

SEA RESCUE



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TRAINING

**DEVELOPING THE
NEXT GENERATION
OF VOLUNTEERS**

WATERWISE

**EMPOWERING
OUR KIDS TO STAY
SAFE IN THE WATER**

OPEN- OCEAN RESCUE

The 277m *Rossini*
rescues stricken
yachtsmen

GETAWAYS

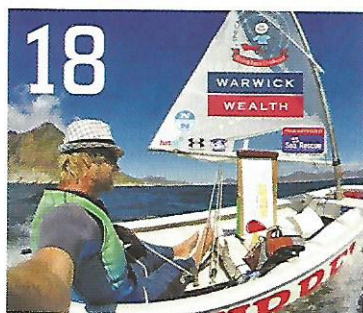
**COOL COASTAL
CAMPSITES**

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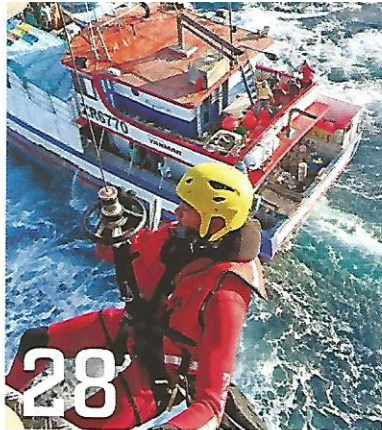
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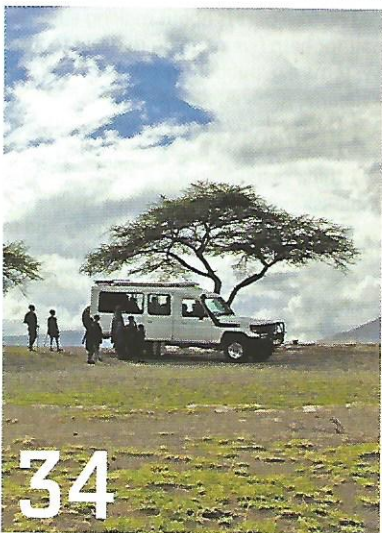
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AN INCREDIBLE STORY

Kyle Castelyn and Jean Sitruk were not sure they would survive a second night on their overturned catamaran's tiny tender, but the captain of the 227m French container carrier *CMA CGM Rossini* was determined to find them before dark, despite the near-impossible task of spotting them on the open ocean. By Andrew Ingram



If you walked past the table around which the seven of us were sitting, chances are you wouldn't have given it a second glance. A light rain had been falling and clouds, driven by an unseasonal northwesterly, were scudding across the sky.

You might have heard that two of the men, one wearing a Sea Rescue South Africa hat and the other a Sea Rescue beanie, had very strong French accents. Perhaps you would have stopped and heard Hervé Lepage, captain of the 227m French-registered container carrier *CMA CGM Rossini*, and the ships' chief engineer, Lyes Lassel, tell the harrowing story of their search for Jean Sitruk, 65, and Kyle Castelyn, 20, after their capsized catamaran was found 50 miles off the Wild Coast.

Looking up, I see the Table Bay Sea Rescue base behind Captain Lepage. Night is falling. The rescue boat *Spirit of*

Vodacom is lit up inside her rescue base. It is a fitting backdrop to a story of exceptional seamanship and determination.

I look at Kyle, sitting across the table. A rake-thin young man with long blond hair and a moustache, he sits ramrod straight in his chair. His brown eyes are focused, unblinking, on Captain Lepage.

I think of the first time that I'd seen Kyle, walking off the Sea Rescue boat that is now a backdrop to our conversation. It was mid-October 2015. He had a smile from ear to ear as he walked up to his mother. She threw her arms around him and pulled him towards her. It was an intensely emotional moment. Jean Sitruk, skipper of the *Llama Lo*, stood on the rescue boat, tears streaming down his face as he watched mother and son reunited. It was only a couple of days before this, as the two men battled for survival in the yacht's tiny tender, that Jean had thought they would die.

