

The Wreck of American Boy

It was so sudden. The waters were very rough. I thought we were going to die.

--Fisherman Joaquim Rico, aboard the tuna boat *American Boy*.

Fishing for tuna on the high seas has always been a risky job. All too often the small tuna clippers have capsized in pounding seas or run aground on rocky shores. In the mid-1950s, fifty-two tuna boats—a third of the San Diego fleet—were lost at sea in one five-year period. On the morning of March 6, 1966, twelve fishermen from the tuna clipper *American Boy* wondered about their own fates when heavy waves swamped their boat.

The 125-foot long steel tuna clipper had been launched in September 1946 by the shipyard of the Consolidated Steel Co. in Newport Beach. Originally a “bait boat” for Van Camp Sea Food that captured tuna by hook and line, the *American Boy* was converted to a purse seiner in 1959 and now used large nets to corral tons of skipjack and yellowfin tuna in the eastern Pacific.



Photo courtesy sandiegotunaboats.com

American Boy had narrowly escaped disaster in July 1963. Returning home with a full load of tuna, the boat was 180 miles southeast of San Diego, when rogue waves flooded the cabins and rolled the vessel on its beam-ends. “I was sure we were going over,” Captain Joe Lewis recalled. “We heeled over 45 degrees.”

Battling the waves from the helm that day was 25-year-old Manuel Jorge who felt the ship shuddering as if it had been rammed. "I threw the engine telegraph to 'full ahead' and tried to hang on. I guess I prayed some too."

The boat was saved when the seas swept a twelve-ton net off the stern. With the weight gone, the boat slowly righted itself. A Coast Guard plane dropped an auxiliary water pump to the clipper and the *American Boy* reached San Diego with its crew safe and valuable cargo intact.

Three years later, Manuel Jorge would skipper the *American Boy* as it fished off the coast of Costa Rica. After leaving San Diego on January 19, 1966, the crew of twelve had taken 175 tons of tuna in about a month's time. But on Sunday morning, March 7, as the boat was plowing through rough seas, the generator suddenly stopped working. Without power the automatic gyroscope went haywire and the *American Boy* twisted erratically in the waves. Before the crew could react, seawater poured into the boat.

The ship's cook, Donald Phillips, was fixing lunch in the galley when a huge wave washed him across the room. He scrambled for the door. "God save me, it opened and I got out of there."

When Phillips reached topside the ship was heeled over almost on its side and several men were clinging to the rail. Two small skiffs floated free and the twelve fishermen climbed in. Minutes later the *American Boy* sank below the waves.

The men knew they were lucky to be alive. But the quick sinking had given them no time to radio a distress message. In the tropical heat they were wearing little clothing. They had no food or water, and they were 200 miles from the mainland.

Two drums of fuel floating among wreck's debris gave the men hope. They could be used for the outboard motors on the skiffs. But at first, the men allowed the boats to drift. "There was no panic," Phillips remembered. "We made jokes, sang songs."

Phillips also remembered being thirsty, and "very, very hungry." One man fashioned a fish hook from a nail, and then attached it to some salvaged nylon line. But the makeshift tackle caught nothing. A box of macaroni came floating by but it was too "well-seasoned" with salt water to be edible.

When a sea turtle swam by on Monday afternoon, ship's oiler Mark Some plucked it from the water. A fisherman used his pocket knife to cut its throat. The blood was drained into a tin can and passed among the men. "I tried to tell myself it tasted just like water," recalled John Da Luz. "But it didn't."

The men tried eating the raw turtle flesh next. "It wasn't bad," Da Luz decided.

On Monday afternoon, after drifting for more than one day, the fishermen decided to actively look for help. "We got a bug in our heads we'd better move to the northeast, closer to shore where the big ships pass by," Some explained.

The decision worked. A few hours later the fishermen spotted a cargo ship on the horizon. Quickly tearing wood pieces from the sides of the skiffs and dousing them with fuel, they made

blazing torches for the ship to see. That evening the Greek freighter *Aristaios* took the men aboard.

The *Aristaios* dropped the men off in Acapulco at the end of the week. On Saturday, March 12, they flew home to San Diego. After 36 hours in an open boat, the men arrived burned and blistered from the sun, but amazed and thankful for their rescue. Donald Phillips would note, “With so little time to get out, things could have been different.”

Originally published as “A TUNA BOAT CREW'S SURVIVAL TALE: The American Boy's fate in 1966 a look at perseverance on the open ocean,” by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, September 8, 2011.