

12-30-2014 Santa Catalina Island - Timothy Mitchell – Harbor Patrol Crushed in Storm Update



OFFICER DOWN MEMORIAL PAGE



REMEMBERING ALL OF LAW ENFORCEMENT'S HEROES

<http://www.odmp.org/officer/22318-harbor-patrol-assistant-timothy-douglas-mitchell>



Bio & Incident Details

Age: 39

Tour: 7 months

Badge # Not available

Cause: Drowned

Harbor Patrol Assistant

Timothy Douglas Mitchell

Avalon Harbor Patrol, California

End of Watch: Tuesday, December 30, 2014

Harbor Patrol Assistant Timothy Mitchell was killed when he was crushed between a boat and a rock near the Green Pleasure Pier in Avalon Bay.

Several boats had broken free from their moorings during a severe storm at approximately 11:00 pm. Harbor Patrol Assistant Mitchell was attempting to secure one of the boats when his boat came dangerously close to rocks and he either jumped or was washed overboard. His body was recovered at approximately 11:00 the following morning.

At least one other person died as a result of the storm.

Harbor Patrol Assistant Mitchell had served with the Avalon Harbor Patrol for only seven months, and had previously served as a volunteer firefighter in Avalon. He is survived by his parents and two brothers.

Victims Identified: 2 Die in Wind-Whipped Waves Off Catalina Island, Including Patrolman

[HTTP://KTLA.COM/2014/12/31/HARBOR-PATROL-DEPUTY-DIES-AFTER-INCIDENT-ON-CATALINA-ISLAND-SHERIFFS-DEPARTMENT-SAYS/](http://KTLA.COM/2014/12/31/HARBOR-PATROL-DEPUTY-DIES-AFTER-INCIDENT-ON-CATALINA-ISLAND-SHERIFFS-DEPARTMENT-SAYS/)

DECEMBER 31, 2014, BY JOHN A. MORENO, MELISSA PAMER, SARA WELCH AND KENNEDY RYAN



Two people have died on Catalina Island, including a harbor patrol officer who was swept overboard and crushed between a boat and rocks amid a fierce storm, authorities said Wednesday.

Unusually strong winds began whipping up waters in Avalon Harbor about 8 p.m. Tuesday, sending waves towering and beaching several vessels, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Sgt. Robert Berardi.

"As the winds increased, so did the wave heights, which kept the Avalon Harbor Department personnel -- patrol officers -- extremely busy throughout the night," Berardi said. "Unfortunately, as heroic as they were, one of their officers succumbed to injuries."

Deputies from Avalon Station and city Harbor Department personnel were working to secure loose boats when a city vessel came "perilously close to hitting rocks, so one of the patrolmen jumped from the vessel to get to safety," a Sheriff's Department [news release](#) stated.



Authorities were on scene at Avalon Harbor on Dec. 31, 2014, after two people were killed on Catalina Island. (Credit: KTLA)

Two deputies tried unsuccessfully to rescue the patrolman, who became stuck between the boat and rocks under "turbulent waves," the release said. Homicide detectives were investigating the patrolman's death, which occurred around 11 p.m. Tuesday.

The patrolman was identified by the coroner's office as 39-year-old Timothy Mitchell.

He was described by reporter Jaime Chambers of KTLA's sister station KSWB as a friend who was "unfathomably brave."

Avalon's city Harbor Department employs 11 patrol officers who provide security and enforce laws at the harbor, [according to the city's website](#).

The other individual killed was a man who lived aboard a boat that was moored in the harbor, Berardi said.

The coroner's office identified the boater as 53-year-old Bruce Ryder of Avalon.

Ryder died in a "water-related incident," according to the coroner's office, but it was not immediately clear if the two victims' deaths were connected, county Department of Coroner Assistant Chief Ed Winter said. The patrolman's death was "weather related," Winter said.

"There were boats that had broken loose from their moorings," Winter said. "There was a problem and he wound up overboard."



Boats were washed up against the shore in Avalon Harbor on Dec. 31, 2014. (Credit: KTLA)

Sheriff's Department's Special Enforcement Bureau divers found the patrolman's body about 11 a.m. The other victim was pulled from the water after his body was reported at 6:30 a.m.

Four boats were beached, and a wall between the sand and Avalon's harborfront sidewalk was damaged.

Cleanup was continuing Wednesday afternoon.



Search and rescue personnel worked to free a body from boat debris in Avalon Harbor on Dec. 31, 2014. (Credit: LASD)

Berardi said the Sheriff's Department had no reports that any other boaters were unaccounted for. No boats were coming into the harbor Wednesday, city Harbor Department officials said.

Catalina resident Tom Quinn said he was sitting in Luau Larry's, one of the bars that line the harbor, when everything unfolded very quickly Tuesday evening. The patrolman had been trying to save a dive vessel called the King Neptune, Quinn said.

"All of a sudden, the wind just came," Quinn said. "Mayhem was happening out here. ... Guys were dying."

Quinn described the patrolman as a "very well loved" local man. The other victim, Quinn said, was older and also an experienced sailor.

"Our thoughts are w/ the family friends of the Avalon Harbor Patrol Officer," the county Fire Department's Lifeguard Division said on Twitter. "Very sad news coming out of Catalina this morning #RIP."

Late Wednesday morning, a procession of emergency vehicles could be seen escorting the patrolman's body to the island's heliport.

Debris and the wreckage of a small boat with an outboard motor washed against the rocks near the pier, and moored vessels continued to bob in choppy waters.



One boat appeared to have sunk and only its mast was sticking up above the water in Avalon Harbor on Dec. 31, 2014. (Credit: KTLA)

Correction: An earlier version of this report erroneously stated one victim's title. The article has been updated.

