his 20s, when he was starting out as a fisherman, his parents were constantly trying to talk him out of it. They gave up, eventually, but even now, every time he said goodbye to his mother, she looked at him as if it were the last time she was going to see him.

Alone in the darkness, he remembered a conversation he had a few months earlier with his sister, over beers in her backyard. They were talking about a friend of Aldridge's named Wallace Gray, a fisherman who drowned off Cape Cod when his scallop boat sank in bad weather. It wasn't a very cheerful conversation, and they both knew that they weren't talking only about Gray. Out of nowhere, Aldridge felt compelled to make his sister a promise: *If I ever get into trouble out there*, he told her, *just know that I'm going to do everything I can to get back home*.

It was a little after 6 a.m. when Anthony Sosinski woke up onboard the Anna Mary. The mate he and Aldridge hired to work this particular trip, an old friend named Mike Migliaccio, got up first, and when he saw that Aldridge was missing, he yelled for Sosinski. They were both sleep-dazed, confused by the daylight. What time was it? Where were they? Sosinski tried to puzzle it out: Just before he went to sleep at 9 p.m., he told Aldridge to wake him at 11:30 p.m. Now it was past dawn. Even if Aldridge had decided to let him sleep (as he sometimes did), surely he would have woken Sosinski by the time they got to their first trawl. But they were more than 15 miles past their traps — almost 60 miles offshore. What could have happened?



Anthony Sosinski, Aldridge's fishing partner. Credit...Daniel Shea for The New York Times

The Anna Mary is a 45-foot boat, and most of its surface is taken up by a flat, open deck, so there aren't that many places to search for a missing person. Still, Sosinski and Migliaccio looked everywhere. One hatch cover on the deck was off, and Sosinski thought maybe Aldridge had fallen into the open lobster tank, hit his head and drowned. He lay facedown on the deck and stuck his head through the hatch, ignoring the powerful smell. No sign of Aldridge.

Sosinski ran to the VHF radio, which was bolted to the ceiling in the small wheelhouse toward the front of the boat, and grabbed the microphone. He switched to channel 16, the distress channel, and at 6:22 a.m., he called for help, his voice shaking: "Coast Guard, this is the Anna Mary. We've got a man overboard."

The Coast Guard's headquarters for Long Island and coastal Connecticut is in New Haven. Sean Davis is a petty officer there, and it was his job that morning to stand watch at the station's communications unit. Davis was part of a five-person watch that had just come on duty. Davis radioed back, asking Sosinski for details, and Sosinski started feeding them

to him: when he last saw Aldridge, the course the boat was on, where they were now. No, Aldridge wasn't wearing a life preserver. No, he wasn't wearing a G.P.S. distress beacon. No, he didn't leave a note. Yes, he could swim.

Davis asked Sosinski to stand by, and he turned to the rest of the team in the command center, a dimly lit room on the second floor of the base. The front wall was covered with maps and charts and video screens, which could show everything from a live radar image of Long Island Sound to the local news. Sitting nearest to Davis was Pete Winters, a Coast Guard veteran who was now working as a civilian search-and-rescue controller. That morning, he was the Operations Unit watch stander, which would normally mean that he'd be the person running the search-and-rescue computers. On this morning, though, there was a second person in the Operations Unit: Jason Rodocker, a petty officer who that week was "breaking in," or being trained. Rodocker was new to Long Island Sound — he had just transferred two days earlier from the Coast Guard station in Baltimore. But as it happened, he was an expert in the Coast Guard's search-and-rescue computer program, known as Sarops.

The first calculation the search team ran that morning was a survival simulation, taking into account Aldridge's height (5-9) and weight (150 pounds), plus the weather and water temperature. It told them that the longest Aldridge could likely stay afloat before hypothermia took over and his muscles gave out was 19 hours. But that, they knew, was a best case. The reality was that very few people survived more than three or four hours in the North Atlantic, especially without a flotation device.

By 6:28, the command center had notified the search mission commander in New Haven, Jonathan Theel, and the search coordinator at the district headquarters in Boston, who would have to approve the use of any aircraft in the search. At 6:30, Davis issued a universal distress call on channel 16: "Pan pan. Pan pan. Pan pan," he intoned, the international maritime code for an urgent broadcast. "This is United States Coast Guard Sector Long Island Sound. The Coast Guard has received a report of a man overboard off the fishing vessel Anna Mary, south of Montauk, between 5 and 60 miles offshore. All mariners are requested to keep a sharp lookout."

