



## Lightning strikes again for the crew of *Lulu*

By Louise Wollman

**F**ile this under “It never rains, but it pours.” Or maybe “Strike three.” And date it May 27, 2009. That’s when our 61-foot Oyster, *Lulu*, was struck by lightning...for the third time in 10 years. It happened around 5 a.m., during an overnight passage, just eight miles short of our destination.

Whoever is responsible for that “never strikes twice” quote deserves his anonymity. We were dead in the water. Almost literally. But, as Life pointed out almost instantly, it could have been far worse. We were shocked (forgive me) when an Air France Airbus with 247 aboard suddenly dropped off the radar screens and vanished from the sky.

Lightning, they said. Sounds odd. Doesn’t a plane fly above lightning, thus shielded from its malevolence? Gary, my husband and a professional cynic, immediately suspected

# Fried Oyster

a cover-up. But meanwhile we were abruptly feeling pretty lucky indeed. It’s called perspective. Or maybe enlightenment. (Sorry again.)

### BOLT FROM THE BLACK

We were en route from Colombia to Bocas del Toro, a popular archi-

pelago on the western Caribbean coast of Panama. We had almost passed the night part of a 26-hour passage with practically no wind and flat Zamboni seas, motoring entirely with all three sails out to help get there. The usual sleeping arrangements were in effect: me in the cockpit wide awake but hoping, Gary dozing on the couch below, ready to take the watch should I so much as yawn.

A dullish rain started around midnight, and far away it appeared—lightning zigzagging almost aimlessly around a moonless black bowl of sky. No thunder, no wind. Virtually no sound at all. Spooky.

We veered off course each time we thought the squalls finally decided on a direction. No dice. Without much conversation, we both had the feeling the lightning was going to get us. It was, after all, the beginning of



The fried inverter with the fire extinguisher mess, above. *Lulu* at the "other" marina, opposite

the rainy season in this area, notorious for its almost nightly sound and light shows.

It had stopped raining at around 4:30 a.m. when I took to our bed for one last stab at sleep and finally nodded off. Shortly thereafter, I heard the "BAAAM!!!" First, I thought it was some mean trick, but Gary's not mean, so who?

Then, I figured we'd thunked another reef. And that had been happening so frequently in these diamond clear but treacherously shallow waters that I just smacked the pillow and rolled over. (Or probably I was just that tired.)

And then I smelled smoke. That

got me up all right.

Flames were revving up to shoot out of the beefy 5000-watt inverter

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that lives behind the salon settee. A fire extinguisher quelled it quickly (and messily), before any real damage occurred—except for the extinguisher powder, fine as talcum, covering everything around, and the burnt wires smelling worse than skunk.

The engine hadn't quit and we didn't turn it off to test its mettle. We got the boat back on course

(autopilot dead) and continued on our no-longer-merry way. We couldn't report the emergency via SSB, because that, too, was lifeless. Around 6 a.m., and very close to Bocas, we tried reaching the usual early risers by VHF. Nada.

Hadda be the radio.

By 7:45 a.m., using our trusty backup handheld, we were finally able to contact the Bocas Morning Cruisers' Net. Just about everyone leaped into the fray (or do I mean frayed?) as we hobbled in amid rain and fog. Mercifully, the chart plotter



Fellow cruiser Judy Rollinger helps out by going aloft for the fried antenna

hadn't gone kerflooey—but on the other hand, the computer charts were completely wrong. And there were no channel markers, either. Someone jumped in his dinghy and led us in.

With the hydraulics out, obviously we couldn't anchor. Did I say obviously? Not to everyone onboard. Characteristically, Gary figured we could drop the 75-pound CQR manually, and no problem, he'd have the whole boat fixed in a couple of hours.

Differing with him about this plan required more patience than I can normally marshal, but after the three fuses he popped in to get the windlass operating blew, he relented and we limped into the marina with

the entire dock population watching and waiting to help.