'We were nearer death than life,' Jean says. 'I hoped to live for my family. But especially for Kyle.'

Skipper of the 52-foot catamaran *Llama Lo*, Jean, from Lyon, France, and his crewman Kyle from Strand, Cape Town, were sailing from the Maldives to Cape Town where Kyle would leave the yacht. (They were on the last stretch down from Durban.)

She was on autopilot, sailing at 12-13 knots in rough seas with moderate winds off the Wild Coast. Both men were down below when, with a loud bang, the yacht momentarily stopped and then swung hard to port.

Rushing up onto the deck, Kyle saw a whale on their port side. Water was flooding into the hull through a massive 70cm hole. The boat was going to capsize. With a hole that big there was nothing that the two sailors could do to prevent it.

Kyle went for the life raft. Loosening it from its position, he threw it overboard and then dashed below to grab emergency supplies... and Jean, most importantly, grabbed the emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB).

Kyle unhooked the VHF microphone and transmitted the call that every seaman dreads:

'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is the yacht *Llama Lo*, *Llama Lo*, *Llama Lo*...'

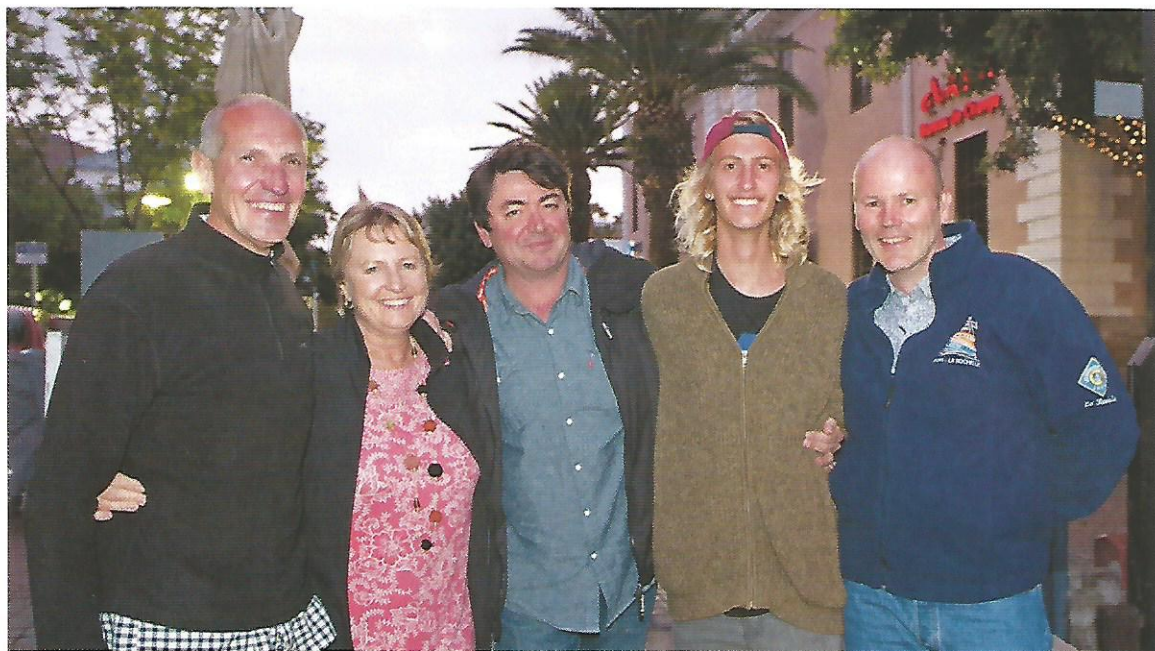
The catamaran was listing heavily to port as the two men rushed back on deck, only to see that the life raft was floating more than 200m away. It was not, as Kyle had thought, tethered to the yacht.