Davis kept working the radio. He contacted the Coast Guard station in Montauk with instructions to launch whatever boats were available. Boston approved the use of two helicopters and a search plane, and Davis radioed Air Station Cape Cod and told them to get airborne as soon as possible. The closest Coast Guard cutter, an 87-footer called the Sailfish, was in New York Harbor, and Davis directed its crew to start heading east.

Rodocker, meanwhile, was manning the computer. The Coast Guard has used computer simulations in search and rescue since the mid-1970s, but Sarops has been in use since only 2007. At its heart is a Monte Carlo-style simulator that can generate, in just a few minutes, as many as 10,000 points to represent how far and in what direction a “search object” might have drifted. Operators input a variety of data, from the last known location of a lost mariner to the ocean currents and wind direction. Sarops then creates a map of a search area — in this case, of the ocean south of Montauk — with colored squares representing each potential location for the search object. Red and orange squares represent the most likely locations; gray squares represent the least likely.

The challenge in Aldridge’s case was that the search team had no clear idea when — and therefore where — he fell overboard. It might have been five minutes after Sosinski went to sleep, or it might have been five minutes before he woke up. That created a potential search area the size of Rhode Island, a sweep of ocean 30 miles wide, starting at the Montauk lighthouse and extending 60 miles south. This was a big problem: In contrast to the sophisticated algorithms of Sarops, the Coast Guard’s basic searching technique is a low-tech one — human beings staring at the ocean, looking for a person’s head bobbing in the waves. An 1,800-square-mile search area would be almost impossible to cover.

The team in New Haven based its initial calculations on Sosinski’s report that Aldridge was supposed to wake him up at 11:30 p.m. That suggested to them that Aldridge fell overboard between 9:30 p.m. and 11:30 p.m., which would put him somewhere between five and 20 miles south of the Long Island coast. Rodocker input those assumptions, and Sarops came back with an “Alpha Drift” — its first scatter plot of search particles — that curved in a thick parabola from Montauk Point southward, bulging out toward the east, with the highest-probability locations, the reddest squares on the map, clustered about 15 miles offshore.

The next step for Sarops was to develop search patterns for each boat and aircraft, dividing up the search area into squares and rectangles and assigning each vessel a zone to search and a pattern to use. A little before 8 a.m., New Haven started issuing patterns to the first three assets on the scene: the plane, a helicopter and a 47-foot patrol boat from Montauk. Sarops can assign all kinds of patterns, depending on the conditions — a track line, a creeping line, an expanding square — but in this case, each search crew was assigned what’s called a parallel search: a rectangular S-shaped pattern, with long search tracks proceeding roughly north and south and a small jog to the west between each track.

The helicopter was a Sikorsky Jayhawk piloted by two young lieutenants from Air Station Cape Cod named Mike Deal and Ray Jamros. Flying a Jayhawk in the Coast Guard, like many jobs these days, involves looking at a lot of screens: seven in total, spread out in front of Deal and Jamros in the cockpit, showing live maps, radar images and search patterns.

When the parallel pattern came in from New Haven, the coordinates fed directly into the helicopter's navigation system, meaning that the pilots were able to simply turn on the autopilot and let the helicopter fly the search pattern on its own. That allowed Deal and Jamros to turn their attention away from the screens and toward the water below them. They were joined in their search by two crew members who sat in the back of the helicopter: a rescue swimmer named Bob Hovey and a flight mechanic named Ethan Hill. Deal and Jamros scanned the ocean through their cockpit windows; Hill sat perched in the wide-open door on the right side of the helicopter, where he had the clearest view of the water below. Hovey spent most of his time staring at yet another screen, this one displaying the output of an infrared radar camera mounted on the bottom of the helicopter.



Aldridge used his boots as flotation devices. Credit... Daniel Shea for The New York Times

The Coast Guard search was off to an excellent start. It was a clear day with good visibility, and they had plenty of assets in place. The only problem, of course, was that everyone involved was searching in entirely the wrong place. Aldridge did not fall in the water at 10:30 p.m.; he fell in at 3:30 a.m. Almost 30 miles south of where the Jayhawk crew was carefully searching for him, Aldridge was clinging to his boots in the cold water.

