

BONUS READ

A family's dream trip
turns into **a nightmare**

SHIP WRECKED

BY KENNETH MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TIM TADDER

In French Polynesia, winter runs from May through October; the days are balmy, but night falls as abruptly as a trap. Just before 7 p.m. on June 25, 2005, a sailing vessel sliced through the westernmost waters of the archipelago, beneath a black and moonless sky. The *Emerald Jane* had left Raiatea the day before; she was headed for Tonga, 1,400 nautical miles away, guided by autopilot. The 55-foot catamaran was sleek and elegant, with five cabins tucked into twin hulls and a spacious living area suspended in between. In the cockpit, 16-year-old Ben Silverwood was finishing his watch. In the salon, his younger siblings—Amelia, 14, Jack, 9, and Camille, 5—had just popped *Drop Dead Gorgeous* into the DVD player. The children's parents, John, 53, and Jean, 46, lounged in their stateroom, discussing the next day's travel plans.

Then they heard it: an insistent scraping, like fingernails along the bottom of a cardboard box. The *Emerald Jane* had carried the family halfway around the world, on a journey that John, a San Diego real estate developer, had dreamed of for two decades. The Silverwoods were well-versed in their craft's vocabulary of creaks, pings and groans. But this was something different. It was the sound of disaster.

John and Jean were already sprinting up the three steps to the cockpit when Ben cried, "Reef!" An instant later, the hulls rammed into the coral. As water poured through a gash in the starboard bow, house-size waves began crashing down on the pinioned boat. John jammed the engines into reverse, to no avail. He ran to the foredeck, where Ben was trying to loosen the Genoa sail, which was driving the craft farther onto the reef. Ben threw his father a knife so John could slash through the canvas. At that moment, a wave slammed into the *Emerald Jane's* 14-foot dinghy, ripping it from its stainless-steel hooks and sweeping it away.

The family had practiced emergency procedures, but the emergency they'd imagined was a storm; running aground had seemed unthinkable. Now the unthinkable was upon them.

In the salon, Camille and Jack were sobbing. As their older sister strove to comfort them, Jack kept screaming, "I don't want to die!" Jean tried the satellite phone but couldn't get a signal; her hands were shaking so badly that she dropped it on the flooded floor. John grabbed the main radio. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday," he shouted. "This is the *Emerald Jane*. We are sinking." Ben called out more Maydays over the shorter-range VHF rig.



The *Emerald Jane* took the family to French Polynesia in August 2004. At left, Jean takes the wheel as the kids dine in the cockpit.

Finally, John threw the switch on the EPIRB (emergency position-indicating radio beacon)—a device resembling a milk-shake

cup, with an antenna for a straw, which is designed to alert emergency crews by bouncing a radio beam off a satellite. The beacon can be picked up only by U.S. facilities, however, and none was near enough to help. The closest search-and-rescue team operated from a French naval base in Papeete, Tahiti, 310 miles away. They weren't responding.

John and Ben raced back to the foredeck and pulled the cord on the inflatable life raft. Then they faced a dilemma: If they threw the raft over the side, it might be shredded by the sharp coral. Instead, they decided to lash it to the deck and wait until they had no other option. Before they finished, the lights shorted out. Ben took a couple of glow sticks that he'd snatched from the supply cabinet, and they went to check on the family. The salon was knee-deep in water. As Jean and Amelia carried the younger children out to the cockpit, John and Ben headed back toward the raft.

By then, both bows were breaking off, and as John reached the foredeck,

the 79-foot mast gave way. Suddenly, he was lying on his back beneath more than a ton of aluminum. A thunderbolt of pain shot up his left leg. When he struggled to a sitting position and peered over the mast, he saw that a metal fitting called a spreader had chopped through his shin like a cleaver; his lower leg was dangling by a tendon. It's gone, he thought, and lay back down. He was pinned to the deck of a disintegrating boat. He could not help his family. If he didn't drown first, he knew, his wound would surely kill him.

John Silverwood was a ninth-grader in suburban Philadelphia when a schoolmate's family took him sailing for the first time. He never recovered. One of four sons of an industrial engineer, John was a smart, headstrong and restless boy, and the sport fulfilled his deepest cravings—for freedom, for independence, for physical and mental challenges. In college at Colgate, he took two years off to sail a battered yawl from Marblehead, Massachusetts, to the Caribbean and back. After graduating, he worked construction; he spent his spare time assembling a trimaran in a barn, then piloted it to the Bahamas. Hired as a project manager for a builder in St. Thomas, he cruised the Virgin Islands in the 30-foot *Dufour Arpège*.

