

## It's Just A Matter of Time

by

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### **The North Atlantic - 150 Miles Southwest of Cork, Ireland**

The Gemini inflatable rubber craft bounced on the waves as it approached the *Pisces III*. The small two-man submersible had just surfaced after a nine hour dive and was waiting to be recovered. The end of the tow line was passed from the Gemini to a diver waiting at the stern, who attached the snap hook to the lower towing point of the *Pisces III*. As he climbed onto the submarine, the Operations Controller saw the tow line wash over the side of the *Pisces III* - it was lying dangerously across her afterdeck. He turned and ordered the winch operator to pay out the tow line, but it was too late. By the time he turned back the line had become hooked on the dogs that secured the aft hatch of the machinery sphere and pulled tight. In the blink of an eye, the hatch had opened and water was filling the sphere. The submarine was sinking. The weight of the submarine increased as it hung, tangled on the line, the sphere filling with water. The trapped submersible pilots - Roger Chapman and Roger Mallison - log the results:

*290940 Tow line parts, on way to bottom.*

**San Diego, CA** - All I really wanted was a good night's sleep and the phone's interruption of my dream at 0445 in the morning was far from welcome.

"What?" I asked, with the cheeriness the intruder deserved. It was the Chief from the YFNX-30 - the CURV III's support boat, he had duty that night.

"Larry! We just received a 'sub lost' flash message." A submersible is trapped on the ocean bottom off Cork, Ireland in 1575 feet. Sunk about 3.5 hours ago"

We were to mobilize the CURV - the Cable-Controlled Underwater Recovery Vehicle - our flyaway capable Remotely Operated Vehicle. And, I was the CURV III's pilot. I jumped into my clothes and minutes later was on my way to

the lab. They had 72 hours of life supporting oxygen when they had started the first dive. (+60 hours of oxygen left).

*291247 Feeling better...lying down, covered in seat covers, grade A rags and rubber cover for VTR gear...Humidity now 95%.*

I arrived at the lab - then the Naval Undersea Center - and raced to the boat. The Chief already had the crew on their way in, the roof's soft patch was being removed so we could unload the vehicle, and the support equipment was being inventoried. There was no time to wait so we set sail to the Naval Air Station at North Island. Two C-141 Starlifter aircraft were being mobilized. By 0900 we had the go-ahead. Load out and fly to Cork, Ireland. (+55 hours of oxygen left).

*291700 Getting Damp. A little tired. Temp now 50 degrees. UQC very loud...tiring. Moved "beds" together to keep each other warm.*

We weren't sure what we'd need, so we prepared to take everything: CURV III, cable, lift lines, floats, control van, crane, supply van, spares, motor generator, capstans, and the kitchen sink in addition to several bags of candied orange slices and jelly beans provided by Bill McLean's wife. We must have looked underfed. Now the CURV and its equipment isn't the most conventional cargo - the vehicle was 5.5 feet wide, 13 feet long, 7 feet high and weighed 5,000 pounds. Along with it was a mix of baskets full of cable, vans and other various equipment that we couldn't get into the plane. The old styled loading equipment wasn't worth a damn. *Good morning Mr. Murphy. Welcome to the trip.* However, with a Rube Goldberg array of forklifts, pallets, jury-rigging, elbow grease, Vaseline and the body language of Talkington, McLean, Capt. Gautier, and Scholsser we managed to cram the material into the two planes. "Pack your bags guys," we were told. We would be flying in the first class luxury of the Air Force planes to Cork - no time to waste. Two hours later we were strapped into the temporary seats and on our way. (+50 hours of O2 left)

*292357 Getting cold. Temp. still around 50 degrees.*

Thank God for Murphy and fuel inefficient engines. We stopped in Dover, Delaware, to refuel and repair a black box on one of the planes. Once fixed, and with a load of box lunches - you can only live so long on jelly beans - we were off again. After a typically uncomfortable and sleepless flight we landed at Cork, Ireland at 1930 on Thursday. Now, I won't say that I expected a brass band or anything when we arrived, but the scruffy bunch of men waiting for us were a far cry from what I expected. The military airlift command personnel were dressed in civies, especially the Air Force Master Sergeant who was wearing a turtle neck, jeans and a Greek fisherman's hat standing in the cold, wet fog of Cork - apparently there was some NATO or political problem at the time. Regardless, as promised by Capt. Gautier, they had the proper loaders waiting and along with the other recently arrived Navy personnel, we had the equipment off in a hurry. (+27 hours of O2)

