

## Duel at Sea-LC Lee

Last year Tom Johnson lost his wife Jennifer in a horrific incident at sea.

Tom dragged each step to his daughter Maureen's home thinking he may not be able to endure the reminiscing of Jennifer's passing. Maureen wanted to bring the family together for a remembrance of her mom's vibrant life, a loss that still overwhelmed her.

Tom had met his wife in San Diego and they quickly became an unlikely couple. She had been a tennis pro and Ms Laguna Beach. And he an ex Navy SEAL with the name *Shadow*, but Jennifer had always called him "Tom."

After he left the Navy they wanted to pursue a dream of an ocean cruise on a sailboat and had planned it for a while. With a little of his retirement they bought a forty foot catamaran which they named *Andrea*, after their first child who had died a few days after her birth.

Never more than 100 miles off the coast, they cruised to Argentina, going in and out of narrow coves they had longed to visit. And after their lengthy voyage, they were ready to head for home.

Tom and Jen were excited to get back home, but the heat of the sun and the confinement of being in a small space started to wear on their nerves. They argued over minor details, like where to put a dishtowel and why the soap wasn't in the soap dish. Wanting some time alone, they decided to look for a port to get some supplies. They sailed into the Gulf of Nicoya in Costa Rica, south of Guanacaste, a magical place of small coves and calm waters and a convenient place to find supplies and a good night's rest. After two nights anchored in the cove, Jen said, "I just want to get back home to San Diego and see my grandkids."

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They bought a few groceries; some needed some needed diesel fuel and water, as well as a few liters of oil as the starboard engine was burning a little. Rested and restocked they established a course for home and set sail in late afternoon.

Keeping the sun on the port side, Tom sailed north. He knew the fishing would be great along the coastal waters and he'd have to drop a line before sunset, so he slowed to a trolling speed in hopes of catching a Yellow Fin or a King Fish. Out in open water, Jen remembered to call her daughter Maureen as she had promised to do when they were underway again. Just as she reached Maureen on the SAT phone, the boat hit something near the stern. It rocked the catamaran. Jen shrieked.

Maureen sounded worried as she asked, "What happened?"

Jen cried out, "I can't talk now. Something's hit the boat!"

The late start and time spent fishing had put them on the edge of nightfall off the coast of Nicaragua. Tom's military training had taught him not to panic, so he calculated his next move. He knew he needed to press forward, but the boat wouldn't handle; the rudder swung from side to side. Tom's thumped the side of the boat in his frustration. "The boat's disabled. We can't continue without fixing it."

He put on his snorkel-mask to take a look before it got too dark. Just as he got ready to dive, he noticed a boat coming from shore toward them. He hoped it would be the coastguard or perhaps a local fisherman coming to assist. The *Andrea* was dead in the water, the sun was setting, and he needed some help. As he examined the hull of the boat, Tom saw a steel rod trapped in a wooden pallet with fishing line and netting wrapped around the whole mess. It had damaged the port side rudder, and the rusted steel rod had pierced

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through the center of the starboard side rudder. Tom broke the surface to call out to Jen, "Give me the red-handled pliers in the aft storage box."

Jen found the pliers, and as she handed them over to Tom, she said, "The trawler is getting closer." Tom calmed her and said, "I'll only be a few minutes."

Tom struggled to remove the tangled mess from the rudders. He saw the trawler along the port side, cleared his snorkel to get a clean breath of air, and dove one last time to free the starboard rudder. The fishing line and the steel rod had enmeshed the rudder. Using his diving knife, he cut the net away.

With his eyes locked on the surface of the water, he ascended. A splash in the water above him caught his attention. Adjusting his facemask to get a better view and blinking his eyes, he was shocked. It was Jen. Someone had thrown her in the water with the spare anchor and chain wrapped around her body. Tom, out of breath and desperate for air, saw Jen sink below him. Reaching out for her, he grabbed at the chain as she descended to the ocean depths. Deeper and deeper he swam after her. Screaming inside, he grabbed onto the end of the chain. When he pulled on it to retrieve her, it unrolled, spinning her body away from him. He fought to reach her, pulling harder on the chain. With no more oxygen in his lungs, he let go in desperation. Tom removed his snorkel and screamed out underwater. "Jen!"