Ultimately, Gary capitulated and agreed it would be easier to unravel the problems and take the systems apart, and he'd probably do a much better job plugged into a dock with air conditioning as his sidekick.

We couldn't get into the more "in" Bocas Marina (no space for big, fat us), but there was a slip for us in the Consolation Marina, which isn't quite in the thick of things and where the docks are somewhat rougher. Still, the cruiser group seemed even more diverse than the usual miscellany that is the essence of this wonderful cruising life.

Good things that seemingly still

worked: refrigeration, microwave, toaster, stove and air conditioners—but only if plugged into a dock. We were also "lucky" to get into a marina at all, plus we got the sails in before the hydraulics totally quit on us.

We knew the strike wasn't a direct hit because the VHF antenna—the highest point on the boat—didn't explode as it did six years ago when we got stuck in nearby San Andres for four months. Also, we didn't sink.

When I reached the cockpit after my mini-snooze, rain was falling in nearly impenetrable sheets. Gary reported that though it had picked up after I bedded down, the conditions had remained relatively calm; the wind never ratcheted above 17 knots, and mostly hovered between 7 and 10. No thunder at all and the lightning remained amorphous—until the giant thunderclap that woke me, and the lightning bolt that chose *Lulu* as its mate. Usually we're hit because we're the tallest mast, but in this case we were the only boat around. Friends traveling miles behind us saw one intensely bright bolt that seemed to plunge down as if targeting the horizon. It was too dark for them to see we were the horizon. We've since learned there's a name for that non-specific, everywhere-and-anywhere lightning, where the electrical charges jump from cloud to cloud: sheet lightning.

### DAMAGE CONTROL

Gary soon got the water running and the icemaker functioning—hey, little things matter when nothing else operates—and probably within his few-hour timetable. (He really is quite amazing.) After installing a voltage converter, the VHF worked—though we did have a spare. Likewise, a spare battery charger, a main freshwater pump and bilge alarm,

The insurance surveyor checking through *Lulu's* electrical system



three spare voltage converters and an extra laptop. (Someone remarked later that the only spare Gary didn't have was an extra wife. He claims he didn't think the service could be any better.)

Not much else could be repaired. But, safe in dock, Gary spent three days evaluating what was broken and what replacements we needed. It looked like some \$25,000 worth of parts—almost as bad as Strike Two: the generator, hydraulics, anchor windlass, SSB radio, alarm system, radar, bow thruster, fresh-water pump, both inverters, the Wi-Fi antenna and amplifier, the autopilot and control system—all out. Once again, anything with a transistor or a diode got fried. Plus the main laptop—the one we use for e-mail and iTunes. For the record, that one was plugged into a surge protector.

The acrid odor from the inverter fire began slowly dissipating; we settled in to wait two weeks for the first shipment to arrive. Meanwhile, we got to see what Gary had missed. Though the VHF radio was working, it had no range. A second laptop, earmarked for navigation, pooped out. The wireless windlass controller didn't turn on. When we ran out of water with the needle reading "full," we learned the fuel and water tank gauges were also toast.

A second order took care of all that. We worked with Marine Warehouse in Miami. Albert Biji jumped on the problem immediately and efficiently, streamlining what could have been a frustrating and lengthy

Warehouse then consolidated it all and air-freighted it to Panama City, where Arturo Romero, the local agent, arranged for three days of trucking over the mountains and onto a ferry to Bocas del Toro, where

it was unloaded yet again, onto a water taxi, which zipped it to our marina on yet another island, Carenero.

The insurance company surveyor arrived from Ft. Lauderdale to inspect and then certify our claim. He said we were actually lucky, because a)

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ordeal. Albert ordered most of the new equipment from the United States, plus received whatever we purchased from overseas. Marine

we did not die or get hurt; b) the structure of the boat and mast were intact; and c) our main engine, a 12-year-old Perkins, also survived. A



Gary receiving all the equipment shipments. Judy, opposite, removing the fried radome

more modern engine, with a “common rail” fuel system, is computerized and generally fails in a lightning strike. For those of you who’ve decided it must be our grounding, he pronounced that just fine. Sometimes (for us, too many times) you just can’t avoid lightning.