302110 ...messages from home...time for another sip of coffee for celebration

302000 Getting tired again...

I asked "Curly" Lawrence where the boat was? My answer came from a dour, "gray faced" Captain who indicated that the boat - the Canadian cable-laying ship *John Cabot* - was tied up about 10 miles down river and that the falling tide was going to keep her there before we could get her loaded. Well, Curly was a charismatic doer and minutes later Curly, Bob Watts, Gray Face and I were charging in a Volkswagen bug "rent-a-racer" down the "wrong side of the road" to the breakwater and the ship. Once we arrived, and I saw how far the 01 deck of the *Cabot* was above the surface, my eyes rolled back - it was really way up in the sky. It sure as hell wasn't the YFNX - nice and close to the water. Two large cranes were on the deck and the vehicle would have to be lowered 35 feet before it hit the water - an accident waiting to happen. Murphy would love it. Curly and I looked at each other as Gray Face impatiently asked us to make up our minds. We could lengthen the trip line or put a boat into the water, and the CURV had handled rough launches before - "I can live with this," I said. Curly knew the tides and exuded confidence. The only way to make the tides was to set sail now and send the equipment out to the *Cabot* on barges. There was no other option. "Let's get

underway." I started to head back and prepare CURV and Curly stopped me. "No time. We'll work onboard and layout the equipment." To hell with the "rent-a-racer." The tide went out fast - we went out faster. (+23 hours of O2)

310243 *Heard over U.Q.C. (the underwater telephone) that recovery line from PII had broken away. Obvious disappointment...*

310344 *Another blow for PII...steady weep of water...requested to ascend. Feeling very tired now - scrubbing taking a little longer. Humidity high (99% on gauge).*

We arrived at the rendezvous point in less than favorable conditions, but a lot better than those who came out on the barges - the pig barges. I had to smile as I watched Denny Holstein standing there in the mist - knee deep in pig shit. Well, maybe it was really ankle deep. I laughed then, but I wasn't laughing any more when we had to secure the equipment to the deck. A welding arc sparking in the middle of pig shit doesn't give off the same aroma as bacon cooking in garlic and onions. Obviously, as planned, Murphy saw that we had the wrong end of the pig for breakfast. With nose pinching perseverance, the vans were welded down, the grips placed on the vehicle and the remainder of the equipment was glued in place before we hit the seaway at 0700 Friday morning. (+18 hours of O2)

310600 - 0945 *PV on bottom searching for us...things became...confusing.*

310947 *...bring up PV...start again. Conditions not too good. Noticeable usage of O2 when things were happening (referring to their excitement during the Pisces II and V rescue attempts)*

It was like Victory at Sea as we sailed towards the accident site. The *Vickers Voyager* had already arrived at the site carrying the *Pisces II* and *V* - the *Pisces III's* sister vessels that had come to aid in the rescue. They would attempt to place lift lines on the downed vehicle. Unfortunately, the messages being sent back to us were far from encouraging. We were becoming the only game in town as we cut through the 20 foot seas, pitching and heaving, while

hooking up the interconnecting cables in the blowing mist of a 50 knot wind. Now, good old Murphy loves this type of weather, and when we powered up the vehicle, the cable connecting CURV to the control van literally blew up. With a lightening crack of arching electricity and roiling smoke - the 55 pin connector became nothing more than a blackened, smoldering mess. There was no time to wire in a spare so we cut back and rang out the wires to identify them, put on solderless lugs, and hard wired the 55 leads into the van's connector strip. Fingers crossed, we fired the vehicle up again. I shut my eyes. No sparks. No smoke. Everything worked - almost. We had fried the compass. It wasn't a critical device in locating the sunken sub - we had the sonar for that - but it was critical for tracking the turns in the cable. If we marry the rescue line to the CURV's cable, any turns in the primary umbilical will lock them tightly together - then both vehicles would be stuck. I had an idea and began to dig through my dive bag. Five minutes later my diver's compass was strapped to the starboard side of the vehicle frame where one of the cameras could watch it. Another test. Success. We arrived at the site at 1930. It was Roger Mallison's birthday - he was 35 today - he was also at the bottom of the Atlantic trapped in the *Pisces III*. Happy birthday Roger. (+7.5 hrs of O2)

311745 *Heard...Pisces V had attached (a line) to our motor.*

311830 *Everything quiet - sleeping a lot. Bad headaches, but otherwise O.K.*

312230 *Losing interest in events. Things becoming difficult. Cold and damp, air...foul. Morale not so hot! Heard for the first time about C.U.R.V. Was not sure...what the surface was talking about.*

010430 *Interrogated by PII's Sonar. She must be very close.*

010505 *Heard PII tell surface that "Toggle" is in after hatch. ...difficult to...visualize what a "Toggle" was.*