Back in New Haven, Pete Winters was having second thoughts about the Alpha Drift. He borrowed the microphone from Sean Davis and radioed the Anna Mary directly. “Talk to me, Captain,” he said to Sosinski. “Fisherman to fisherman. Help me reduce this search area. We need to narrow it down so we can find John.”

Throughout his long career with the Coast Guard, Winters worked on the side as a commercial fisherman on the North Fork of Long Island, like his grandfather and his uncle before him. This gave him an advantage when a search-and-rescue operation involved commercial fishermen, especially Long Island fishermen: He spoke their language.

Sosinski had also been having second thoughts about the search area. After his initial conversation with Davis, he inspected the boat more carefully, and he found a few important clues. One hatch cover was upside down on the deck, which every mariner knows is bad luck — an upside-down hatch cover means your boat is going to wind up upside down, too. Aldridge must have left it propped up against the side of the boat when he opened the hatch — and he wouldn’t have left it there for long. The pumps were on, sluicing cool ocean water through the lobster tanks, which meant that Aldridge had been preparing them for the day’s catch. And in the warm summer months, Aldridge and Sosinski would usually wait to start filling the tanks until their boat reached the 40-fathom curve, the line on maritime charts that marks where the ocean’s depth hits 40 fathoms, or 240 feet, which is the point at which the water temperature tends to drop. The 40-fathom curve is only about 15 miles north of the Anna Mary’s first trawl. Then Sosinski found the broken handle on the ice chest, and he realized exactly how Aldridge had fallen overboard. It was still difficult for Sosinski to reconcile this new information with the fact that Aldridge hadn’t woken him up at 11:30 p.m., as scheduled, but he knew that Aldridge liked to push himself, and it didn’t seem entirely uncharacteristic that his friend might have just decided to stay up all night, alone, before working an 18-hour day pulling in traps.

Together Sosinski and Winters came up with a new theory: Aldridge had gone overboard somewhere between the 40-fathom curve, about 25 miles offshore, and the Anna Mary’s first trawl, about 40 miles offshore. At 8:30 a.m., Winters passed this new information to Rodocker, who punched it into Sarops. When the new map emerged, most of the dark-red search particles had migrated south of the 40-fathom curve, and Sarops quickly developed a second, more southerly, set of search patterns.

Theel, the search-mission commander in New Haven, then turned his attention to a more difficult duty: informing Aldridge's parents. He called John Aldridge Sr., who called his wife to the phone, and they sat together, listening to Theel deliver the news of their son's disappearance. Mrs. Aldridge was hopeful, but Mr. Aldridge felt certain his son was already dead. If he hadn't been killed by the propellers when he fell overboard, he had surely drowned by now. Pretty soon, he thought, Theel would be calling back to say that the helicopters had found John's lifeless body floating in the waves, or that the Coast Guard had decided to suspend the search.

The news about Aldridge was also spreading through Montauk's fishing community. Much of the town's commercial fleet was out on the water that morning. Some fishermen heard Sosinski's anguished first call for help. Others heard Sean Davis's pan-pan broadcast. And then word traveled from boat to boat, back to the dock and then all over Montauk. The mood in town was grim. Everyone knew the odds: a man overboard, that far off the coast, would very likely never be found alive.

Most of the fishermen who heard the news had the same immediate response, wherever they were: They wanted to help with the search. Richard Etzel, the captain of a Montauk charter boat, had taken a group of customers out at dawn that morning to fish for striped bass. When he heard the news over the radio, he took his customers back in, fueled up and headed south. At the Montauk Marine Basin, a mechanic borrowed a customer's center-console boat — without actually mentioning it to the customer — and took off toward the fishing grounds. Jimmy Buffett, the singer, who has a summer house in Montauk, had that morning hired Paul Stern, one of the best big-tuna fishermen on the East Coast, to take him out in Buffett's boat, the Last Mango. When Stern heard about Aldridge, he asked Buffett if they could join the search. Buffett agreed, and the Last Mango headed south as well.