The anguish in his eyes said it all as she slowly faded into the black and the sea swallowed her. The pain of depleted air in his lungs forced him to the surface. Nightfall loomed overhead; but he could see the bottom of the trawler on the port side of his boat. He brought his head above the waterline and bobbed in the water alongside the trawler. The men on board conversed in Spanish as they divided the spoils of his boat. Tom looked into

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the water again and took a shallow dive, hoping against hope he would spot Jen. There was no sign of her.

Returning to the surface, he waited in silence alongside the *Andrea*, hoping to identify the monsters who had killed his Jen. Finally, he heard the names “Octavio” and “Vicente.” He burned their names in his mind.

After a few minutes, the trawler motored away. Quickly, Tom got back on board and pulled out an old pair of binoculars he kept near the bait tank, looking for any markings on the trawler which might help identify it later. He ran forward until he could make out the name on the boat *Humeante*. With deep breaths his adrenaline was pumping. All he wanted was to get the bastards who had killed his wife.

A fire in the cabin grabbed his attention, and he needed to take care of that emergency before anything else. His initial instinct was to put out the fire Octavio and Vicente had set, but it suddenly dawned on him, if the fire kept burning and they could see it from a distance, they would think they had left no evidence behind. His training took over and squelched his instinctive reaction to extinguish it.

To keep it burning, he gathered all the bedding, cushions, and anything that would burn bright or create smoke. Retrieving the wooden pallet he had just freed from the rudder, he piled all the flammable items onto it. While it was alongside the boat, he added cooking oil to make sure the fire kept going and pushed it adrift. As the night grew darker, he set off with full power in their direction, hoping the pallet he had set ablaze would allow him to follow the *Humeante* in the dark.

He looked back and saw there was plenty of smoke and burning trash to keep Octavio fooled. He knew it was Octavio who had shouted orders when they were on his boat and

figured he must be the captain. Not seeing the *Humeante* ahead of him, he put his ketch on autopilot, keeping his heading, and went below to assess his options while he sailed for revenge. For Jen.

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**Vicente told Octavio**, “I see a radar signature coming toward us.” Tom had been so focused on catching them he had forgotten about the sailboat radar enhancer. Without the enhancer, a catamaran made of fiberglass would be invisible to the radar reflection. Octavio had Vicente watch the blip on the radar screen, not sure, if it was the Nicaraguan Coast Guard or another trawler.

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**Meanwhile, Tom found a propane tank** they had stored for their heater. Assessing all he had available, he found the diving tanks. One of them was still full. What he needed now were some parts he could weaponize, like the spear gun he knew was on board. Desperate to make something work, he laid everything out on the floor.

His moment of resolve brought a sudden recollection of his loss of Jen. Sobbing, he broke down and uttered, “Those bastards won’t know what’s coming for them.” The tears went away when he started to piece together weapons. While he was figuring out how to mount the spear to a dive tank, *Andrea’s* radar warning went off. Looking up, he saw a blip coming toward him on the screen. On deck, he saw the trawler’s lights on the horizon. He realized his radar enhancer was leading them right back to him.

Without hesitation, he pulled the spear from the gun and scurried to the top of the mast. Swinging away at the ball that contained the radar enhancer, he recognized the *Humeante’s* course was set to intercept him. He struggled in the bosuns chair to reach the

mounts for the radar enhancer. The rope he was holding on to pushed away every time he swung at it. With time running out, Tom was desperate, so he locked his legs around the mast and beat on the mount with the spear until the radar enhancer finally came loose and landed on the deck. Lowering himself, he tossed it into the ocean. Then he steered hard to starboard to get off their course.

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**On the *Humeante*, Vicente called out,** “The boat, Captain, It’s gone. There is no blip, nothing.”

Octavio said, “What? It can’t just disappear. Go see what’s wrong.”

“The radar is working; it must have been a fluke.”

“Get on the bridge and see if you can spot any lights.”

There was nothing but pitch black. Vicente turned on a powerful spotlight and swept the horizon. “There is nothing, Captain.”

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**Tom stayed with them during the night** and when the morning winds came, he wanted to catch them off guard. He knew the *Humeante* would barely do 10 knots, and with a close reach and a strong wind, the *Andrea* was faster. With just four or five minutes of sleep at a time, he watched the radar blip from the *Humeante* until early morning. At first light, he saw the trawler on the horizon and worried they might see him too. With the wind speed low, he lowered the sails, as there wouldn’t be any advantage in catching the *Humeante* in broad daylight. What he needed now was a strategy. How would he get close enough to use his improvised weapons without sails? A strong wind at night was his only hope. For only the

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second time in his life, he prayed for help. “Dear God, let me catch these sons-of-bitches and find justice for Jen.