Along the way he met Jean, a striking blonde from Pleasantville, New York, who was crewing in St. Croix. Like John, she'd grown up in a big, upwardly mobile Catholic family, where hard work and strenuous fun were equally prized. She'd spent summers camping in the Adirondacks and sailing in the waters off the Hamptons. She was earthy and unpretentious; her wry reserve made a nice foil for John's excitability. They married in 1986 at a yacht club on Long Island.

The couple settled in San Diego, where John joined a real estate development firm owned by his younger brothers. He set his sights on an ambitious goal: to start a family, save his money and—someday—spend a year or so at sea with the people he loved most. Jean embraced the dream but insisted that they first attend to practicalities. Early on, there was too little cash; then new babies kept arriving. But John eventually started his own business, and as he entered his 50s, the timing seemed right. The housing boom had made him wealthy. Ben would soon be in high school, and if they waited too long, he'd be tied down with college applications. "It's now or never," John told his wife.

In February 2003, they found their dream boat in Miami: the *Emerald*

Wave, a French-built Lagoon 55, offered by its owner at a modest \$400,000 (comparable models cost \$1 million when new). The catamaran seemed ideal in terms of safety as well as comfort. Unlike a single-hulled vessel, it would sail flat and smooth under most conditions; it would be tough to capsize even in the fiercest storm. Its hulls were made of Kevlar, the material used in bulletproof vests. It had a bathroom for each cabin, there was a gourmet kitchen, and the dining table seated eight.

The couple rechristened the boat the *Emerald Jane* after Jean's late mother. Then John began retrofitting it to make it even safer. He installed child-proof netting around the perimeter. He bought a top-of-the-line life raft. He stuffed a cupboard with splints, syringes and medications. And at Jean's urging, he bought a state-of-the-art EPIRB, capable of broadcasting a vessel's position to within 300 feet.

That July, John sailed the *Emerald Jane* from Florida to Long Island. The family flew out to meet him, and spent a month near Jean's sister in Mamaroneck, New York, getting used to life on-board. In September, they headed down the coast, spending a month each moored in Baltimore, Maryland, and Norfolk, Virginia.

John and Jean were looking for more out of the trip than an extended vacation. They wanted to get to know their children in a way few modern parents ever do. They wanted to escape the routines of affluent suburbia: Dad's long workdays; Mom's shuffle between supermarket and tennis club and carpool; the kids' round of school, sports, lessons and play dates; the Saturdays at the mall. They wanted everyone to spend less time focused on video screens—"to be immersed in nature," as John put it, "instead of virtual reality."

The younger kids quickly adjusted to life on the catamaran. For the teenagers, though, the transition was harder. Both missed their social life. Amelia, a serious dancer, pined for her ballet classes. Ben—a big-boned, athletic boy who hoped one day to become a military officer—had inherited his father's lust for freedom and hard challenges, but this outing seemed to offer little of either. His idea of excitement was a Boy Scout survival trek in New Mexico, where he once hauled an 85-pound pack up 10,000-foot peaks. He yearned for his surf team competitions, paintball matches and Xbox tournaments.

Jean had enrolled Jack and Amelia in a homeschooling program run by

the San Diego school system, and Ben in a private program for high school students. Even preschooler Camille had lessons. Every weekday, the pupils were at their desks from 8 a.m. to noon, doing work that was supervised via e-mail by teachers hundreds of miles away. After that, their activities might consist of chores, meals and a James Bond DVD. "I'm bored" was a frequent refrain, especially during days at sea or in a nondescript port. Sometimes the surfeit of togetherness set everyone to squabbling.

As the weeks passed, however, the kids flourished. Helping out with nautical tasks—docking the boat, keeping the log, manning the radios—they developed a growing sense of teamwork. Amelia became an expert baker, Jack a budding marine biologist, eager to identify every creature he saw. Ben read more books than he'd ever thought possible. Their solitude was eased by encounters with peers on other boats, and by occasional visits from relatives and old friends.

And from Bermuda onward, the adventures came thick and fast. The

They surfed Tahiti's waves, took in native dance, swam with an octopus.

Silverwoods snorkeled each morning before breakfast, amid bright blizzards of tropical fish. At night, John lay on the deck with the kids and showed them the constellations. The family took scuba-diving lessons in St. Thomas. They sailed through the Panama Canal. In Ecuador, they explored Inca ruins and trekked through Andean villages where guinea pigs were a staple food. In the Galápagos, they frolicked with giant tortoises and rode horseback up a volcano.