Their only chance now was a small, bright-yellow inflatable boat. The yacht's tender. Kyle tried to start the tender to go to the life raft but the engine wouldn't start. Wearing lifejackets, clutching emergency rations and the yacht's EPIRB, they pushed away from the yacht and watched as she slowly rolled over.

It was just after 6pm on Saturday night 17 October 2015, and as darkness

Main image: A relieved mother and son. Far left: The upturned hull of the *Llama Lo*. Left: The empty life raft found by the *MV Cape Olive*.





Above (from left): Kyle's parents, Raymond and Linda Castelyn, chief engineer Lyes Lassel, Kyle and Captain Lepage.

descended on the Indian Ocean the two men drifted away from the capsized catamaran and switched on their EPIRB.

Sea conditions were deteriorating. A gale-force wind of 50 knots was battering the two men as the French Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Gris Nez picked up their emergency beacon on their computers.

As is protocol, they alerted the South African MRCC to the signal as it was off our coast, and a huge rescue effort was started. Five ships in the area were diverted to the position that the

they could see the searchlights of ships looking for them, and with some luck they figured they could fire the flares when the ships were closer.

As the sun was rising on a seemingly empty ocean, a wave, bigger than the rest, flipped the little boat, dumping Jean and Kyle into the sea. Kyle had tethered his rucksack to the dinghy, and as soon as they had scrambled onto the upturned hull, he pulled it up. Inside

ships. Exhausted, the men hoped that the ships were searching for them. By now they had drifted far from *Llama Lo*, and the first ships to arrive at the wreck reported that there were no signs of life on her. Soon after that, the life raft was found. Also empty. By now the Sea Rescue craft *Spirit of Lotto* and the SAAF 15 Squadron Oryx helicopter were well on the way to the search area.

Sailing down the East Coast, nearing the search area, was the huge French container carrier *CMA CGM Rossini*. Two-hundred-and-seventy-seven metres of ship. As the sun started rising off the horizon, the duty officer called Captain Lepage to the bridge. It was 07h10. They'd been alerted by the French MRCC in Gris Nez to the distress signal from the French yacht. By a strange twist of fate, it was the same MRCC where the captain had done his military service in 1988.

On the bridge Captain Lepage asked for the coordinates of the EPIRB pings and plotted them on his chart. A master mariner with vast experience on supersized ships, Captain Lepage is also a volunteer with the French Sea Rescue service, the SNSM, in his home town of La Rochelle.

'At 12h15 we called Port Elizabeth

The crew knew that if they did not find the two yachtsmen before dark, their chances of survival would not be good.

EPIRB was transmitting to try find the yacht, and the East London Sea Rescue volunteers as well as a military Oryx helicopter were put on standby.

Through the night Kyle and Jean took turns to paddle the little rubber boat, trying to keep her head into the sea. Huge swells of 6-7m, sometimes crumbling at the top, threatened to turn them over. Kyle ignited a hand-held flare ... to no avail ... and they decided to keep the flares for the next day. In the distance

was Kyle's laptop. And, most importantly, fresh water that would last the men six days. The supplies that weren't tied to the boat, including their flares, were gone. 'I saw my packet of Futurelife cereal floating past and grabbed it so at least we would have that to eat,' says Kyle. After they rested on the capsized tender for about two hours, another huge wave flipped it again, and Kyle and Jean scrambled back into the boat.

Out on the horizon they could see

radio and told them that we were getting close to the position. They asked me to proceed there,' says the captain. 'I changed my course.'

Watching his chart plotter, Captain Lepage knew that there were already five ships in the area. One had found the capsized cat, another the empty life raft. But none had followed the EPIRB position that was drifting down the coast.

'I contacted my company and the MRCC in Gris Nez and suggested that we chase the EPIRB,' he says.

At 16h15 the *Rossini* glided up alongside the wreck. 'It was close to my starboard bow and we gave a blast on the horn, thinking that they might be inside.'

'There was no response. No sign.'

Captain Lepage gave the order to increase power and bent over his chart. The EPIRB pings he'd been given by France were two hours behind. They were in a straight line indicating the drift of the EPIRB... but how could it be that it was not with the life raft?