Harbor Patrol officer crushed between rock and boat on Catalina Island dies

<http://www.presstelegram.com/general-news/20141231/harbor-patrol-officer-crushed-between-rock-and-boat-on-catalina-island-dies>

12/31/2014 By Andrew Edwards, *Press-Telegram*



Avalon Harbor is shown from Sky5 on Dec. 31, 2014. Several boats can be seen ashore near the pier. (Credit: KTLA)

AVALON >> An Avalon Harbor Patrol officer died during a storm late Tuesday night while attempting to secure boats that were being loosed from their moorings by heavy winds and waves, a sheriff's spokeswoman said.

The harbor patrol officer has been identified as 39-year-old Avalon resident Timothy Mitchell. Authorities have also identified a second man whose body was found in Avalon Harbor about 6:30 a.m. Wednesday: 53-year-old Avalon resident Bruce Ryder.

Deputies from the sheriff's Avalon station and officers of the Avalon Harbor Patrol responded to reports of boats becoming free of their moorings shortly before 11 p.m. Tuesday. Mitchell was on a patrol boat near Green Pleasure Pier that was moving toward a rock. He attempted to jump off the boat for his safety and was caught between the patrol boat and the rocks.

"He goes right into the water, and basically, he's lodged between the rocks and under the boat," Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department spokeswoman Nicole Nishida said.

Two deputies who were on land tried to rescue Mitchell, with one deputy holding the other by the belt to extend the length of the other's reach, Nishida said.

Conditions were too dangerous for the deputies to immediately enter the water and attempt a rescue.

Homicide investigators, who routinely investigate deaths that occur in waters under Los Angeles County's jurisdiction, flew to Catalina on Wednesday to work on the case. Sheriff's department divers also worked on the recovery effort.

Deputies found Mitchell's body about 11 a.m. Wednesday and worked to notify his next of kin.

The storm also caused considerable damage around Avalon Harbor.

The National Weather Service's office in Los Angeles reported about 11 p.m.

Tuesday that the Avalon Harbor Patrol had observed wind gusts blowing at speeds in excess of 40 miles per hour and several boats breaking loose from anchor during the storm.

Several boats had washed ashore as of Wednesday morning, with accounts differing between sources on Catalina Island as to the exact number.

Three waterfront restaurants were also closed pending assessments of storm damage, said Donna Harris, Catalina Chamber of Commerce marketing director. There was "a lot of wind. A lot of waves breaking in the harbor," she said.

John King, owner of Afishinados Charters in Avalon, said the city's emergency warning siren blared when the storm hit the island. King, who goes by Capt. John, said he thinks the siren has not been used since a major wildfire burned on Catalina in 2007.

"There's a sailboat out here in front of me where all you can see is the mast," King said by telephone. "If you walked around, you'd see there are sunken dinghies all over the beach," King said.



The Tuesday night storm that resulted in the death of an Avalon Harbor Patrol officer and another man also severely damaged some vessels anchored in the waters off Catalina Island. (Photo courtesy of John King)

King counted four boats that had washed ashore as a result of the storm.

Afishinados Charters has a fleet of four fishing vessels and King said all four appeared to be in good shape from his vantage point on the shoreline. He was unable as of Wednesday morning, however, to board his company's vessels because access to the harbor was blocked during the sheriff's investigation.

The Avalon Harbor Patrol, employed by the city of Avalon, has had a force of 11 officers in addition to its harbor master, assistant harbor master and other staff. Patrol officers have law enforcement duties and are also responsible for handling waterfront business permits and docking schedules for commercial vessels.

"It's kind of a sad situation right now," Harris said. "We're all trying to comprehend it."

Officials with the harbor patrol declined to comment and said sheriff's officials would be responsible for releasing information.

Men Who Died After Storm Slams Catalina Identified

<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Harbor-Patrol-Officer-Dies-on-Catalina-Island-During-Storm--287200171.html>

Dec 31, 2014 By Jason Kandel and Michael Larkin - *Jonathan Lloyd contributed*

Several boats broke loose from their moorings during 40-mph wind gusts and fierce waves in Avalon Harbor

Two men died Tuesday when fierce winds and big waves tore boats from their moorings and tossed vessels onto the rocky shore in one of the worst storms to hit Santa Catalina Island.

Timothy Mitchell, 39, an Avalon Harbor Patrol officer, was crushed to death between a boat and a rock. Bruce Ryder, 53, was found floating in the water at 6:30 a.m. and died at a hospital, officials said.



The Tuesday night storm that resulted in the death of an Avalon Harbor Patrol officer and another man also severely damaged some vessels anchored in the waters off Catalina Island. (Photo courtesy of John King)

The Harbor Patrol officer died while trying to save a dive boat, the King Neptune, from sinking.

He jumped off the boat as it came "perilously close" to striking rocks in the harbor, officials said.

"The patrolman became lodged between the vessel and the rocks under the turbulent waves and could not be reached," the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said in a statement.

At least three boats broke from moorings as wind gusts up to 40 mph lashed the island and swells up to 8 feet crashed onto the beach. Catalina is about 20 miles off the coast of Southern California.

The storm snapped a section of pier on Avalon's beach. Three pleasure boats lay hard on their side on the beach, one smashed by rocks.



A harbor patrol officer was among two people killed after strong winds slammed Avalon Harbor. Ted Chen reports for the NBC4 News at Noon on Wednesday Dec. 31, 2014

Don MacKenzie and Lois Laughlin were not on the boat they live in when the storm hit.

"We tried to get on it, but thank God we really weren't," Lois Laughlin said.

The cove was vulnerable in this storm because it's not protected from waves

washing in from the northeast.

Residents said it was the worst storm to hit in years. Kurt Kaplan, a meteorologist from the National Weather Service, said cold, dense winds "crashed down" on the island harder and persisted longer than in recent memory.

"It's rare to see one that strong," he said.

Avalon's harbor patrol assigns moorings and provides security on the city's waterfront.