Eventually, they braved the 3,000-mile passage to the Marquesas and then on to the rest of French Polynesia. There, the generator broke, and they lingered in the islands while awaiting repairs. Ben surfed Tahiti's legendary waves, Amelia took in native dance performances, and in the Tuamotus Jack swam with a wild octopus on his back. In December 2004, the family flew to New Zealand, where they spent three weeks exploring the rain forests and fjords.

Shortly after New Year's, they docked the *Emerald Jane* in Raiatea and headed back to San Diego to wait out cyclone season. Everyone was thrilled to return to the luxuries they had left behind, but the novelty soon paled.

The following June, when school was out, they took up where they had left off. The plan was to head for Tonga, Fiji, and finally Australia; in August, they would put the boat up for sale and return home.

The catamaran left Raiatea at 3 p.m. on Friday, June 24. Around 5 p.m. the next day, one of the pins attaching the boom to the mast came loose. John furled the mainsail, and spent an hour and a half trying to solve the problem. As darkness fell, he decided to finish in the morning. He switched on the starboard engine to supplement the Genoa sail at the bow.

About 200 miles west of Raiatea lies a tiny atoll called Manuae, which trails

John alternated between acceptance and denial of his impending death.

a reef like a comet's tail. John had planned to round it by daylight, but now that was impossible. Stopping was not an option; the ocean in these parts is two miles deep, offering no anchorage. Charts of the area are not always reliable, but he had studied the route carefully. He set the autopilot on a course that allowed seven miles of clearance, then headed to the stateroom to talk to Jean, leaving the younger kids in front of the TV and Ben on watch in the cockpit.

Jean was at the stern with the children when the mast toppled onto her husband. She screamed, then stood frozen with terror on the pitching deck. The mast had knocked Ben down as well, leaving a gash on his crew-cut head. Now he stood over his father. "I'm here, Dad," he said, his eyes betraying everything that his calm voice concealed.

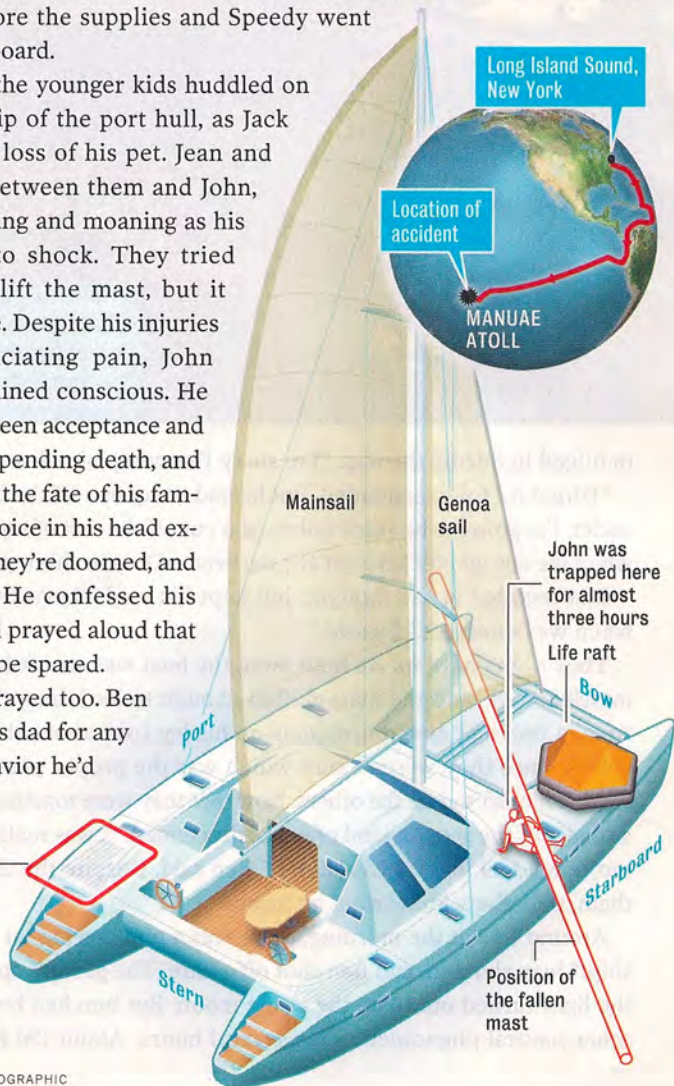
"Bring me some of that $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch utility line," John gasped, and Ben ran to grab it from a cabinet. John wrapped a strand of rope about his knee, twisting the ends to form a crude tourniquet. The foot-wide mast lay across his mangled lower leg, grinding into it with every movement of the boat. The craft had pivoted since hitting the reef, so the foredeck took the brunt of the waves. Each time a breaker crashed over him, he lost his grip—and more blood.

