

The Amazing Rescue of the s/v Bela Bartok

This story is about the amazing rescue of Derk Wolmuth and his boat Bela Bartok in the Single-handed 2012 Transpac. Due to a serious staph infection, the skipper had to be evacuated. Antibiotics were desperately needed and Derk had none on board. After getting Derk off his 31 ft boat the Monitor windvane steered the “ghost boat“ 450 NM for 4 days without a skipper on board until it was rescued 15 NM off the coast of Hawaii by other participants in the race. The skipper of the 860 ft cargo ship, Captain Mark Crawford, was awarded the Rod Stephens Trophy for Outstanding Seamanship by the Cruising Club of America. We were told that he received a standing ovation by the large crowd.



Bela Bartok when found by her rescuers

When we started to look into the matter the story got even better. By pure coincidence the skipper of the big ship also was an accomplished small boat sailor with a similar boat which also was equipped with a Monitor windvane, bought in 1994 at the Seattle boat show. I have a feeling that quite a few Masters of large containerships could have lost both boat and skipper in their effort to perform this rescue operation. The Matson line should be proud of having such a Master on one of their ships.

When contacted by Scanmar, Captain Thomas Crawford was kind enough to write the following letter which he has given permission to publish in its entirety.

Hans Bernwall
Founder
Scanmar International

Hans,

It was nice talking to you and you are so correct about good news as opposed to bad. The below is a copy of the report I sent to the MOKIHANA's owner and operator Matson Navigation Company after much prodding from them. I try to fly under the radar as much as possible but sometimes that does not always work out.

In the rescue response the paramount goal was to save Derk.

Once he mentioned that Bela had a MONITOR, my second goal was to try and get her to the islands. Murphy was someplace else, thankfully. When I asked Derk over the VHF if he wanted to save his boat he probably thought I was nuts as his problem was staying alive. When he answered in the affirmative, I gave him a laundry list of tasks to complete prior to pickup and had him secure his trim for a SWxW reach and adjust his MONITOR to maintain it and avoid using the engine unless he wanted to bail out of the deal. Once he had that and the remainder of the list squared away the long and tedious task of keeping MOKIHANA on a parallel course and slow enough to claw up alongside Bela, started. It felt like hours of engine orders and helm orders from my perspective as MOKIHANA is a rather odd duck with regards to windage (hermaphrodite rig describes her well) and needs copious amounts of water past the rudder to counter the wind effect and to keep from getting weather cocked or in irons. The minimum engine speed is 7 knots so clawing too fast just complicates things.

When Bela entered MOKIHANA's wind shadow, Bela was like a cork. Derk kept his cool when many people might have panicked. If he had tinkered with the vane or helm adjustment and trim during the period that MOKIHANA was on near approach and blocking the wind I don't think Bela would be in Honolulu today. That was the critical part of the salvage, planning for the post rescue passage. The bow thruster wash was used to capture Bela, keep her from moving away from the hull and for washing her aft as the crew passed and hauled on gantlines secured to her bow and stern. Somehow, that worked. During the rescue transfer the wind had carried MOKIHANA with Bela alongside to an easterly heading. After Derk was aboard it was necessary to get Bela headed for Hawaii. Gantline hauling, engine, helm and bow thruster were used to get her headed in the right direction again.

When Bela was cast off I had her heading 235 degrees T and gathering speed with the MONITOR vane working like nothing ever happened. The radar plot had her up to 3 knots by the time contact was lost.

The dead reckoned transit expected was for Bela to make the islands someplace between west Maui and Kauai based on currents, prevailing and forecast winds sometime Thursday the 19th. When the word came that she was recovered north of Maui the morning of the 19th, high fives were numerous. Derk had walked down the gangway in Oakland the night before under his own steam. So, both goals were accomplished. Derk was alive and mending and his home was safe in Oahu. Many people working towards a number of goals made for an amazing outcome. Not a Mars landing but not that far removed for a bunch of people unknown to each other and with no planning or rehearsal.

I read in an online report sent to me that numerous lines were found adrift on Bela and her prop was fouled when she was recovered. At least two, the largest two, were the gantlines MOKIHANA used to bring Bela alongside for Derk's transfer and the point of sail positioning for the subsequent attempt to get her to Hawaii. They were cut as short as possible when Bela was cast off on her solo-solo passage to Maui. I was worried they might foul the Monitor oar on the transit and felt sure the prop would be fouled by the headline gantline regardless. As it turned out, the prop was fouled and that might have prevented the oar from being fouled by coincidence. Murphy was someplace else, again.

My compliments on the MONITOR. It is a very cleverly designed and superbly seaworthy piece of equipment. If I did not have one I would buy one. A cruiser without a MONITOR is like a sailor without a knife, etc.

Aloha,
Tom Crawford

The following was added in a memo to the owners of the container ship:

Derk Wolmuth is a very lucky man by all indications. Good weather ceased 12 hours after his pickup; he had the good sense to call for help in time. He received excellent attention from the MOKIHANA's medical officer Todd Campbell. He was lucky enough to encounter the MOKIHANA and her superb and thoughtful crew. The icing on the cake was the recovery of his sail vessel and home, the Bela Bartok, on the morning of July 19th still on a course of 235 T at 3.7 knots approximately 15 miles north of Maui by a salvage team put together by the Transpac contenders. He has good friends. He has physically recovered from his illness as of this writing and is back aboard the Bela Bartok in Ke'ehi Harbor on Sand Island and happy to be alive.

The potential for such a rescue to go wrong is always there. The training, experience, teamwork and seamanship of the crew of the MOKIHANA reduced that potential to near zero.

TC