The staff includes 11 harbor patrol officers, according to the city.

LOSS OF HARBOR PATROL OFFICER TIMOTHY MITCHELL

<http://ecatalina.com/news/article/Loss-of-Harbor-Patrol-Officer-Timothy-Mitchell>

January 01, 2015 By Avalon Harbor Master Brian Bray



AVALON, Calif. – On December 30, 2014, the City of Avalon lost Harbor Patrol Officer Tim Mitchell, a hero and beloved member of the City family, who gave the ultimate sacrifice as he valiantly served the community defending life and property.

Tim was on duty as a Harbor Patrol Assistant, working from a patrol boat, trying to protect residents, visitors and boats that were being battered by the fierce winds and waves that quickly and mercilessly descended upon Avalon Harbort. He died as he tried to save the King Neptune, a boat upon which he had also served as a Dive Instructor here on Catalina Island for approximately the past 10 years.

Nearly 40 years old, Tim was a native of New Zealand, but a recent United States Citizen. He held joint degrees in Religious Studies and Sociology, and was an accomplished musician, playing multiple instruments.

Tim recently joined the Harbor Department in May of this year. However, he had served the City for the past five years as a Reserve Firefighter. In addition to his City family, Tim also enjoyed a close, extended family at ScubaLuv - home of the King Neptune - where he worked as a Dive Instructor, and was looked up to by all of his peers. He was a "2nd father" to Bob and Tina Kennedy's children (Bob and Tina being the owners of ScubaLuv, of course).

Tim leaves behind a mother, father, two brothers and Michelle Rodriguez, his girlfriend. He will be missed by all those who knew him. Our condolences to Tim's family - both biological and extended. Once we are aware when services will be held for Tim - and if anyone outside of family is invited to attend any of them - we will let you know.

Please join me in acknowledging the tragic loss of one of our own family members - this hero, Tim Mitchell - and his ultimate sacrifice in serving the City of Avalon.

Thank you, EVERYONE, for your prayers and condolences. For donations to the Mitchell Family, please make checks payable to the Avalon Harbor Employees Association, PO Box 1085, Avalon, CA 90704.

Harbor Patrol Officer Killed on Catalina Being Called a Hero

<http://ktla.com/2015/01/01/harbor-patrol-officer-killed-on-catalina-being-called-a-hero/>

JANUARY 1, 2015, BY Joseph Serna and Amy Hubbard



Boats driven ashore by high winds and waves line the beach in Avalon after a storm Dec. 30 wreaked havoc on Catalina Island. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)

The storm that battered Catalina Island earlier this week with fierce winds and rough seas killed at least one man, and he's being called a hero.

Tim Mitchell was fighting to protect residents and save boats during the storm that "quickly and mercilessly descended upon Avalon," the city said in a news release.

The 39-year-old was on duty as Harbor Patrol assistant, working from a patrol boat. "He died as he tried to save the King Neptune," the city said.

The vessel and its owners were special to Mitchell. He had worked as a dive instructor at ScubaLuv, home of the King Neptune, according to Harbor Master Brian Bray, and was a "second father" to the children of owners Bob and Tina Kennedy.

During Tuesday night's storm, Mitchell was aboard the King Neptune as it was about to run



Boats were washed up against the shore in Avalon Harbor on Dec. 31, 2014. (Credit: KTLA)

aground at Avalon Harbor. He tried to jump ashore but didn't make it, according to an L.A. County sheriff's spokeswoman. Two other officers tried to rescue him, but Mitchell became pinned between the boat and the harbor rocks and was killed.

"Conditions were so horrible," said sheriff's spokeswoman Nicole Nishida, "they were unable to go in after him."

Officers couldn't retrieve Mitchell's body until the next day. On Wednesday, boats were grounded at the harbor, which looked as if it had been struck by a hurricane, Nishida said.

Mitchell was a native of New Zealand and a recent U.S. citizen, the city said. He played multiple musical instruments and held college degrees in religious studies and sociology. He joined the Harbor Patrol in May but had been a reserve firefighter on Catalina for five years and a dive instructor for 10.

The body of a second man was found after the storm. His identity and details of his death are not known at this time.

LOSS OF HARBOR PATROL OFFICER TIMOTHY MITCHELL

[HTTPS://ECATALINA.COM/NEWS/ARTICLE/LOSS-OF-HARBOR-PATROL-OFFICER-TIMOTHY-MITCHELL](https://ecatalina.com/news/article/loss-of-harbor-patrol-officer-timothy-mitchell)

Thursday, January 01, 2015 [Watch Video](#)

CITY OF AVALON



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Service for Harbor Patrol Officer Timothy Mitchell

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of his peers. He was a "2nd father" to Bob and Tina Kennedy's children (Bob and Tina being the owners of ScubaLuv, of course).

Tim leaves behind a mother, father, two brothers and Michelle Rodriguez, his girlfriend. He will be missed by all those who knew him. Our condolences to Tim's family - both biological and extended. Once we are aware when services will be held for Tim - and if anyone outside of family is invited to attend any of them - we will let you know.

Please join me in acknowledging the tragic loss of one of our own family members - this hero, Tim Mitchell - and his ultimate sacrifice in serving the City of Avalon. Thank you, EVERYONE, for your prayers and condolences. For donations to the Mitchell Family, please make checks payable to the Avalon Harbor Employees Association, PO Box 1085, Avalon, CA 90704.

By Avalon Harbor Master Brian Bray

After 2 deaths, Catalina Islanders united by grief

<http://www.ocregister.com/2015/01/10/after-2-deaths-catalina-islanders-united-by-grief/>

January 10, 2015 By **THERESA WALKER** | Orange County Register



The storm that lashed Catalina Island the night before New Year's Eve has an official name: "Avalon Complex 12/30/14."

