

# Lost and Found

*By Daniel J. Basta*

We had gone to Raynor's Marina in the town of Merrick on the south shore of Long Island to go fishing for the day. My friends and I had been to Raynor's Marina a few times before. We would get dropped off at Raynor's by some one's parents, rent a small skiff, aka a big rowboat, and be towed out to the fishing grounds to a channel known as "rowboat alley," and left for the day. We couldn't go very far with only oars and mostly stayed at anchor listening to the radio, fishing, and falling asleep to the rhymical rocking of the boat by the waves in the bay. A boat from Raynor's would then come out and tow us back to the marina later in the day.

This part of the Bay is studded with very flat marshy islands or wetlands that extend in hap hazard patterns almost to the outlying barrier island that encloses Long Island's "Great South Bay." The famous Jones Beach State Park extends for miles along the ocean side of this barrier island. Most of these very flat islands are practically underwater on a high tide. Many of them had shanties or fishing shacks perched on them raised-up on stilts. They had always looked abandoned to us. The Great South Bay is very shallow, and these islands are crisscrossed with dredged channels and causeway bridges, in several places, to connect the south shore of Long Island to the Jones Beach State Park, and to other places on the great barrier island. Me and my friends had always liked to explore the marshy islands and wetlands.

And so It was early in the spring of 1965 when we had decided to go on our first fishing trip of the year, even though it was still fairly chilly. Easter Break was coming and it would be a good time to go. There were no school spring breaks in those days, only a couple of days off around the Easter Holiday. It turned out that six of us would go fishing. We planned to go the familiar Raynor's Marina and rent two skiffs. Only this time we had brought an outboard motor for each skiff. The outboard motors enabled us to explore the marshy islands, wetlands, and fishing places we could never get to with the row boats. My father had just re-built his 5.5

horsepower outboard motor, and one my friend's brought his father's 7.5 horsepower outboard. Three of us would ride in each skiff. Steve, Tommie, and I in one and Tony, Richie Alt, and Richie Ilardi in the other. It was the Saturday before the Easter Break when we had driven out to Raynor's Marina to go fishing. Tony, Tommie, and Richie Alt had graduated from Sewanhaka High School in Floral Park the year before. Steve, Richie Ilardi, and I were in our senior year.

That morning I had loaded my fishing gear and Pops re-built outboard motor and gas cans into an old 1953, four door, six-cylinder pea-green Chevrolet sedan. This car was like a tank or at least like an armored vehicle or maybe a battering ram. It weighed a ton. I made sure to add a quart of oil to the crankcase and put another quart in the trunk for the ride home, just in case. This beat-up old car seemed to burn as much oil as gas. I picked up my buddy Steve first because he lived the closest, then had gotten the others and drove over to Richie Ilardi's. Steve, Tommie, and I had lived on the same street. Richie Alt lived on the next street over but was actually the closest to me if you hopped over our back fence and cut through the neighbor's yard. Tony lived three blocks away and his house was on the way to Richie Ilardi's. Richie Ilardi lived in the adjoining town of Elmont, all of about six or seven blocks away. It was a small world in those days. Richie Ilardi had a 1955 Ford, which he had kept immaculate, and was packed and ready to go. Tony and Richie Alt transferred to the Ford, and we got on our way for a day of fishing on Great South Bay. Little did we know or even could have perceived that this little trip would be the last time any of us fished together or with each other ever again. Before 1965 had come to an end everything changed.

All along the southern shore of Long Island are many towns just like Merrick and many marinas just like Raynor's. I can't remember why or when we started going to Raynor's, but we just had. I think one of the local firemen in our neighborhood had kept a boat at Raynor's. We parked in an open area where some boats were up on blocks and had had reeds growing tall among them. We had felt pretty good and grown-up to bring our own outboard motors with us, even though they were pretty puny compared to the 18 HP and 20 HP motors the marina put on the skiffs. The tricky part hadn't been getting the motors down to the skiffs, but rather the beer.

I was the only one that was still 17 years old and underage, as if that had mattered at all in those days. Obviously, as young men, we had brought more beer along than we could possibly drink. I think we had three cases of "Pabst Blue Ribbon" short neck bottles. But then again it could have just as easily have been Schlitz. Regardless of what it was that we had brought along; the beer played a key role in the events that transpired.

