



Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard

Photos from the rescue of Montauk lobsterman John Aldridge

Miracle at Sea

The Heroic Rescue of Montauk Fisherman John Aldridge

BY KELLY LAFFEY

“Lost at sea” stories so rarely have a happy ending. But few rescue efforts have such unconditional community support as Montauk recently provided to lost-and-found local lobsterman John Aldridge.

As much as Montauk radiates the energy of an idyllic seaside resort community, there’s also a determined quality amongst all who love the hamlet, a side that was on display last week when Aldridge was plucked from the Deep Blue by the U.S. Coast Guard. The miraculous rescue occurred nine hours after an intense search began and 12 and a half hours after Aldridge fell overboard in the dark, early morning hours of Wednesday, July 24, buoyed by his rubber boots and an unwavering will to survive.

He went into survival mode. “Dying wasn’t an option,” confirmed Aldridge in a press conference, while holding his young nephew. During his time in the water, Aldridge had a knife in his pocket, and he was able to cut lobster buoys loose. He used those, as well as his boots, as flotation devices.

Aldridge’s fishing boat *Anna Mary* left Montauk the evening of July 23. He fell overboard sometime around 3:30 a.m. on July 24 after he went to move a cooler and the handle snapped. Fishing partner Anthony Sosinski woke up a few hours later and realized his friend was missing.

“He (Aldridge) left clues,” said Sosinski. “I started backtracking my steps and analyzing the boat.”

Sosinski, nicknamed “Little Anthony,” initially feared that Aldridge had drowned in one of the 2,000-pound lobster tanks on board. He quickly took inventory of his ship, which was 62 miles offshore at the time.

“There were stacked coolers on the boat that were moved, and one had a broken handle,” said Little Anthony.

“When I first went in at night, I saw a fin or two...[I thought] I just got to keep my composure, I can’t panic...”

Anthony charted his course and called the Coast Guard to ask for air support.

A call also went out to the local fishermen. “Our fishing friends offshore basically stopped what they were doing and headed in my direction,” said Little Anthony, explaining that boats lined up a half mile apart either in an east-west direction or a north-south direction to form a grid.

“The local fishermen really, really stepped up and helped Anthony patrol the waters closer

in,” says local resident and musician Nancy Atlas. “That freed up the helicopters to do longer runs.”

Two rescue boat crews from Station Montauk, two Coast Guard 87-foot rescue patrol boats, aircraft and two rescue helicopters from ASCC, along with several good Samaritans and local fishing vessels, searched about nine hours to find Aldridge. The coordination between the vessels and the Coast Guard allowed them to cover an area of 660 square miles, approximately the size of 378,000 American football fields.

“All of the local support and the federal government support was unprecedented,” noted Little Anthony.

“It’s very telling, how the community came together,” confirms Atlas.

There are rumors, though unconfirmed, that Jimmy Buffett and his boat the *Last Mango* were among those in the search party. Even if that proves untrue, his song “Fins” rung a little too close to home for Aldridge that fateful night.

“When I first went in at night, I saw a fin or two,” said Aldridge. “[I thought] I just got to keep my composure, I can’t panic...”

“I grabbed my boots, filled them with air and threw them under my arms,” said Aldridge. “The water was warm,” he added. The current temperature of the Atlantic is about 75 degrees.

Rescue efforts spanned the better part of Wednesday. John spotted (Cont’d on next page)

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Rescue *(Cont'd from previous page)*

“The swimmer said, ‘We’ve been looking for you for nine hours’ and I was like, ‘I’ve been looking for you for 12 hours.’”

various ships while floating, but “they were all looking away from me,” he says.

“He told me I passed him two times,” says Anthony. “[He said] ‘I saw you and all I could think about were the burgers in the cooler.’”

Aldridge was found by the Coast Guard approximately 43 miles south of Montauk. He was taken to Falmouth Hospital on Cape Cod

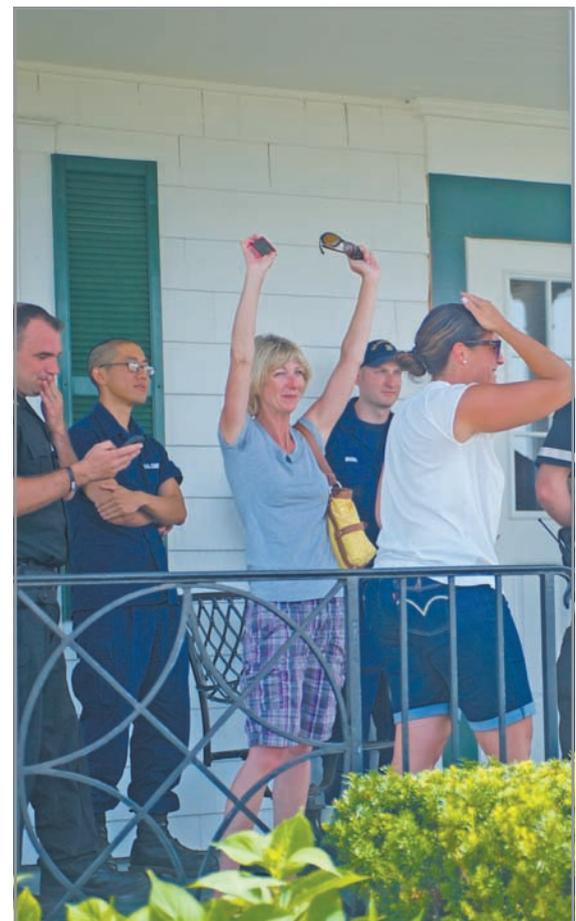
and was treated for dehydration, exposure and hypothermia.

“The swimmer came out and jumped in the water and said ‘We’ve been looking for you for nine hours’ and I was like, ‘I’ve been looking for you for 12 hours,’” said Aldridge in the press conference.

Likely adding to the challenges of spotting a man in the immense expanse of ocean, Aldridge was wearing a blue shirt, from the Anna Mary’s Blessing of the Fleet 2012.

“Everyone gets a shirt [for the Blessing of the Fleet],” says Anthony. “Same shirt, same team.”

Incidentally, some fishermen have become disenfranchised with the Blessing of the Fleet as of late because of the amount of regulations involved in the ceremony, says Anthony, who



Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard

Cathy Patterson, Aldridge’s sister, upon hearing he was saved

says he was ticketed for not having enough lifejackets on board about “two or three years ago.”

“It’s like ticketing someone for not wearing a seatbelt in a parade,” Anthony deadpans.

But that hasn’t taken away from the purity of the yearly Montauk tradition, and its ties to this latest rescue story. “It’s for everyone who loves that ocean. It’s the start of our season and is a time for remembrance; for everyone to be safe.”

The next blessing of the fleet is nearly a year away. But, Atlas notes that an amazing thing through all this is that Anthony is already back out at sea, having left this past weekend. The media coverage was slightly overwhelming. “He’s just happy that his friend is alive...He said ‘I just need to get back on the ocean. I’m my calmest there.’”

Aldridge too, plans to get back on the sea soon, according to Anthony.

“He’s still working, just not out on the ocean,” he said from his post out at sea. “He just needs to heal.”

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