In total, 21 commercial boats volunteered to look for Aldridge. And as they set out, one by one, they flipped their radios over to channel 16 and alerted the Coast Guard that they were joining the search. Usually, when good Samaritans volunteer to take part in a search-and-rescue mission, the Coast Guard politely declines. It's too complicated; the civilians don't know the search patterns; and their searches aren't always reliable. In this case, though, the search area was so vast that the Coast Guard needed all the help it could get. And these were highly motivated volunteers who knew the area well. Theel didn't want to turn down that kind of help. Still, Sean Davis couldn't possibly coordinate 21 new search patterns on top of all the Coast Guard craft he was already directing. So Winters hit on an idea: They would put Anthony Sosinski in charge of the volunteer fishing fleet.

Sosinski said yes to the assignment, of course — he would have done anything to find Aldridge — but organizing 21 fishing boats into a search party would be a daunting task for

anyone, and Sosinski was distraught and disoriented, standing alone in the cramped wheelhouse of the Anna Mary in his bare feet and shorts. In contrast to the high-tech work stations in New Haven, Sosinski's only work surface was a chest-high countertop by the boat's front window that was always piled high with unopened mail, newspaper clippings, notebooks, tide charts and rolls of paper towel and electrical tape. Sosinski dug through the mess until he found a pen, then got on the radio and asked the volunteer searchers to give him their latitude and longitude.

To outsiders, Sosinski looked more like a surfer than a fisherman: long, sun-bleached blond hair that he was constantly pushing back from his eyes, untamed facial hair and a face tanned and creased by years in the sun. On his days off, he would usually smoke some marijuana to calm himself; when he was in charge of the boat's satellite radio, he inevitably chose the '70s station. He was short and muscular, always humming with energy, talkative, jittery — all of which made for a sharp contrast with most Montauk fishermen, who tended to be laconic and reserved. But Sosinski had been on the dock since he was a teenager, and he had earned a certain kind of respect — or at least affection — among the Montauk fishing fleet.

When Sosinski was growing up in Oakdale, his father worked as a tractor-trailer driver during the week, delivering lumber up and down Long Island. But most Friday nights, his father would drive to Montauk for the weekend, where he'd work a second job as a deckhand for the Viking fleet, Montauk's biggest charter company, helping out on half-day party-boat charters. When Sosinski turned 12, he started tagging along on his father's weekend trips, and in high school, Sosinski spent each summer living on a houseboat moored at the Montauk dock, working full time for Viking. As soon as he finished high school, Sosinski moved to Montauk and started commercial fishing. He married at 20, and by the time he was 24, he had two daughters and a job on a long-line tilefish boat, going out for 10 days at a time.



Aldridge (with hose), Sosinski and Mike Migliaccio (in cap) on the Anna Mary. Credit... Daniel Shea for The New York Times

Then Sosinski returned from a fishing trip to find that his wife had left town with their children. No note, no forwarding address. For 14 months he searched for his family, until he finally found them in Laguna, Calif. After a long legal battle, Sosinski won custody of both of his daughters and brought them back to Montauk, where he raised them as a single father, doing everything from attending P.T.A. meetings to cooking dinner to making sure they both got into college. While the girls were young, he worked close to shore on a small lobster boat so that he could be home every night.

Aldridge and Sosinski first fished together as boys, riding their bikes to a spot they found under Sunrise Highway and pedaling home with their bicycle baskets filled with trout. Once Aldridge joined Sosinski in Montauk, they fished for years on separate boats, but when a beat-up lobster boat called the Anna Mary came up for sale, they decided to pool their money and buy it together. It took more than a year of repair work in the boatyard to make the Anna Mary seaworthy, and the men were in their late 30s by the time they finally got it

out on the water. But it felt to both of them like the opportunity they had been waiting for — no boss, working together, setting their own hours, charting their own course.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Montauk's commercial fisheries had been contracting, a casualty, depending on whom you asked, of rampant overfishing or excessive government regulation. Every year, there were fewer commercial boats going out. But Sosinski and Aldridge made it work. They found a buyer for their lobsters in Sayville who would ship them on the ferries to Fire Island. They sold their crabs to Chinese markets in Queens. They weren't getting rich — maintaining lobster traps and a boat is an expensive undertaking — but they were doing all right. And they were still fishing side by side, more than 30 years after they first dropped their hooks in the water.