But in the hearts of an island population shy of 4,000, the storm will always be known as something else: The night Bruce Ryder and Tim Mitchell died.

This week, tourists visiting Avalon gawked at piles of debris on the beach and the sad spectacle of two boats washed up on the sand, still lodged against each other.

Some tourists also paid respects at the cluster of flowers, candles and sea shells that serves as a makeshift memorial for Ryder and Mitchell. Same for local residents, as well as sheriff's deputies and island firefighters, who wore black bands across their badges.



Randy Jackson pauses Tuesday at the Marlin Club in Avalon as he talks about his friend, Bruce Ryder. Ryder worked at the club and lived on his boat

On Thursday, hundreds of mourners from the mainland joined islanders at a memorial service to lay Mitchell to rest at sea. Others are expected to come on Saturday to celebrate Ryder.



Workers and earth-moving equipment dig a moat around a boat stranded on the beach in Avalon on Catalina Island on Tuesday, in order to float it off the beach at high tide.

Locals who have lived on Catalina for decades say they can't remember a tougher time.

Not the storm of 1988 that stranded more than 1,000 people and killed a boater. Not the brushfire in 2007 that destroyed one-tenth of the island's vegetation and several buildings.

Not the fury of last summer's Hurricane Marie, which caused \$15.6 million in damage.

Officials don't have a dollar figure yet for the havoc wreaked by 10-foot-high swells. At least five vessels broke loose from moorings and were destroyed or damaged. But boats and buildings can be replaced; plant life grows back.

"It still seems like a nightmare to me," said Linda Rhoutsong as she sat on the sea wall and watched a salvage crew work to get a beached cabin cruiser back in the water.



Linda Rhoutsong holds a piece of the King Neptune, which Tim Mitchell had boarded during the storm.

Rhoutsong, 67, a retired hospital activities director who has lived in Avalon since 1992, clapped her hands together loudly, her way of describing the sound of waves in Avalon Harbor the night before New Year's Eve.

"This time," she said, "we lost two of the most loved guys on the island."

ISLANDERS UNITE

This week, the island is awash in flags.

A tattered American flag waves on a hill above the town, as if it survived a fierce battle. Other flags fly at half-staff, testimony to the loss that has brought this small, tight-knit community even closer.

Ryder, 53, and Mitchell, 39, were islanders. Neither was native to Avalon; Ryder arrived 20 years ago and Mitchell five or so years after that. But locals say they



Flyers are posted in the window of Catalina Scuba Luv in Avalon on Catalina Island for a celebration of life for Bruce Ryder and memorial service for Timothy Mitchell. The men were killed during a storm that hit Avalon on Dec. 30. Mitchell was a dive instructor at the shop as well as a captain on their boat, King Neptune, which he tried to save during the storm after it broke loose from its mooring. The boat was destroyed.

may as well have been; the water was home, and on the island that's what defines an islander.

At different times, both men served as dive instructors at Catalina Scuba Luv. Both were single, with no relatives on the island.

But at Scuba Luv – and other island spots – both were considered family.

Inside the narrow dive shop, crowded with air tanks, fins and other equipment, Scuba Luv co-owner Tina Kennedy briefly worked the counter this week, still dazed after losing two good friends. She and husband Bob Kennedy also lost a 65-foot diving boat, King Neptune, they owned as part of their business.



**Avalon Harbor Patrol
Officer Tim Mitchell was
killed in a storm Dec. 30.**

Kennedy remembered how Mitchell, a transplanted New Zealander, walked in the door of the dive shop about 10 years ago and announced, "I just quit my job. I'm available if you need me."

They knew his reputation as a diver, so her husband replied, "Excellent. See you tomorrow."

Mitchell worked his way up to co-captain the King Neptune. He also served as a volunteer reserve firefighter in Avalon the past five years.

He got his U.S. citizenship a year ago, and that enabled him to become a part-time officer with the Harbor Patrol.

The Kennedys had returned to Catalina Dec. 30 from a Christmas visit with their daughter in Texas. Mitchell picked them up and drove them home, then a few hours later reported to Harbor Patrol duty.

They never spoke again.

"He just loved his job," Tina Kennedy said, holding back tears.

"He loved being in the water."

TWO DEATHS

Sgt. Robert Berardi, a watch commander for the tiny Los Angeles County sheriff's station on the island, remembered how smooth the water was at 8 p.m.

"You could go water skiing on it," he said.

An hour later, a punishing wind arrived. Almost all the island's safety personnel, volunteer and staff, instinctively headed to the harbor. The howl of the wind and the

crash of the waves drowned out the World War II-era siren atop the station a few blocks away.

Boats tore loose from their moorings and spun in the harbor like tops, posing a danger to other vessels and the people aboard them, Berardi said.

Mitchell, who would have turned 40 this month, had boarded the renegade King Neptune from a patrol boat, hoping to pilot it to deeper water. But he couldn't control it and lost his footing while trying to jump ashore at Steps Beach – a spot where concrete steps descend into the water.

For a moment, two sheriff's deputies briefly had ahold of Mitchell, trying to pull him to safety. But the force of the sea pulled him out of their hands and back into the water. Berardi said Mitchell was pinned against the concrete sea wall and the King Neptune, which later was battered into kindling.



Bruce Ryder was killed during a storm that hit Avalon on Catalina Island on Dec. 30.

By the next morning, when the Harbor Patrol found the bodies of Mitchell and Ryder, the weather had shifted and the water was again calm.

It's less clear how Ryder died.

He was a lanky, affable man who could fix anything and lived with his constant companion, a retriever named Pretty Boy, aboard the 32-foot Ocean Ryder II that he had painstakingly refurbished.

Authorities are uncertain if the wind knocked Ryder off his boat or if he was killed when it broke against the rocks and pilings near shore.