Coincidentally, he was same sur-

veyor who came six years ago to San Andres: fun, with lots of war stories about sunken boats, massive insurance claims and pirated ships he’s tracked down all over the world. I looked at it as a sort of reunion.

The parts price tag climbed to \$32,000. With Order Two in transit and without computers, we couldn’t

test the Pactor modem, but the radar “slave” was fine, as was all mast wiring. The satellite phone apparently worked for voice and might for data transfer with a new connector cable. If not, we’d need a new one. The Northstar 962 chartplotter and two televisions continued operating on command.

### UNINTERRUPTED FOOD CHAIN

Now we sorely miss the SSB, which connects us with faraway boats, but the nearby array of cruisers and activities provide plenty of downtime fun. Dominoes, as much as you want—Friday afternoons with the regular anchorage and “In” marina group, Saturday afternoons in our marina. Yoga too if I could manage to schlep myself out in the dinghy and into shore three mornings a week. A weekly ladies luncheon, and trivia night on Thursday.

The food in the cute Calypso

Cantina at Bocas Marina is hearty and wonderful—Friday night ribs surpassing excellent, Wednesday night Chicken-Fried Chicken that’s down-home Texas terrific. Respectable lunch sandwiches, fine fries and a just-OK burger that most cruisers rate “great.” Translation: cheap and big. (We’re very picky about our burgers; almost none pass muster.) Though the menu was limited we’ve worked our way through with



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Bocas Town, on Colon, the main island of the Bocas del Toro group, is adorable: a riot of color and a hodge-podge of Caribbean architecture in various stages of peeling—a kind of cross between Key West before it got spoiled and a Clint Eastwood cowboy outpost. Lots of restaurants to try, most with cute porches hanging over the water on stilts, but it's hard to tear ourselves away from the Cantina food and social life.

Bocas offers surprisingly good provisioning. I'm talking Thomas's English Muffins, Otis Spunkmeyer bagels—which can't be worse than Lender's—fresh vacuum-packed tuna steaks, tilapia filets, whole snappers and even big, puffy sea scallops. Fine-looking meats too, including elusive loin lamb chops. Terrific local pineapples. Two markets make baguettes daily—one's crunchy just like in France, the others usually need at least 10 more minutes in the oven. But even that's okay—we get hot, crusty, bread every time.

Off our stern, an Indian woman lives in a little shack with four children under five years old. She makes (with plenty of smoke) what she calls johnnycakes, which are like giant English muffins, hot from whatever she bakes them in and not bottom-heavy with tiny cornmeal



ball bearings that scatter everywhere when cut...four for a dollar. (Now I'm sounding like a real cruiser.)

The Also-Ran marina has some interesting amenities, including free-for-the-picking fresh basil, rosemary, mint and cilantro all prettily planted in a huge, old wooden dugout canoe. Tropical flowers and vibrant bushes bloom everywhere. It rains all the time, so everything is lush and colorful. Plus about a billion no-see-ums, all taking full advantage of significant exposed flesh available everywhere.

Our eclectic boat neighbors include a couple from Queens on a massive 60-foot steel shrimp boat they restored themselves and a couple who practice massage therapy from many different traditions. They owned a Napa Valley training school

that sent a small army of trained practitioners around the world. They also owned and operated a jewelry chain as well as a string of pizzerias, plus bought and sold real estate in Mexico. Oh, and he was a Special Forces dude who guarded Lyndon Johnson, among a slew of other presidents. (The fact that he was recently robbed at gunpoint at a Motel 6 and relieved of the \$500 in his pocket indicates Johnson was lucky to die of natural causes.)

Several of our other marina-mates are or were chefs, so the potlucks are gourmet events. But they're on Friday nights, which is rib night at the Important Marina. A serious conflict.

All in all we think Bocas is a great place to get stuck. Or do I mean struck? ≈