Now, quite literally, Sosinski had lost his best friend. All day, as he stared out at the vast rolling ocean, he felt helpless and guilty. If only he'd woken up a few hours earlier, he told himself, Aldridge would have taken his shift in the bunk, and right now they'd be pulling in lobster traps together. He tried to focus all his energy on directing the commercial boats in north-south tracking lines, trying to keep all their locations straight. But none of it felt like enough. Aldridge had left his driver's license in the wheelhouse, propped up next to the radio, and every once in a while, during the search, Sosinski would pick it up and hold it in his hand. He'd stare at it and say out loud: *Where are you, John?*

The sun rose on John Aldridge at about 5:30 on the morning of July 24. He was cold, thirsty and tired — he'd been awake for 24 hours — but he was still alive and afloat. Now that it was light, he gave himself a new assignment: find a buoy. To most people, the Atlantic Ocean 40 miles south of Montauk is just a big, undifferentiated expanse of waves, but Aldridge knew roughly where he fell overboard — a few miles south of the 40-fathom curve. And he knew that several lobster fishermen had trawls nearby — he knew them by name, in fact. Each lobster trawl is a string of 30 to 50 traps, spaced 150 feet apart at the bottom of the ocean, and at the end of each string, a rope extends up from the last trap to the surface, where it is tied to a big round vinyl buoy. If Aldridge could make his way to a buoy, he figured, he would be more visible to the searchers, and it would be easier to stay afloat.

But where to find one? For the first couple of hours of daylight, Aldridge just drifted and looked. Every 10 seconds or so, a swell would carry him up a few feet, and when he got to the top of the wave, he'd scan the horizon for a buoy. Finally, at the peak of one wave, he spotted a buoy a couple of hundred yards away and began swimming toward it. He took a sock off one foot and stretched it over his right hand, to give himself more pull. But it was slow going with the boots under his arms, and the current was against him. Each time he looked up, the buoy was a little farther away.

Aldridge realized he was exhausting himself, and he decided to cut his losses. He was able to see that the buoy he had been swimming toward had a flag on top of it, which lobster fishermen attach to the west end of their strings. Lobster traps are always laid out along an east-west line, so Aldridge figured that a mile or so to the east of the unreachable buoy, he would find the other end of that string of traps, and with it, another buoy. He started swimming east — *with* the current this time instead of against it — stopping briefly at the top of each swell to see if he could catch sight of the eastern buoy. It was painful work. His legs were cramping. He couldn't feel his fingers. The sun, rising higher in front of him, was blinding. But finally, after more than an hour, he spotted a buoy, and using the current, he was able to angle himself directly into it. He grabbed the rope and held on.

After a minute or two of relief, Aldridge discovered that the buoy wasn't quite the deliverance he was hoping for. Lobster buoys can be big — two feet or more in diameter — so it was impossible to get his arms around it or ride on top of it in any way. His only option was to grab on to the black vinyl eye at the bottom of the buoy that the rope was threaded through. The problem was, since the buoy was tethered to the traps at the bottom of the ocean, it didn't rise, entirely, with the waves. Each time a swell rose, much of the buoy would submerge. Which meant that Aldridge would be dunked underwater as well.

By noon, Aldridge had been in the water for almost nine hours. He was starting to shiver uncontrollably. Sea shrimp and sea lice were fastening themselves to his T-shirt and shorts, claiming him as part of the sea. Storm petrels swarmed around occasionally, squawking and diving.

Aldridge could see the plane and the helicopters running their patterns, but everyone searching for him seemed to be at least a mile to the east. Clinging to the buoy, he realized that the Coast Guard thought he was still drifting. Even if they'd figured out more or less where he fell in, their search patterns hadn't taken into account the possibility that he snagged a buoy. Aldridge knew if he wanted to have a chance of being found, he had to get himself farther east. He took out his buck knife and started chopping away at the rope that held the buoy in place. When he got it free, he tied it around his wrist and began swimming east again, holding the buoy in front of him.

As he went, he felt the energy drain from his body. His kicks and strokes were weakening. The sun rose higher, and the skin on his face and neck began to blister and burn. Then, at the top of one swell, impossibly, he spotted the Anna Mary, less than a quarter-mile in front of him. Mike Migliaccio was standing on the roof, and Aldridge hollered with all the strength he could muster. He tried to throw the buoy up in the air to attract attention, but the boat was too far away. For the second time that day, Aldridge watched as the Anna Mary receded

into the distance without him, and he began to contemplate the reality he'd kept at bay in his mind for all these hours, that no matter what he did, he might not be rescued after all.