Pretty Boy, typically shortened to P.B., somehow survived. The dog now stays with the owner of the Marlin Club, the historic island bar that's a few doors down from Scuba Luv, just off the promenade.

Ryder and Bob Kennedy had been schoolmates in South Pasadena since third grade. Ryder came to Catalina after attending a wedding with the Kennedys and decided to stay, Tina Kennedy said.

Always helpful, Ryder found work in Avalon as a fisherman, dive instructor and boat captain. He also owned a pumping business for a few years. At the time of his death, he was employed by a company that repaired moorings.

Ryder talked fast and worked fast, Kennedy said, traits that earned him the nickname "Taz," short for the whirling Tasmanian Devil of cartoon fame.

Ryder also had trouble sleeping, Tina Kennedy added. "I just kind of keep thinking about how now he can rest."

A salvaged chunk of fiberglass bearing the name of his boat hangs inside the Marlin Club. It's near a video machine with classic 1980s games that Ryder loved to play.

Ryder, who quit drinking several years ago, still frequented the bar for companionship. On the morning of Dec. 30, just as he did every morning, Ryder had stopped in for a 7 Up, while P.B. was treated to a biscuit.

"It's sad," said Randy Jackson, a retired bartender who does inventory at the Marlin Club. "Just sad."

GENEROSITY PLAYS OUT

For all the sorrow that will come with the event, Tina Kennedy said planning Ryder's celebration, slated for Saturday, has been smooth. Avalon's generosity, she said, is playing out.

The Marlin Club holds only 50 people, but permission has been given to let the expected overflow crowd spill into the street.

"You ask for this, you ask for that," Kennedy said, "and it's been doubled."

That same spirit marked Mitchell's memorial service and the release of his ashes at his favorite dive spot. The turnout Thursday included family members who flew in from around the world, and a host of public safety personnel.

Hundreds of mourners from the mainland arrived aboard a Catalina Express vessel that, for the memorial, gave mourners a free roundtrip from San Pedro.

The lights on the legendary Catalina Casino turned blue Wednesday and Thursday nights in tribute. Outside of red and green at Christmas, those lights always shine white.

As she left her perch on the sea wall, clutching a broken piece of the King Neptune, Rhoutsong reflected on Avalon's loss.

"I don't think this island is ever going to get over this one," she said. "We'll get through it, but we won't get over it."

Boater shares first-hand experience of Avalon storm

<http://www.thelog.com/local/boater-shares-first-hand-experience-of-storm/>

January 29, 2015 Daniel Sipes

A Sipes family (Tamara and Daniel with Sophie, 9 and Max, 8) tradition is to take our boat, the Tamara, from San Diego (Mission Bay Yacht Club) to Avalon Harbor, Catalina Island after Christmas and stay through the New Year. New Year's Eve on

Catalina is rather popular with many events, including a black tie affair at the Casino. As such, the number of boats in Avalon Harbor swells for the holiday.

On December 30th, 2014 the weather forecast called for mild winds (5 to 15 knots) from the North East. I have been through several of these "Santa Anas" while boating at Catalina and the northern Channel Islands. Twice they have been severe enough that the harbor master called for everyone able to leave the anchorage to return to the mainland or seek out alternative shelter. Once I rode out a Santa Ana at sea – mostly in Santa Monica Bay. It was an exciting night with strong, warm winds and steep seas but my Cal 25 sloop handled it well.

However, this time the weather forecast was such that there was no advisory to seek alternative shelter. The harbor has several hundred mooring buoys. The moorings for larger boats are well spaced on the "outer" edges of the mooring field. Moorings for smaller boats, like our 34 foot Meridian powerboat, are more densely packed toward the back of the mooring field. Some moorings are more exposed to North East winds than others.

We were on buoy 103, which would be very exposed to the wind and waves and requested to move more "inside" the harbor. I was told there were no "good" moorings remaining but buoy 62 was available. This buoy was only marginally better protected but was in shallower water and closer to the sea wall – not good if the seas became large and breaking. I still elected to move to buoy 62 as it should be a bit more sheltered from the predicted wind direction. Since the forecast was for mild winds, we were really only talking about comfort, not survival.



However, we decided that it would be best for Tamara and the kids to move to a hotel in town so they could get a good night's rest. We took our dinghy ashore in calm weather at about 5 PM, had dinner at Antonio's Pizzeria then checked into the Glenmore hotel.

I spent some time with the family, said good night and left for the dinghy dock.

While walking back I noticed a cold wind was up, more than the 5 to 15 knots forecast, and the seas were already rough. The ramps to the dinghy docks had been hoisted and the dinghy docks – with my dinghy still attached, were about to be towed from the Green Pier to a safer place in the harbor. I recognized Brian Bray, the harbor master we have interacted with for many years, as leading the operation.

I said, "Hello" to him and he turned to me, looking rather frantic, and said, "This wind just came up in the last twenty minutes!" From his expression I inferred he

was surprised by the intensity of the wind. The worker riding on the now free-floating dinghy dock said to the tow vessel operator, "Go, go, go!"

I mentioned to Brian that I just dropped my family off at a hotel and needed to get back to my boat. He pointed to the yellow boat coming in to drop off a woman and said, "Try the shore boat."

I went down to the dock and hopped onto the shore boat. The shore boat operator just stared blankly at me and I stated I had just dropped off my family in a hotel and needed to get back to my boat. He said, "Well, that was my last run. It is too dangerous. But I will do one more. Exact change only – \$4.50"

I told him I had four singles or a twenty. He said, "Tonight, four dollars is fine." He brought me to The Tamara and wished me good luck.

The wind was blowing maybe 20 knots and the seas in the harbor were increasing – now 4 to 5 feet and steep, arriving every 5 seconds or so. I tuned the VHF radio to channel 12 – the harbor patrol. From the conversation I immediately determined that Baywatch had one or two boats in the harbor on standby in case the situation worsened, but one of them was, hopefully temporarily, out of service with a mooring line "wrapped" on the propeller. They were trying to free it.

