

HOLY COW!

Playing the blame game rarely proves a useful exercise, especially when a greater power has marked your card

Some thrive on uncertainty, others would turn the tide to avoid it if they could. Like it or not though, the only thing we can be really sure of at sea is that we never know what'll happen next. Last week, I dropped my biggest anchor on my foot. Was I unlucky, or was it my own stupid fault? There are arguments on both sides, but before examining what constitutes a genuine accident, it's worth sparing a thought for a crew of Japanese fishermen as reported in the *Australian Financial Review*.

These honest sons of the sea were cruising home mending their nets when a large cow fell from the sky, plunged through the deck before their astonished gaze, continued past the fish hold and out through the bottom. You might be thinking that the beast would have been better employed supplying milk to the thirsty, but the fishermen had other priorities because their boat was sinking rapidly. When they were

SAILING, YACHTS AND YARNS

finally pulled from the water, nobody believed their story. Far from being returned to their loved ones, they were interrogated and slung in jail, presumably under suspicion of insurance fraud.

Weeks later, the truth was leaked by the Russian Air Ministry. Apparently the crew of a cargo plane had stolen a cow, herded her aboard, then taken off for home and a fresh beef dinner. The plan backfired somewhere over the Sea of Japan when the hitherto mild-mannered cudster awoke to the fact that her future looked short and far from pleasant. So violent were her berserk rampages that the aircraft's stability was compromised, leaving the airmen little alternative but to shove the beast out of the door. The chances of her making landfall on the boat below were so remote that not even Mr 'Jobsworth' the assessor could blame the fishermen. It just hadn't been their day.

We can contrast this misadventure with the affair of a young man in mid-ocean on a 21ft boat when his pressure-driven cooking stove ran low on alcohol half-way through supper. These units are considered by many as safer than propane, and lighting the rings follows a sequence. The fuel tank is pressurised with a hand pump with the supply to the burner turned off. The burner is now heated so that it will vapourise the fuel for combustion. This is done by igniting a small amount of raw alcohol tipped into an open pan under the base of the burner. With good timing, the pressurised fuel can be turned on just before the flames in the pre-heating pan die. If the burner is hot enough, the stove catches and roars into satisfying life. If it isn't, you either get the benefit of a jet of burning liquid fuel, or nothing at all. If you miss the right moment and the burner is hot enough, you're still in with a good chance of lighting it with a match.

Our gallant mariner's stew was nearly ready but, as the gravy warmed up, the fuel ran down until it became obvious he must refill it. Rather than go through the whole ritual, he opted to open the tank and top it up before the burner cooled off, then pump it up again while it would still work. He'd done it before, but this time his luck was out and an awkward wave spilled his fuel container onto the cooker. This flashed up all right, but not in the way he'd intended. His beard was burning merrily by the time he leapt over the side. So was the cabin as he struggled back on board, but his fire extinguishers were well sited to save his skin and his boat.

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An unfortunate accident? I don't think so, do you? It is to this excellent adventurer's credit that he was able to complete a fine circumnavigation, but if it had ended there and then, he couldn't really claim to have been unlucky.

These contrasting catastrophes throw our more modest mishaps into perspective. We live in a culture of blame in which someone, somewhere must be held responsible for everything. If an out-of-control marina trolley pushed by a speed freak injures us as we sit minding our own business on a bollard, we probably have good reason to feel aggrieved. Accountability is less clear if we're hurt tripping over an unfair plank on a pontoon. Many would sue as a matter of course. Others might take the view that failing to look where we're going could just be our own fault.

Out at sea, it's no good complaining about who's to blame when things go wrong and urgent action is needed. The starting point for any subsequent investigation must be that we are responsible for our boats and actions, although accidents can happen from gear failures that the skipper couldn't be expected to anticipate. We might look to the manufacturer of a nearly-new winch whose pawls fail in normal use and break someone's arm with a flailing handle, but if a block that I didn't bother to inspect this year bursts, then whatever the consequences I have only two choices. Either I foolishly curse my luck or I blame myself like a gentleman.

Happily, however, there are still misfortunes for which we remain as guiltless as the fishermen sunk by the cow. When the sea breeze we hoped would kick in and blow us home turns unaccountably into a stiff headwind, it's either plain hard cheese or it's an Act of God. Submit all claims to The Almighty, c/o St Peter, Pearly Gates Yacht Club.