He willed himself to keep kicking until eventually — he doesn't know how much time went by — he reached another buoy. He recognized that it belonged to his friend Pete Spong, a Rhode Island fisherman who owned a lobster boat called the Brooke C. He untied the rope from his wrist and tied it to the anchor rope underneath the new buoy. Now he had two buoys connected by a few feet of rope. He swung his leg over the rope and straddled it, facing east. The thick rope rubbed back and forth on his crotch and his legs as the waves rose and fell, chafing them raw, but at least he wasn't being pulled underwater anymore. He repositioned the boots under his arms, and he waited, knowing that this was as far as he could go, that he couldn't survive another swim. If he was still in the water at sundown, he decided, he would tie himself to the Brooke C's buoy. That way, at least someone would find his body, and his parents would have something to bury.

Image



The Rescue The Coast Guard lifting Aldridge to safety after he spent almost 12 hours in the water.Credit...Video Still from The United States Coast Guard

Up in the Jayhawk helicopter, Deal and Jamros and Hovey and Hill had been staring at the water since about 7 a.m., and by early afternoon, they were growing discouraged. They had a few false alarms during the day — sea turtles and mylar balloons — and with each possible sighting, they followed the same protocol: the person who saw the object would call out: “Mark. Mark. Mark.” One pilot would hit a button in the cockpit that would mark the location, and they would swing the helicopter back around to check it out. Each time, nothing.

The truth of working as a search-and-rescue helicopter pilot for the Coast Guard is that you don’t get to do a lot of actual rescuing. Deal had been in the Coast Guard for eight years, flying a Jayhawk for three, and he had never once pulled anyone alive from the water. They had all trained for it countless times, plucked dummies out of the ocean, run through checklists and drills until they had them memorized. But the reality was that almost every time a person went overboard in the North Atlantic, he drowned.

At 2:19 p.m., the helicopter crew finished another parallel search pattern — their third of the day — and radioed to Sean Davis to request a new one. They were about an hour from bingo fuel, the moment at which they would have only enough gas to make it home. And once they stopped to refuel, they knew, they would be in fatigue status, and Coast Guard regulations would then stipulate that they couldn’t take off again until the next day — at which point Aldridge would be well past his 19-hour survivability window.

Davis radioed back from New Haven with some unwelcome news: Sarops had crashed. The search had been going on so long and involved so many assets that the system became overloaded; the screens in the command center simply froze. After much shouting and cursing and pounding on keyboards, Rodocker had to restart the system, and now he was typing in all the relevant information again. For the time being, Sarops couldn’t produce search patterns. Davis instructed the Jayhawk crew to return to its base in Cape Cod — even if Rodocker was able to get Sarops running soon, bingo fuel was fast approaching, and there wouldn’t be time for them to do a full search pattern anyway.

They radioed back and argued with Davis. They were out there anyway, and they still had a *little* fuel — why not give them something to do? The search unit in New Haven finally agreed, and in the command center, Rodocker, Winters and the command duty officer, a civilian named Mark Averill, huddled around Rodocker’s computer and looked at the latest Sarops map. Pointing with his finger on the screen, Averill proposed a simple track-line search: the Jayhawk would head south-southeast for about 10 miles, straight through the main search area, then turn sharply to the north for another 10 miles, then veer north-northwest, which would take the crew straight back to Air Station Cape Cod. It wasn’t a conventional pattern, and it wasn’t Sarops-generated, but it would have to do. Davis

radioed the coordinates to Deal and Jamros, who fed them manually into their autopilot, and at 2:46 p.m., the helicopter started moving again.

Twelve minutes later, Ray Jamros called out “Mark! Mark! Mark!” — only now he was much louder and more insistent than he had been all day. Deal hit the mark button in the cockpit and turned the helicopter around. And there was John Aldridge, sitting on the rope between his two buoys, clutching his boots and waving frantically. Bob Hovey, the rescue swimmer, clipped his harness onto the helicopter’s hoist cable, and Hill lowered him into the water. As Hovey swam to Aldridge, Hill lowered a rescue basket, and Hovey helped Aldridge climb in. Just as Hill was about to raise him up, Aldridge realized that his boots were floating away, and he yelled to Hovey to grab them and put them in the basket with him.