People were also on the radio asking to get off their boats but the shore boat had stopped running. They were asking the harbor patrol to get them off their boats. The harbor patrol responded stating they were trying to secure the harbor but would get to them in time.

The "Catallac" a 50' party-boat catamaran, asked for assistance to secure to a second mooring. They were in the outer harbor, and it was a very good idea to do this. The harbor patrol helped them. So now the Catallac had two lines securing the bows and two securing the sterns.

The ride was rough in the harbor. On my boat items were falling from the shelves. I was tidying up and securing items when I heard a "bang" on the bow. I looked through the salon window to see the stand-up paddle board, which I had already secured, blown over the side and held in place only by the Velcro ankle strap attached to a stanchion. I got a line and went forward to hoist back aboard and tie it down more securely. Then I went back into the cabin.

It was dark, but I could still make out the boats in the anchorage. I noticed an ~8 foot zodiac inflatable with a small outboard flying from the stern of a sailboat and wondered how much wind is necessary for that to occur. Thirty knots? Then I heard, "Avalon Harbor patrol, I am off my mooring! I need help!"

Avalon Harbor Patrol, "We are on our way but still towing the dinghy dock. We will get to you as soon as we can."

Baywatch, "Our prop is still wrapped, we have a diver in the water."

I went up to the bridge and saw the free-floating boat, banging into other boats. Then the harbor patrol arrived, got a line to the bow and towed to a calmer part of the bay by the Casino. I noted the sea wall was only about 75 feet behind me.

If my mooring line parted I would likely be in the breakers and smashed against the wall before the harbor patrol could arrive. I climbed down from the bridge and went on my bow to check the mooring line attachment to the cleat. All looked good and I had, earlier in the day, attached another line to the loop of the mooring line and also to another cleat on the boat. In this way, if the cleat should pull out we would still be attached to the mooring.

However, the Tamara's mooring was very loose – the stern and bow lines, from the anchors below, were too close together. That allowed the Tamara to float too close to the boats on either side but more importantly it did not always face directly towards the oncoming seas. The Tamara would get somewhat sideways thus increasing the stress on the mooring lines when waves would hit. My neighbor to starboard, Richard Bertram, on a 37 foot powerboat, placed his Achilles dinghy between our boats and I also placed fenders forward.

I started the generator to top off the batteries and also started the engines. Then I felt a particularly large wave hit the boat – Tamara's bow raised all the way to the end of the hawser. I felt a "bang!" as the slack ran out and wondered if the line had parted – I quickly took bearings and determined we were still attached.

Then I heard over the radio, "Harbor patrol, we are free! We need assistance." And another, "Harbor patrol, this is mooring XXX, we are free."

Harbor patrol responded, "We are on our way."

"Harbor patrol, we have sick people on board and need to be evacuated" "Harbor patrol, we have elderly on board and need to get to shore" "Harbor patrol, the captain is not on board, what do we do?" "Harbor patrol, we have a person having an anxiety attack with shortness of breath. We need to be taken ashore." "This is Catallac. We are down to one mooring line and need assistance."

Harbor patrol, "We are trying to control loose boats right now. Others will have to wait."

The radio blurted, "The King Neptune is loose!"

I knew the massive King Neptune well, having performed a persona best, at the time, freedive to 101 feet from it many years ago. It was particularly concerning that it was floating free because it had been moored in the outer harbor and was a very large vessel – 65 feet. King Neptune could do a lot of damage to the vessels in the inner harbor if it were pushed ashore by the wind and waves.

I watched from the bridge. It was moving through the harbor striking boats. These were glancing blows – causing damage but not threatening to destroy the smaller boats. It was now essentially floating broadside to the waves and wind. Then it appeared the mid-section of the King Neptune was going to hit a ~40 foot trawler yacht. I thought to myself that if it hits it will either break the trawler off the mooring and push it to the beach or destroy it on the mooring. Then King Neptune hit the trawler.

I watched the pulpit of the trawler collapse and the King Neptune just seemed to hang-up for a bit. Then a woman from within the trawler screamed into the radio, "Help! We are breaking up! Our boat can't take this! It is coming apart! Help us!"

By this time the harbor patrol was swarming around the King Neptune with three boats. They put personnel on board and secured a line to the bow and towed it off the trawler and headed to the calmer part of the harbor by the Casino. Then the towline parted. They secured another line and started to tow.

Then it snapped.

The King Neptune once again was drifting through the anchorage and again hit the same trawler, this time a glancing blow. The Harbor patrol repeatedly tried to take it into tow but the lines would just break.

A voice of a harbor patrolman on the King Neptune said, "I'm trying to start the engines."

On board was 39 year old harbor patrol officer Timothy Mitchell – a Kiwi who had moved to Catalina in 2000 and worked on this very boat as a SCUBA instructor. He served on the volunteer fire department and eventually joined the harbor patrol. Getting the engines going was the only hope to save the boat.

But it was too late.

The King Neptune hit the seawall about 100 feet astern and toward the Green Pier from my boat. The waves were pounding, rocking it violently. A crowd gathered on land – now only feet from the King Neptune. The stern of King Neptune was very close to steps that are used by swimmers to enter the water in calmer times. Then I heard over the radio, "Tim fell off the Neptune and is in the water!"

I hoped he could get clear and not be pulled under the boat by the tremendous suction that develops under such conditions. Then many in the crowd ashore screamed and I could tell by their expression some gasped. Many turned away but some leaned in further. I knew what had happened. Every patrol and Baywatch boat in the harbor raced over, but could do nothing due to breaking waves. The harbor patrolman's body would be recovered later that morning. The King Neptune would be reduced to debris in less than two hours. The engines remained in that spot. The rest of the boat and its contents spread throughout the harbor, with many parts thrown by the waves onto the city streets. The harbor stank of diesel.