Jean scrambled to his side and knelt there, stroking his face. "It's going to be all right," she repeated softly, as if hoping to hypnotize them both into believing it. Then she gathered herself. The life raft, she knew, could be zipped

closed, and with chunks of debris flying everywhere, it seemed the safest place for Amelia, Jack and Camille. She herded them into it, along with bags of food and jugs of water. She also tossed in Speedy, a small tortoise they had adopted in the Caribbean nearly two years earlier. But soon the hulls began to wobble loose, squeezing the raft between them. Jean hustled the children out again, just before the supplies and Speedy went tumbling overboard.

Amelia and the younger kids huddled on the rearmost tip of the port hull, as Jack cried over the loss of his pet. Jean and Ben shuttled between them and John, who lay shivering and moaning as his body went into shock. They tried repeatedly to lift the mast, but it wouldn't budge. Despite his injuries and his excruciating pain, John somehow remained conscious. He alternated between acceptance and denial of his impending death, and anguished over the fate of his family. At times, a voice in his head excoriated him: They're doomed, and it's your fault. He confessed his sins to God and prayed aloud that his loved ones be spared.

The family prayed too. Ben apologized to his dad for any obnoxious behavior he'd





Members of a family who lived on a nearby mid-ocean atoll arrived by motorboat (left) to rescue the Silverwoods. Remains of the *Emerald Jane* are at top left.

indulged in during the trip. “I’m sorry I’ve complained so much,” he said.

“Forget it,” John responded. But he had a request: “If the boat starts to go under, I’m going to be stuck unless you cut off the rest of my leg. It’ll be like when we cut up chickens for the barbecue. Do you think you can do it?”

Ben recoiled at the thought, but kept his cool. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” he said.

They didn’t have to. An hour later, the boat was struck by a particularly massive wave, and the mast shifted enough to let John pull free. Ben and Amelia fastened new tourniquets on his leg (one above the knee and one below, since they weren’t sure which was the proper position), and then carried him aft to join the others. Now that they were together, crowded onto a corner of the stern, a kind of peace descended. “I was really scared before, but now I feel like it’s Christmas,” Ben said. Despite the chaos all around them, the others knew what he meant.

Around 1:30 in the morning, there was a glimmering on the horizon. “A ship!” Jean shouted, and Ben shot off a flare. The group’s spirits sank when the light turned out to be the rising moon. But Ben had been tracking another natural phenomenon for several hours: About 150 feet away was a

section of reef that never went underwater, even at high tide. The strip was about five feet wide; it rose three feet above the sea and stretched for perhaps a quarter mile. Compared to their unstable perch, it seemed like a haven. “It’s time,” Ben declared, “to get off the boat.”

He went first. The water on the way to the ridge was only waist-deep, and cushions from the boat were scattered across the coral. Ben gathered them into a comfortable nest, and Amelia helped him carry out Jack and Camille. The life raft was stuck between the hulls and tangled in cables, but after Jean freed it—using a saw that Ben ferreted out of the wreckage—they lifted John in and towed him to the refuge. Jean and Camille joined him in the raft, and Amelia held it in place, sitting neck-deep in the water to stay out of the chilly breeze. Ben and Jack curled up together on the cushions.

And then they waited.

The Emerald Jane’s distress calls never reached Papeete. But an orbiting satellite picked up the EPIRB signal and relayed it to a U.S. Coast Guard station near San Francisco that coordinates rescue operations throughout the Pacific. The transmission contained the EPIRB’s serial number, which was registered—along with the Silverwoods’ emergency contact information—with the federal government. The Coast Guard tried contacting the boat by sat-phone and e-mail, but there was no answer.

Although the EPIRB also provided GPS data, it took three passes for the satellite to get a clear reading of its latitude and longitude. In the meantime, Coast Guard officers tried to glean what they could from the people on the contact list. At 11 p.m. California time—8 p.m. in French Polynesia, about an hour after the accident—they called Jean’s father, Albert Boera, in New York’s Westchester County. He told the officer that the boat was somewhere near Bora Bora, en route to Australia. The Coast Guard notified the Rescue Coordination Center in New Zealand, which alerted the French military’s counterpart in Papeete.