It was a particularly chilly day and cloudy as we motored out of the marina and into the Bay. There had been hardly any other boats out fishing. We had begun fishing and drinking beer as soon as we had gotten to the familiar rowboat alley area. But soon had upped anchor to cruise among the marshy islands and wetlands, careful to stay in the channels and avoid the mudflats since the tide was still out. We had stopped here and there to throw our fishing lines in and drink beer. We were working our way west towards the "West End" of Jones Beach State Park and a little sand island known as "short beach." We had thought we might even go ashore and walk over the road to the ocean beaches. It had been a few hours and a few of us had drank quite a bit of beer, especially Steve. Steve had gotten quite drunk, in fact very drunk. We had just passed under the furthest west causeway to Jones beach when Steve had begun to lose it.

I had known Steve practically my entire life and had never before nor since seen him go on the drunken "jag" or "rave" that he did that day on the boat. He had had a crush on a girl in school who simply didn't seem interested in him. A head full of beer had driven him over the edge! Funny thing, however, more than 40 years later at a High School Reunion, she told him that she had had a crush on him. Who can figure how the heart works? At any rate, on this day it was more than he could bear, and he had gone haywire. None of us could reason with him as he attempted to jump out of the boat. He kept saying he had to swim to shore. The water was freezing and he was fully dressed and we were afraid he would drown. We held him in the boat until I got the boat close to shore and shallow water and then had simply let him go. The water was about waist high, and he dragged himself onto the sandy beach near the causeway and continue shouting and raving on. He was completely incoherent.

Of course we had laughed ourselves to death, as soon as we knew he was okay and couldn't hurt himself on the sandspit. We then decided the best thing to do was to leave him there until he had run out of energy and sobered up a bit – that crazy Steve what had gotten into him! Still, we had to keep an eye on him and couldn't go too far away. Consequently, we never did get to short beach and West End and cross over to the ocean beaches. We had motored back under the causeway and tied the boats off to some pilings. It was out of the wind and wasn't a bad place to fish, and from there we had kept an eye on Steve, as he ran around yelling and ranting on the sandspit. Of course, we also drank a beer or two enjoying the Steve show. Finally, Steve ran out steam and had just flopped in the sand. He looked a mess. We waited a while before we had gone to pick him up, just in case he might still have had a little rave left in him. When we finally got him back in the boat he was as tame as a kitten, feeling rather low, soaking wet and full of sand. I don't think he even had a memory of his rave. You may ask:

“How does this all fit into the “Lost and Found” of this story.”

I am about to tell you!

Enough was enough and it was about time to head back to Merrick and the marina. Once the boats had been reorganized, Steve quietly sat up front in the bow of my boat, and we began motoring side by side in the channels between the marshy islands. Steve was special friend, and I had begun to feel sorry for him, and then he asked me if he could steer the boat. He had looked so pathetic and sad that I had finally given in. I thought it would give him something to do and buoy his spirits. I told him to pay attention to the motor and to where the boat was headed and had taken the center seat to guide him a little. Steve seemed revived when he had taken over the tiller. Tommie had gone forward to the bow where Steve had been. As we motored back the tide was coming in fast and we decided it was safe to leave the channel and take a short cut among the marshy islands. All was going well, Steve was standing in the back of the skiff with one hand on the tiller which was handle of the outboard motor. Tommie was laying on his back smoking a cigarette when he said:

“Hey Steve, go over to the other boat they got my potato chips.”

Steve had then immediately swung the tiller hard right and the skiff surged and headed to the other boat almost perpendicularly. The outboard motor roared and raised up on one side. A hard crash was imminent. We all had then yelled from both boats:

“Steve, Steve, look out!”

Then with a bewildered look on his face, he was still a little fuzzy, Steve yanked the tiller hard left with all his might and then all was quiet as we glided silently. The outboard motor my father had just re-built had fallen off the back of the skiff and was gone! I remember that Steve had had a sudden look of panic and wanted to jump in after it and I had yelled:

“Steve, no, no don’t do it, don’t be stupid!”

We were still gliding along and had moved well past the position where the motor had disappeared. I had stood up in the middle of the boat trying to visually fix our position to points on the islands as we silently glided past them. The other boat throttled down and came along side as we glided to a stop. We all sat there in disbelief each with his own thoughts. It had happened in a matter of seconds – here one second and then gone the next. What now ?