Two other boats, both trawlers, went ashore at about the same time. But they went onto the beach rather than against the breakwall, so fared somewhat better. The harbor patrol went back to grabbing wayward boats and towing to the more sheltered portion of the bay. I am sure they were out of moorings so must have been tying them to other boats or floats.

Richard and I tried to speak to each other. I mentioned I had dove off the King Neptune a few years ago and it was a massive, good vessel, but he could not hear me. We were ten feet apart but the sound of the wind drowned out my voice. We did manage to communicate that we would keep an eye on each other and help as we could. Both of us were the sole occupants of our vessels and sometimes you just need a bit of help from someone else.

I re-assessed my situation. With the breakwall directly behind my boat I realized that if my mooring line should break I would only have seconds before the boat swung, connected by only the stern line. In this position, the breaking seas would come over the transom, flood and sink the boat quickly. So I would need to start the engines and cut the stern line as quickly as possible. I put my largest and sharpest knife by the salon door. I already had a lifejacket on but took off my shoes (much easier to swim without shoes) and put swim fins by the salon door. I took the boat registration and insurance papers, folded them and placed in my back pocket. I attached a water activated strobe light to the shoulder of my lifejacket and put a water proof flashlight in my jacket pocket. My plan was, if the mooring line should break, to first try to motor out. Even if I got out of the breakers I would need to navigate through many rows of closely packed boats on moorings. With the large windage of the Tamara, I would not have good control and might hit other boats or get a mooring line wrapped on the propeller thus disabling the boat.

Alternatively, if the boat was heading to the seawall quickly, I would jump into the water and swim to the calmer part of the harbor where I could climb out or be picked up by a harbor patrol boat. Anything to avoid being on the boat pinned against the seawall awaiting certain destruction.

Around midnight or so the winds and seas seemed to go down a bit but then around 1:00 they picked back up.

Then I heard on the radio, "Epic is free!" Epic is a large luxury sportfisher, maybe 65' long. The mooring line had been attached to the windlass on the bow – a very strong attachment point – designed to deploy or retrieve the ship's anchor in all conditions. But the windlass pulled out of the deck setting Epic adrift. I watched as the harbor patrol chased Epic down, put a man aboard and secured a tow line. This time it went as planned and Epic was towed over by the Casino and secured to a dock.

Then another boat came adrift – a ~60' pilothouse motor yacht – I am not sure of the exact make. It was moving quickly through the harbor, about to move into a densely packed area of smaller boats. Two harbor patrol boats rushed to it and

were determining a plan of action when the operator came on the radio and said, "I'm going to try to get the engines going." A harbor patrol boat pulled alongside and a man attempted to step aboard just as the owner put in gear and revved the engines. The yacht lunged forward and harbor patrolman missed his mark, ending up in the water and luckily missed the powerful propellers. The harbor patrol boat had to move around several boats before returning to the patrolman in the water, but he was brought back aboard.

"Seaview is free!" This is the glass bottom boat. Fairly large, heavy and very wide.

It bounced off a few boats before being secured and side-tied to another vessel, still in the exposed area of the harbor. Too bad for the vessel to which it was attached.

"Harbor patrol, this is Susie Q. We are free and in need of assistance." This family had been next to us an Antonio's. What appeared to be three generations of family.

The grandparents, the parents (one with a jacket embroidered with "Susie Q Crew") and grandchildren. I was on the bridge and saw Susie Q, a ~40 foot Hunter sailboat, spiral off her mooring – stern to wind and waves. Her engine was on. She looked in good shape. It looked like she was going to pass the ~35' Tiara powerboat on mooring 105, round her stern, then could head out to sea. But instead she turned sharp, attempting to pass in front of the Tiara. The wind and seas were too much. She could not get her bow into the wind. She collided, at speed, with the bow of the Tiara. Susie Q then backed off, tried to go forward but could not. Her propeller was wrapped and the engine useless. She seemed stuck to the Tiara, with her stern to the waves. The harbor patrol came by to help.

Eventually a line was attached from her bow to the stern of the Tiara. The stern of the sailboat was let go and she floated around – attached by the bow to the stern of the Tiara. The strain on the line was tremendous. When a wave would pass under the Tiara and to the sailboat the line would snap taught, but not break. Then, often, the bow of the sailboat would smash the stern of the Tiara. Eventually the back of the Tiara started to disintegrate. The bow of the sailboat developed a huge V-shaped hole. If the rope should break, it was unclear whether Susie Q would go aground on the beach or hit the breakwall. Susie Q was also in danger of sinking.

The skipper of the Susie Q radioed the harbor patrol. "I'm not sure how long this rope will hold. What do I do if it breaks?"

Harbor patrol, "Float into shore."

Susie Q, "But what do we do? Jump off? Swim?"

Harbor patrol, "We don't have much to do with that. There will be people on shore to help. You might want to think about getting off that boat now."

The harbor patrol sent a boat over and evacuated the Susie Q. The stern was pitching too much to transfer. The harbor patrol vessel pulled up beside the mast, where the pitching was reduced. The crew evacuated.

For a couple of hours the now abandoned Susie Q battered the stern of the Tiara, which was occupied. The harbor patrol tried to free the Susie Q but it seemed that it was somehow attached beneath the waterline. The Susie Q eventually sank. People continually requested to be taken off their vessels but the Harbor patrol could not accommodate due to more pressing emergencies.

"That Cigarette boat is free!" A 42 Fountain speedboat came detached from its bow mooring and swung into a sailboat two boats in front of me. I could see the situation clearly from the bridge. The speedboat seemed to be still attached by its stern mooring and was banging into the side of the sailboat. I heard a particularly loud "thud" of the two boats coming together then screams and yells from the man aboard. His wife came on the radio, "His finger is gone! He is hurt! We need help!"