'I thought of submersion suits. They must be wearing submersion suits. And holding the EPIRB,' says Hervé.

'We had six pairs of binoculars on the bridge, so I called six men up and divided the area to search into sectors. Each man must concentrate only on his sector.'

And then came the curveball.

The French MRCC Gris Nez gave the next EPIRB position way off to the left of where the drift should be. With darkness approaching, this required calm thinking and some careful calculations. Captain Lepage gave the order to turn to port, although he believed that the position was wrong. He had worked out that they would have enough time to check. To make sure. And then, if need be, to loop around and sail back up the drift line that they had been searching.

There was, as he had thought, nothing where the last EPIRB position was thought to be.

Increasing speed of the massive ship, Captain Lepage looked at his watch. Sunset was too close. Calculating where the correct position of the two-hour-old EPIRB ping should have been and where the drift would have it now, he gave the order to keep heading down the coast.

'Sir, should we not turn now?' The chief officer asked.

'Not yet,' replied the captain. 'Not yet.'

It was a call that needed to be taken by instinct. The calculations showed a position and then it came down to a hunch, a feeling, that some have in them. And others do not.

At 17h50 the captain gave the command. 'Turn to starboard now.'

The *Rossini's* bow came around and the captain lined her up on his track in the opposite direction, before the wild-goose chase off the drift line.

'The picture that was in my mind was of them in the water with emersion suits on. The EPIRB in their hands.'

Concerned about the fast-approaching darkness, the captain called for an

increase of speed. The tension on the bridge was palpable. The crew knew that if they did not find the two yachtsmen before dark, their chances of survival would not be good.

'There.'

The call was from the chief engineer Lyes Lassel, who was scanning the port sector. He had seen a single flash of orange. Binoculars were swung onto his quadrant, and, clearly now, the men on the bridge saw two orange specks.

They had seen the horseshoe collars of the life jackets that Kyle and Jean were wearing.

The great ship slowed down and turned towards the orange specks.

Kyle and Jean had been watching the container carrier for a couple of hours, slowly paddling towards it.

'And then they gave three blasts on their horn,' says Kyle. 'And then we knew...' His voice trails off and he looks down at the floor.


It was 15 minutes before sunset. And one of the biggest challenges for the captain and his crew lay ahead. How to get the huge ship alongside the tiny rubber boat and then get the two men up the wall of steel onto the container carrier?

'I used the wind and the currents,' says Captain Lepage.

With great skill he sailed the *Rossini* up to the little yacht tender, leaving Kyle and Jean only a few metres to paddle to the side of the ship.

Despite his exhaustion, youth was on Kyle's side. He was up the ship's ladder in a flash. But Jean, now knowing that Kyle was safe, had no energy left. He had held on bravely through the ordeal, focusing on getting his young crewman to safety. Now exhaustion washed over him. As he started the 9m climb up the rope ladder, his hands slipped and he crashed into the sea, losing his life jacket in the process.

The *Rossini's* chief officer, Sadi Resd-édant, rushed out onto the ladder to help. Dropping a helicopter strop on a rope and shouting encouragement to the exhausted sailor, they managed, against the odds, to get the elderly skipper on board.

'I thought we would lose him,' says Captain Lepage. 

Comments on the NSRI website from family of the two men who were rescued:

Raymond and Linda Castelyn

The family of Kyle Castelyn would just like to thank everyone who was involved in the rescue, from helicopters and boats to the people communicating so promptly with us at the NSRI offices. Your professionalism and speed are commendable and we will forever be grateful for your work in returning our son back to us safely.

Nicolette Castelyn

Thank you to each and everyone who was part of the rescue. Thanks to you, my brother Kyle Castelyn will be coming home to us safely. May God bless everyone.

Jeremy Sitruk

We are so happy with the good news and the great work by all rescue members. Jean's grandson is too young to appreciate it yet, but he will hear about this story for a long time to come. Thank you all!