The CURV was ready to dive into the ocean, and I was ready to dive into bed. The voyage had been long, wet, and

frustrating. All I wanted was some sleep. A few minutes later I crashed into the bunk. I swear it was only a second later when they woke me up. It was time. The Pisces vehicles were unable to complete the rescue - the line they attached by PV to the motor would not handle the lift the other line attached with the toggle attached by PII was only good for 12000 pounds - too weak for the sub and its flooded aft sphere. It was up to us to attach a line capable of lifting the lost sub safely. To accomplish this feat, we'd use a device attached to the CURV's manipulator holder. The device - large toggle bolt was fabricated from steel plate - was the most critical portion of the recovery equipment. The toggle would be inserted into the open rear hatch of the submersible. It was strong enough, but would it open, stay inside and hold? I wanted to ensure that the toggle would work as required, so I took a large Crescent wrench from the tool box and had it hastily welded to the center of the toggle to provide a stand-off. We then attached two strands of bungee cord which acted as springs, holding the toggle open. Without the springs, the toggle could collapse and pull out if the line went slack. To ensure it latched properly, we fabricated a replica submersible out of a sheet of plywood - well at least the open hatch. We inserted the makeshift toggle. It worked. Attached to the toggle was a 6-inch, double-braided nylon line with a breaking strength of 50 tons. The line was attached to the umbilical with masking tape which would break away and detach as the CURV pulled away. We launched CURV at 0942, Saturday morning - 8 hours and 42 minutes beyond the 72 hour design of the *Pisces'* life support system. (-8.7 hours of O2)

*010800-1030 ...must have fallen asleep. C.U.R.V was on her way down to us.*

Thirty-five feet to the water - it looked like a mile. The seas had calmed slightly, but the launch was a major concern. The extreme length of the tag lines wouldn't allow much stabilization of the vehicle during the launch. The vehicle rocked and swung as the *Cabot* heaved in the violent sea, but with luck, we reached the safety of the water, and the vehicle was released. The plan was in place. The buoy marking the location of the sub was on the surface and the *Cabot's* Master followed the vehicle's umbilical, directed via radio by the CURV crew as we moved towards the buoy. The ship free-boated as we began the dive. Whatever reason

for the delay in launching the CURV, politics or pride, the CURV was on its way. The Yanks were given a chance. I drove the vehicle to the bottom while the nylon line was rolled over the gigantic bow sheaves of the cable layer. I reached the operating depth at 1030 (-9.5 hours of O2)

011035 ...very confused. Thought that C.U.R.V. had already been down...heard movement around us.

I pointed the sonar down, and using the diver's compass, lined up with the target area. The submersible appeared immediately - a large blip on the screen - about 240 yards away. The current wasn't too bad, about one-half knot, as I flew the vehicle towards the target. The Cabot followed the umbilical above. We were a "dog on a leash" and our Master was one of the best as he guided the Cabot along behind us. We knew the sub's pilots were alive because of the UQC communications, but time was not on their side. There was no room for error as we neared the crew's "drop dead time," - the British term, not mine. I felt confident as I maneuvered CURV along - one eye on the compass, the other looking ahead at the night time desert that passed before us - a Cyclops with a single light beam from the 250 watt mercury vapor spotlight mounted on the working pan-and-tilt. Then I saw the Pisces, suspended like a child's top as it leaned slightly to one side, the sail above the pointed tail section with the open hatch and the flooded aft sphere resting on the bottom. I drove directly toward the sub and, with a combination of body English and the control stick, maneuvered the CURV around lining up the toggle with the gaping mouth of the machinery hatch. It almost felt anticlimatic after all the travel, loss of sleep and anxious moments, but the insertion was really no harder than parking the car in the garage after a long drive home. I had done this type of maneuver a hundred times before and I could do it in my sleep. Ah, sleep. The toggle went into the open hatch and locked in place. The back seat drivers were swarming around me in the van as I pulled the vehicle back and tested the bolt. It held secure. "Bring it up," I said. Some weren't so sure, including Gray Face. I won out over the concern of the on-lookers and we went for it. (-10 hours of O2)

011040 ...things really happening. Woke up and tried to get organized... Informed that C.U.R.V had positive lock... We would be lifted whatever happens at 1130!

011045 Put on life jackets. Tried to stow...loose gear.

011055 Both jammed in opposite corners. Angle at 50 degrees nose up.

011110 Leaving bottom. Depth gauge moves for first time in 3 1/2 days.

011115 On way up. Rocking about dreadfully ...convinced lines would come out of Aft sphere.

011130 Motion terrible. Slight air leak into main sphere...shut off all Hull stop valves.

011142-1200 Dreadful pause at 350'. Motion awful...sat there hanging on...hoping everything held.

011205 - At 60'...Motion worse.