Doubting God would ever consider his request, he turned to what he knew his training. It had taught him to improvise, to make something out of nothing, and it would define his next choice in battling the crew of the *Humeante*. He lashed the spear to the dive tank and readied it to fly off the deck into the trawler. After securing an igniter to the propane tank, he looked for a way to sling it onto the *Humeante*. That was when he ran across some of Jen's tennis balls, the same ones he tried to talk her out of taking on board because there would be no place to play on the trip. Using a worm blower from his fishing tackle box, he filled one ball with kerosene fuel for a camping stove they had used on shore. When the ball was full, he dipped it into the fuel, drenching it. He made an old-style sling out of a metal stay and a piece of leather he had cut from his belt. He saturated the leather into ice water to make it fire proof and inserted a tennis ball. The sling enabled him to propel an unlit ball almost fifty feet. He thought it was a good distance, but he still needed to get close enough to the trawler to make the distance.

Groundswells tossed the *Andrea* and the *Humeante* up and down like ocean buoys most of the afternoon. When the swells finally subsided, a breeze picked up to about 8 knots. This was what Tom was waiting for; a little chop on the water and a stiff breeze to catch the trawler. With full sails the *Andrea* headed for the *Humeante*. All his weapons were ready, and the adrenaline started pumping through his body. There was no need to look at the radar screen because the trawler was dead ahead.

It was late, and the trawler stayed anchored. There was still an evening breeze, but Tom dropped the sails and used the diesel engines to get closer to the *Humeante*. Once he

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was close, he cut his engine and used the momentum to move silently on her port side. The first weapon from the *Andrea* was the spear tied to a dive tank. Tom hit the valve with an ax, and it fired off the deck. The spear hit the *Humeante* right at the water line.

Tom used the motor to turn for another pass, and this time he chose the tennis balls filled with fuel. Lighting one, he carefully maneuvered it into the sling. When he stood to fire it into the trawler, shots rang out, but Tom was committed and ignored the shooter to launch his best shot. As soon as the tennis ball hit the wheelhouse, flames engulfed the wall. The shooter stopped firing to extinguish the flame. Giving Tom enough time for one more try. He whipped the sling around a few times and put a flaming ball right inside the *Humeante's* wheelhouse. His mouth tightened as he wiped his forehead when he saw a bright orange flame light up the inside. He turned the throttle wide open; he swung around for a final pass. Passing on the starboard side, he opened the valve on the small propane tank and flung it over to the deck of the *Humeante*.

In the mayhem, Tom didn't realize they had shot him. He fell to the deck, trying to reach the throttle as the engine screamed its demise. The propane tank spun wildly on the *Humeante*, spewing flames in every direction, until it found an open hatch and fell below deck, spewing flames. With one hand badly burned, a bullet lodged somewhere near his left kidney, and a bad knee from an old wound, Tom stayed just off their port side until he saw the *Humeante* sink. He whispered, "This is for you Jen." And then he shouted raising his fist, "You sons-of-bitches will never harm anyone else."

Tom tried to stop the bleeding from the gunshot and decided he should try to find a doctor in El Salvador. The wounds weren't what were killing him. The worst thing was figuring out what he would tell his family. He had always been able to protect Jen, but this

time he had failed. If he had come up top when she warned him about the trawler she might still be alive. The more he reflected on the past hours, the deeper he fell into darkness, until he didn't care if he lived or died. Just when he was sure all was lost, he got a call from Maureen. She cried when she heard the news about her mother, but she recognized her father was in a place he sometimes went when he suffered alone with his PTSD. She stayed on the phone with him, and they both cried as she encouraged him to come home.

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**As soon as she finished talking to her dad, Maureen** called the US Coast Guard and pleaded with them to find the *Andrea*. She told the Coast Guard a simplified version of what had happened, saying nothing that would tip off the authorities of his act of revenge.

The next day she got a call when they had picked him up close to San Salvador where he had passed out from a loss of blood. Breathing a sigh of relief she got the next flight out to take care of her dad.

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**Tom couldn't bring himself to go back inside** Maureen's to celebrate the anniversary of Jen's passing. Sitting on an old chair leaned against the back door Maureen called out, "Dad come inside everyone 's leaving."

Tom rocked the chair forward and slowly stood, wiping the tears away when Maureen put her arms around him. "Dad this is about all the good things we loved about mom."