Ordinarily I would have taken my dinghy over and rendered assistance, as most people would. But I just felt helpless, seeing him motionless on the swim step with no means to get over there. I shined the boat's spotlight on the sailboat's swim step to aid the harbor patrol in locating him, and also in case he passed out and fell into the water. The harbor patrol arrived quickly and evacuated him and his wife. I saw an ambulance and fire engine race to meet them by the Casino.

A large trawler, maybe 55 feet, came loose. The owner was trying to get the engines started – probably the only way to save it. The Harbor patrol was busy with other emergencies, so was not immediately available. It was up to the owner to get the engines started and get out of there. Just before the water was too shallow, it appeared the trawler was starting to move under its own power. It takes a tremendous amount of power, and some time, to get a boat that size to turn into the wind. It was too late. It hit the beach and washed ashore. Quickly the seas broke open the side and flooded the interior. Destroyed but no lives lost. "The Seaview is free again!"

Throughout the night an ambulance and fire engine, red lights flashing, would occasionally run out to the Casino stay a few minutes and then run back into town. I assumed they were tending to those few people who were able to be evacuated from their boats.

These emergencies went on and on throughout the night. Sometimes a sort of rhythm would develop and it seemed the worst was over. Then all in the anchorage would feel a particularly large wave move through mooring field (sometimes noted on the VHF "that was a big one") followed by the "so-and-so is off the mooring!" alerts from nearby boats. Dinghies frequently blew through the anchorage to be demolished against the seawall.

At graylight the wind and seas had greatly diminished and the destruction apparent. Three trawlers on the beach. Most of the townspeople, and the media,

never saw the massive King Neptune against the seawall. It was reduced to rubble well before dawn. But the harbor was full of its debris – thrown onto land, floating throughout the harbor and below the surface. Most of the wayward dinghies were destroyed, in bits. But interestingly their outboard engines could often be seen near the seawall, a foot or two below the surface, sitting on the bottom. The mast of the sunken sailboat arose from mooring 103, our previous mooring. I'd guess that 50% of the boats in the harbor had damage.

Sadly, while searching for the harbor patrolman, another body was found. He was 53 year old Bruce Ryder, a well-known Avalon resident that lived on a boat in the harbor. The wreckage of his demolished powerboat, Ocean Ryder II, was found near the King Neptune. His dog made it to shore and his usual hang-out, the Marlin Club. But he did not. Condolences to his family and friends.

Lessons learned and some observations? Here are a few from a single perspective. I am sure there are many other important lessons and observations from other points-of-view.

First, the bravery, professionalism and competence of the Harbor Patrol, Baywatch and volunteers cannot be overstated. Without their efforts many more lives and much more property would have been lost. Our deepest condolences go out to the family and friends of Timothy Mitchell.

At the first sign of a North East wind, even if forecast to be light, we will evacuate. This NE wind was predicted to be 5 to 15 knots. It topped out at over 40 knots. Cat Harbor is a good choice if you want to remain on the island during such a weather event.

Big heavy boats are more prone to breaking the moorings and, once adrift, more difficult for the Harbor Patrol to control. These types of boats, especially if they are on the most exposed moorings, should be the first to evacuate the harbor.

There are many reasons boats came off their moorings but several of the boats I saw adrift were due to failed moorings, not failed deck fittings. Some of the boats adrift, and on the beach, still had their mooring lines attached. However, one of the trawlers on the beach had its windlass ripped out. As did the Epic. Regardless, it is very important to securely attach the mooring line to your boat, add chaffing gear and check it frequently.

When being washed onto a beach, don't jump off a boat in the surf. Either evacuate before the boat hits the surf or ride it through.

Remember there is tremendous force between colliding boats – even at seemingly slow speeds. Never put yourself between boats or between boats and a shore facility.

In mooring fields during storms, motoring out is not a good option. Just turning a large boat into the wind and seas in the confinement of the mooring field can be a

tremendous challenge. Once Susie Q's propeller became fouled she was at the mercy of the elements. Much better to leave beforehand.

Lastly, I am incredibly thankful my family was not aboard. I am a fairly strong swimmer and felt I could possibly make it through the surf, and even across the harbor, if I had to abandon ship. I would not assume that of my family members. With the seawall behind me riding the boat through the surf was not a realistic option. Of course, had my family been aboard, I would have requested they be evacuated. But in this emergency that likely would not have been possible. Many families requested to be evacuated and the harbor patrol simply could not get to them until after daylight when things calmed down. Hopefully these families are not overly scared by the ordeal and will keep returning to Catalina. For my family, Catalina is a very special place. My wife and I became engaged on the island. Our kids have been joining us since they were three weeks and five weeks old. We make many trips to the island every year including a two week annual cruise with Mission Bay Yacht Club. We will never look at Avalon Harbor in the same way as we did before December 30th, 2014. But our appreciation for Catalina and her residents have only increased. We will soon return.

Daniel Sipes has been an active boater his entire life. He enjoys sailing, powerboating, fishing, SCUBA and freediving/spearfishing. He grew up on Bethel Island, in the California Delta. His parents had a marine electronics business and have been active in the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary for over 50 years. After graduating from California State University, Sacramento and UC Davis, his career took him to San Diego where, in his leisure time, he restored an old Seafarer 31 sailboat and sailed it solo from Mission Bay Yacht Club to Hilo, Hawaii, through the Hawaiian islands then to San Francisco, up to the Delta (visiting his parents' house on the water) and finally returning to San Diego (MBYC). In order to more frequently visit Catalina he and his wife purchased a 34 Meridian power boat in 2004 and make the trip several times a year with their children. Daniel currently works as a biologist specializing in laboratory automation with Novartis Pharmaceuticals in San Diego.