At first, we had gone back to where we thought it had fallen off of the boat. But everyone had had a different idea of where that was! It was a pretty wide expanse of water between the islands and quite a distance from the channel we had turned in from to take the short cut. The water was almost black, and you couldn’t see the bottom. We tried using the oars to see if we might be able to poke it. The water had already gotten too deep for using the oars as the tide was flooding in fast. I don’t think we really knew the spot to look.

But we refused to be defeated and thought we could drag for it if we could find something to drag behind the boat which still had a motor. We spied one of those shanty fishing shacks on a nearby island and motored and rowed to it. Perhaps we could find something. The shed must have still been in use because it was shuttered and locked up. It had been tempting to break into it and see what we could find, perhaps a fishing net, to drag along the bottom. I don’t think that ordinarily that we would have hesitated to break in, but for some reason on this day we did. Maybe it was because of losing the outboard motor and not wanting to tempt fate any more that

day. Piles of junk of all kinds laid under the shed, including a very heavy metal ladder under the rickety stairs. It was not an ordinary ladder and looked like it might have come off a ship and was probably used as another way to get up into the shack. We borrowed the ladder, tied ropes to either end of the ladder, which was only about five feet in length, and towed it slowly behind the boat with the motor hoping to snag the lost outboard motor. It had been the best we could think of, and it didn't work. It was getting late, and it was going to be awhile before we could get the skiffs, one towing the other, back to Raynor's. We were defeated. We put the ladder back under the stairs to the shack and then stashed over a case of beer under the other junk underneath the shack. How would it have looked if we had come back without the outboard but a soggy case of beer.

It was a slow brooding cruise back as I pondered how would I tell the "Old Man." My father had now become the Old Man in my mind, rather than the more forgiving Pops. He loved that little outboard which had taken him on many fishing trips. Steve, of course, had kept apologizing and was still a little out of it. But it really hadn't been all his fault. The threads on one the bolts that clamped the motor to the transom on the boat had been stripped for some time. Pop and I would put a block of wood under it so tight turns could be made on the good part of the bolt to hold that side of the motor fast. I had told Steve about it and to be careful before he had taken over the tiller. But he was still a little drunk and when he yanked hard on tiller the block had popped out and the outboard had reared up on one side. Immediately yanking it hard back the other way was too much for the other bolt and it couldn't hold the full weight of the motor. Looking back it had been my fault for letting Steve steer the outboard. I should have known he couldn't process what I was telling him. On top of that he had no feel for the tiller and therefore yanked it around with all his might. Even so, if it hadn't been for the beer he wouldn't have yanked on it the way he did. I couldn't really blame him and had to tell the Old Man the truth except for the beer.

Arriving back at Raynor's Marina had caused quite a stir as we limped in and tied off the skiffs. Lots of smiles, smirks, and snide remarks:

“What Happened to you guys?”

“How could you loose and outboard motor?”

“What were you guys doing out there?”

“You’ll never find it, might as well forget about it.”

“Hey, I lost one once and we never found it.”

None of us responded or had gotten rattled. But there had not been a lot of encouragement from the “peanut gallery.” I told them that we knew exactly where it had fallen off the boat and we would be back to get it. What else could we say? I checked the oil in the old 53 Chevy, added a little and we drove off without staying for more small talk!

I had dropped everyone off but Steve. He had to come with me to face the Old Man. As we pulled up to the driveway my father was waiting, and he walked down the driveway to meet us. Before either Steve or I could get a word out he had asked:

“How the motor run?”

As I tried to tell him the block under bolt had fallen out, Steve had jumped in apologizing and editorializing about what had happened. I thought Steve was going to cry he had felt so guilty and was so emotional. The Old Man put his hand up, seemingly to tell us to shut up, and had just looked me directly in the eye and with his this is serious look, including the raised eyebrow, he then said:

“I want that motor or a new one by next Friday!”

He then turned and walked back up the driveway to the house and left me and Steve red faced at the curb. I drove Steve home and told him I’d see at school on Monday and that we had to figure something out.

There had only been three days of school that next week because of the Easter Holiday at the end of the week. And each of those three days at school had been like running a gauntlet. Everyone in the entire school knew we had lost the outboard motor. Sewanhaka was a very big school in those days, Steve and I had over 800 kids in our graduating class alone that June. Whether in class or in the halls, or wherever, Steve and I had both been continuously ribbed for

three days. We probably had been the biggest joke at school before the Easter break. Of course, I had told everyone we would find it. But actually, I thought we never would and hoped they would forget about it over the break. Maybe just a good effort would be enough to show our mettle and enough to impress the Old Man to give us a way out.