After Aldridge was safely in the helicopter huddled under blankets, Deal flipped the radio to channel 21 and called Sosinski, who was somewhere below them, staring out at the water, still looking for Aldridge. “Anna Mary,” Deal said, “we have your man. He’s alive.”

There’s a bar in Montauk, a few steps from the Anna Mary’s slip, called the Dock, a dark, wood-paneled place with stuffed animal heads on the wall and signs that say things like “No Shrimpers, No Scallopers,” and “We’ve upped our standards. Up yours.” It is one of the dwindling number of places in town that feels as if it belongs to the people who live and work there year-round. If you step inside the Dock any given afternoon, you’ll very likely find fishermen drinking and talking about ballgames and elections, D.U.I.’s and divorces. You’re very likely, too, to hear them talking, sometimes overtly, sometimes not, about the loss of a way of life — the government regulations that make it harder to make a living as a commercial fisherman, the vanishingly small margins for doing the dangerous work they do, the way this place where they’ve made their home is less recognizable to them with each passing year.

In the weeks after Aldridge’s rescue, I talked to several local fishermen on the docks about the search, and not only did they all admit that they cried when they heard the news that Aldridge was safe, but most of them teared up again, despite themselves, as they were telling me the story. It was hard to say what, exactly, was bringing them to tears. But what seems to go mostly unspoken in their lives is the inescapable risk of their jobs, and the improbable fact that Aldridge hadn’t drowned in the Atlantic somehow underscored that risk for them even more. He’d kept himself alive in a way that few people could, had managed to think and work his way through a situation that, for most of us, would have been immediately and completely overwhelming. And he’d willed himself to live. To be a fisherman and to really know the danger of the sea, and to think of Aldridge in the middle of the ocean for all those hours refusing to go under — maybe that was too much to contain.

The person who seems least shaken by the experience is John Aldridge. He spent the night after his rescue in a hospital in Cape Cod, being treated for hypothermia, dehydration and exposure, but he has no post-traumatic stress, he told me: no nightmares, no flashbacks, no fear when he goes out on the water to work. The Coast Guard pilots and the men in the search unit in New Haven express a certain understandable pride when they talk about their work that day, and when Aldridge talks about it, he sounds the same way. “I always felt like I was conditioning myself for that situation,” he told me one day in September while we were sitting in the Dock. “So once you’re in it, it’s like: All right, I can do that. I did it. I had that sense of accomplishment. I mean, thank God I was saved, yes. Thank God they saved me. There’s no better entity than the U.S. Coast Guard to come save your ass when you’re on the water. But I felt I did my part.”

For the people around him, though, things haven’t been quite so easy. Aldridge’s father told me that he still often wakes up around 3 a.m. and can’t get back to sleep. “It’s something that you can’t kick,” he said. “It’s never out of my mind. Never.” A few weeks after his son’s rescue, John Sr. got a tattoo on his arm: a pair of big green fishing boots, and between them, the G.P.S. coordinates where his son was found.

Anthony Sosinski still seems shaken as well. For all his happy-go-lucky charm, his love of life, something changed for him on July 24. The last time he and I talked about it, we were sitting in the wheelhouse of the Anna Mary, which was tied up at the Town Dock. “More than anything, I think about it when I’m out there working,” he explained. “It was the whole feeling of helplessness. Something was torn out of me, and that part doesn’t just show back up.”

For Montauk as a community, the ocean remains a blessing and a curse. It is the lifeblood of the town, the essence of its economic livelihood, the reason the tourists keep coming back. But it is also a constant threat. In September, a 24-year-old Montauk commercial fisherman named Donald Alversa was killed on a fishing trip on a dragger off the coast of North Carolina. Alversa grew up in Montauk — he went to school with Sosinski’s older daughter — and Sosinski and Aldridge attended his wake.

The funeral home was crowded, and the mood was somber. When it was over, the Dock filled up, and the mourners drank late into the night. The next evening, after Alversa’s funeral, Sosinski and Aldridge met at the Anna Mary. They loaded on bait and ice, steered her past the lighthouse and went back to work.

A correction was made on

Jan. 3, 2014

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An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a universal distress call. It is “pan pan” — not “pon pon,” which is how it is pronounced.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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