011222 Can see one diver.

011319 Hatch open - Out into fresh air and sunlight.

We brought both vehicles up at the same time - the CURV's umbilical was wrapped around the recovery line. But not severely. Divers met the Pisces as it reached 100 feet and attached another safety line. I flew the CURV away from the Pisces and joined the others on deck. The Pisces III was on the surface at 1317 - 84 hours after their initial launch - 12 hours beyond the expected end of their air supply. Their survival was a tribute to forced relaxation and fortitude while placing their lives in the hands of a multi-national group of new found friends. The two rubber boats stood by as swimmers were put into the water and the hatch was quickly opened. We all watched over the side of the Cabot when the first pilot climbed out of the their small home for over three days. A chorus of cheers rose from the ship - they were home. There was no wasted time, no waving hands, only two tired submersible pilots - Roger Chapman and Roger Mallison - who were swiftly loaded into the rubber boats and



raced to their support ship. They never even looked our way. The rescue was done, so we returned to the final tasks, recovered the vehicles and headed back to Cork.

Sometimes, if you are susceptible to migraines, you can get one more easily from positive stress than negative. That was the case this time for me as I visited the Cabot's doctor. He gave me some medication. The headache was a killer, but the medication seemed to work. Even though the pilots we rescued weren't there, we needed to celebrate. After we arrived at the dock, I gave one of the crew some money to go pick up a bottle of good Irish Whiskey. When he returned, we started to celebrate and were soon joined by a few of the Brits - pilots from one of the other subs. They hadn't totally blown us off after all. We downed the Whiskey and congratulated each other on a job well done. The Brits acknowledged that we had saved their mates butts and asked, "How can we get hold of you guys again?" So, I gave them my card and told them to tape it beside their viewport - just in case. Call anytime. Now, I'm not sure what the mixture of drink and medication actually had on me, but I'm told that after we arrived at the airport, Sandy ended up wheeling me around the airport on a baggage cart while I extended my arms for wings in an attempt to get off the ground. Not a match for DiCaprio on the bow of the Titanic, but I felt like flying. It had been quite a day. And, when I crashed, it was into a warm bed.

The sleep didn't last and I woke up hungry. At least the headache was gone. I gathered some of the gang - it was only midnight - and we asked the manager where we could get a bite to eat. The night manager smiled - obviously he knew we were the men who rescued the Pisces pilots - and hailed a cab. He gave the cabbie instructions and told us to tell the man at the door that "Sean sent you." Not sure why, we thanked him and piled into the cab. The drive didn't seem that long, and we soon turned down a dark street. The driver turned off his lights and drove slowly. He stopped beside another parked car, rolled down the window, and said something to the men inside. We began to worry. Then he pulled to the curb and said, "Okay lads." We looked at each other - this didn't feel good. Dark streets, strange men. But we did as ordered and seconds later were ushered through a door that was barely visible. It led into a dark entry way. After the door shut behind us, another one opened up

and we walked into a smoke filled, noisy club where the food and drink seemed plentiful. Apparently a secret "after hours" establishment, we enjoyed ourselves, filled our bellies, and asked for another cab to take us back to the hotel. We were ushered through the dark security room a second time and out into the ink black night. We couldn't see a thing. Then someone called out in a thick Irish brogue, "Right here mate." The cab driver was sitting in the dark, in the car, with the lights off. We jumped into the cab and drove off into the dark void, back to our hotel. Back to bed. Back to home.

Now I could stop here and say that we all lived happily ever after, but that's only part of the story. There was something missing after our adventure. We know the dual Roger's had their celebration with their mates and we weren't included. Not sure why. Embarrassment? Who knows. And it really didn't seem very important at the time. Besides, who else gets thanked after saving someone's life - lifeguards? paramedics? firefighters? Not usually. And I never really thought much about it - after all, it was my job. At least not until 11 years later when we were invited to the ROV '84 conference in San Diego for a reunion with Roger Chapman - one of the *Pisces'* pilots. I was a bit negative at the idea at first. Roger never even thanked us in his book. Our city recognized us and declared "CURV III day" when we returned. Our families, mothers, brothers and peers at work hailed our achievement. All that recognition was nice, but something was always missing. I didn't really realize what until the banquet. The room was filled and the podium sat high above everyone - we had the table of honor at front center. Business was good that year and there was party in the air. Then the main event - Roger Chapman's talk. He stood at the podium, making fun of their near death experience, but the most distressing part of the ordeal was using the *Pisces III* for "the loo", which didn't help the stale air at all during their entrapment. But survive they did and when the speech was over, we were all introduced to him, one at a time. Roger finally had a chance to thank the crew that had saved him - albeit only a small part of the total operation. I shook his hand. There was nothing gushy - only the simple exchange of thanks through the grip of two men's hands. A simple shake to say thanks - eleven years later. Finally, the circle was closed. Roger had quit piloting submersibles - after his

experience he had opened an ROV company. As for me, I still fly ROVs - I'm probably the world's longest running active ROV pilot, or at least one of them. And, I probably won't be woke up at 0400 again to fly around the world and save someone; however, you never know. After all, they do have my card pasted above one of their viewports. Then we'd see our friends again, after all, it's just a matter of time.