I decided we had to go back to Raynor's Marina on Thursday, our first day off for the break, to try to find the outboard motor. But who was going to go with me. It was a chilly April, and no one volunteer for the mission. Richie Alt had gone back to School; he was a college freshman. Tommie and Tony were working and didn't like the idea anyway, and Richie Ilardi would have no part of it. The previous Saturday had been enough for them. None of our other friends would even consider it, except for Raymond. Raymond was one of our childhood friends and we had all grown up together. He was a lovable Irishmen who even at 17 was a connoisseur of beer and spirits. He liked to drink a lot. I like to think that in an earlier time he would have made a great Hobo. When he had heard that we had stashed a case or more of beer on a nearby island he volunteered to come along under two conditions. First, we would have to go directly to the island and retrieve the beer so he could drink it. Second, he wouldn't have to leave the boat and get wet. Steve and I agreed on both counts but made it clear, he had to row the boat when we were in the water. Steve and I figured that the only hope to find the motor was to get in the water at low tide and walk or swim around. All we had had to armor ourselves against the cold was our bathing suites and the ignorance of youth! No wet suites, no masks, no fins, no snorkels, no anything but towels for when we got out.

Early that Thursday before Easter I picked up Steve and Raymond in the oil smoking green 1953 Chevy and headed back to Merrick and Raynor's Marina. Since it was the start of a long weekend there had been more people at the Marina than the Saturday before. Word had gotten around the marina quickly that we were the "boneheads" who had lost the outboard motor the week before. More fun with "new" friends! Raymond had said to the bystanders:

"Don't ask me I wasn't even there; I am just along for the ride."



We rented a skiff, and the Marina agreed to tow us to where we wanted to be cut lose, a bit further than the usual Rowboat Alley, and then to come back in three or four hours to tow us back. I think they pitied us a little, but they had nevertheless charged the full amount for a day rental. No one at the Marina that day had given us a chance in hell to find the outboard. Some had said that not only wouldn't we find the motor, but we were likely to get hypothermia getting in the water this time of year. We pulled away from the marina wrapped in our own thoughts as our skiff swayed behind the tow boat. Steve and I had been mostly silent the whole way. Raymond had spoken a little as he wanted to make sure we knew where the beer was stashed.

As we got near the island where the motor was lost, the tow boat had stayed in the channel because the tide was still out, the driver feared running aground. We told him to cut us lose and we would row the rest of the way. It wasn't far. As the tow boat departed the kid driving it, who was probably our age, had yelled:

"Good luck assholes!"

Keeping our promise to Raymond we had first rowed to the island with the fishing shack. Raymond was delighted that it was just exactly as we had said. He had then burst with renewed enthusiasm after we had crawled under the shack and retrieved the beer. He immediately produced a bottle opener and opened a bottle. Steve and I refused to drink a cold beer before going into the cold water. We placed all the beer in the boat and rowed out into the expanse of water trying to figure out where we were when the outboard had fallen off. I tried to remember the three points I sighted when I had stood up in the boat when the outboard disappeared. Wow, the boat had been moving and there was a lot of confusion and now I wasn't sure I had remembered it right. Steve had an opinion as well, but I thought to myself what did he know? He was still half drunk and in shock when the outboard had fallen off.

One thing for sure, the outboard was somewhere between the channel and the island with the fishing shack, closer to the channel than the shack. But where was a big guess. Steve and I had stripped down trying to put the cold out of our minds. After I got into the water, I had asked Raymond to row the boat towards the channel and drop off Steve. The plan was to work

towards each other mostly down the center of the water body, using our feet feeling for it and periodically diving down. It had been very cold in the water, and the tide was running in. The water was almost chest high and rising. Raymond had been lazily circling in the rowboat drinking beer. I remember that the bottom had felt like a frozen crust and every footstep felt like it had broken through the crust. Maybe it had just been the cold.

As I continued my search in the black water, I could see Steve about 60 to 75 yards away and he began waving to me. He was shouting that he thought the outboard motor had fallen off the boat more his way and that I should come more directly to him. I had yelled a few curses at him because I was cold and angry and didn't think he had any idea where the motor had come off the boat. I had then stomped my right foot down hard forward with perhaps a little anger, but it didn't break through the crust it had come down on top of the outboard motor!! I had then dived down into the black water to inspect what I had stepped on and it was indeed the outboard motor. After all that had happened since Saturday the feeling that had come over me was indescribable and is hard to explain. What blind crazy luck!! But in my joy, I couldn't help but tease Steve and yelled to him how much further did he think it was. When had I called to Raymond to row the boat over he thought I was kidding at first. But then it was:

“Holy shit you really have it!”

Steve also couldn't believe it when I said I was standing on it. He thought I was having one over on him.

I was not about to take my foot off the motor in the black water no matter how cold it was, and asked Raymond picked up Steve and rowed over to where I was standing on the outboard. I feared I would lose it for sure in the dark water and the muck. I had then lifted it up to Raymond, who wasn't the strongest guy, and he and Steve pulled it over the side and laid it in the middle of the boat like they had just taken a giant sailfish on board. There it was dripping wet, glistening and looking none the worst for lying on the bottom in the mud for almost a week! We three were ecstatic and Raymond had immediately popped open three bottles of cold beer for a toast. Although still soaking wet, Steve and I hadn't even felt the cold as we slugged down that bottle of beer. Such was our relief. But soon the adrenalin was gone and we were shivering

uncontrollably. We had then quickly dried off and gotten into our clothes and jackets but continued to shiver for a while and then had another beer anyway. When the boat from Raynor's finally arrived to tow us back to the marina, the kid in the boat couldn't believe we found it. He had come along side to look for himself:

"Holy Mackerel, nobody is going to believe this," he said and was now all smiles. Maybe we weren't such assholes after all.

The tow back to marina was like a triumphal procession. We waved and shouted to any boat we passed, not that anyone knew why we were shouting or waving at them. Back at Raynor's we had become instant celebrities as if we found the Titanic or had arrived with a giant trophy fish. What a different reception and feeling than the few hours before when we had left under tow on a fool's mission. Some of the guys working at the marina had come down to the dock and lifted the outboard out of the skiff and carried it up the stairs to a bench area where they worked on motors. They clamped it down in a tank and wanted to see if it would start. I had quickly vetoed that idea and didn't want to work anymore salt water into the cylinders. Pops had taught me well. As we were standing admiring the little outboard a small crab had crawled out from under the cowling. It was a fitting end to the outboard's ordeal. We carefully tossed him back in the water, gathered up all the beer, empty bottles, and pointed the old green Chevy home.

There were no cell phones in 1965 and no way to tell anyone of our extraordinary luck until we got home. We pulled up to the house and as before Pop had walked down the driveway to meet us. I am sure he had been prepared for the worst, but I really didn't know what he was thinking. I remember I had said something like:

"We still have till tomorrow, right?" And then paused and said:

"But we are not going to need the extra day, because we found the motor and it's in the trunk!"

The look on his face was precious as he had let my words sink in for a few seconds. He then looked at me and Steve and saw that we were just beaming, and he instantly knew it was true. His motor was back! I think he was very proud of both of us. Who would have bet on us – no one.

Back at school the following Monday, Steve and I were minor celebrities for a day and even our teachers had wanted to know how we had found it. Richie Alt, Tommie, Tony, and Richie Ilardi could hardly believe it. Raymond was more than happy; he had gotten the remainder of the beer for a job well done. Pop got his motor back, but he had to tear it down and rebuild it again and this time replace the striped bolt. We used that motor for many more years, until Pop decided he needed more horsepower and bought one three times the size. By Christmas 1965 Steve, Tommie, and Tony were in boot camp, I was off to college, and several months later the Richie's were drafted. Our last fishing trip together had been memorable and a good tale to tell.

**About the Author.** Daniel J. Basta was the Director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), within the U.S. Department of Commerce from 1999 to 2016 when he retired after 37 years of government service as an engineer, scientist, and administrator. He was a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES) for more than two decades and had an extraordinary career both inside and outside of government. He is well known as an explorer, adventurer and master diver who has traveled the world. He has dived more than 160 shipwrecks. Since retirement he has become an accomplished writer and author, writing short stories and tales of his adventures, sometimes to the wildest of places, and of the colorful people in them.