Soon afterward, the EPIRB’s precise location came through. But the French couldn’t mount a search until sunrise, which was still far away. As the night wore on, John weakened steadily. The mast had severed his tibial arteries, and despite the tourniquets, he had lost nearly four pints of blood. Unbeknownst to his family, he was also suffering from gangrene—the death of tissue around his wound—and an infection was spreading toward his vital

organs. He'd begun to vomit, and his trembling had grown violent. Jean knew his chances of survival were slimmer if he lost consciousness, so she tried to keep him talking. "Daddy's going to be okay," John told the kids, whenever he could manage it. His silences, however, were growing longer.

As the sky began to lighten, around 6 a.m., the Silverwoods got their first good look at their surroundings. The reef, mostly submerged beneath a few feet of water, snaked to the horizon, where a patch of palm trees was just visible. Nearby, the boat's shattered remains bobbed on the swells. The vast Pacific glittered all around. And high overhead, Jean saw something streaking across the clouds.

"A plane!" she cried. It proved to be a bird. But about 20 minutes later, another dot appeared in the sky—and this time it was a French navy jet. Everyone cheered. Ben shot up a flare, and the plane began circling. Another hour passed, then two. The little kids dozed, while Jean and Ben passed the time collecting useful flotsam; they found bottles of water, cans of Coke and a vial of painkillers, but John could hold nothing down. "Where are they?" he asked, over and over.

Finally, around 9:30, a motorboat approached, carrying seven stout Polynesians. They loaded the life raft—with John still inside—into the boat, and made room for the rest of the family. None of the men spoke English, but the leader made the sign for "helicopter." Jean shouted, "Hurry! He's dying!" and the boat set off for Manuae, eight miles away.

The island, it turned out, was inhabited by a single family—an elderly couple and 14 of their children and grandchildren, who lived in a collection of tin-roofed shacks. The islanders made an urgent call on their radio to the rescue center in Papeete, then offered the family dry T-shirts and warm hugs, and presented Jean and Amelia with black-pearl necklaces. They laid out a feast, with crepes, raw fish and coconuts, and kept Camille and Jack distracted with kittens and turtles.

Once the French realized there was a medical emergency, they mobilized as quickly as possible. Still, distances are long and resources scarce in Polynesia, and it took until noon for the copter to arrive. The medics quickly stabilized John, then flew him and the family to Bora Bora; from there, a jet rushed John to Tahiti. By 5:30, he was on an operating table, gazing up at a team of surgeons. "I was so deliriously happy," he says. "I knew my wife and kids were safe. And I knew the pain was about to be gone."



The family (from left, Ben, Jack, Jean, Camille, John and Amelia) sail on a friend's boat back home in San Diego Bay.

The doctors amputated John's leg below the knee. If he'd arrived 40 minutes later, they told him, it might have been too late. It took six days of dialysis before his kidneys, damaged by the infection, could function on their own, and another five days of recuperation before he was strong enough to return to the States.

The family flew back to LAX on July 7, and John was transferred directly by ambulance to Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla. There, doctors determined that his knee was damaged beyond repair. To heal properly, he would need a more radical amputation. Four days later, a surgeon sawed through the bone just above the knee. Another infection soon set in, with fevers that left him delirious and despairing. He didn't leave the hospital until July 27.

That night, unable to climb stairs, he slept in the living room of his sprawling house near Rancho Santa Fe. The next morning, he woke to find Jean snuggled on one side of him, Camille on the other. Outside the windows,

sunlight was sparkling on the dozens of citrus trees he'd planted in the yard. "My improvement," he says, "began right then."

John started a course of rehabilitation, and by late September, his leg had healed enough to be fitted with a state-of-the-art prosthesis. It has a micro-processor in the knee joint that adjusts the hydraulics to match his gait. Such a contraption requires long practice to master, and a year after the ordeal, John, who has not yet returned to work, figures he's about halfway there.

To this day, he wonders what went wrong off Manuae, whether the charts were off, the autopilot was buggy, or his own calculations were flawed. He still has some "phantom limb" pain—the mysterious discomfort that many amputees feel in their missing part. But he is learning to hold his other phantoms at bay. For a time, he couldn't stand to look at the ocean; on a seaside camping trip, he awoke in a panic at the sound of waves. In February, however, he manned the tiller on a half-day jaunt sponsored by a handicapped sailing group. "I had a ball," he says. He's already planning to buy a new boat.

Remarkably, the other Silverwoods are open to the idea. Although Jean still suffers from anxiety attacks, she managed a Carnival Cruise to Mexico last winter. The kids report no nightmares or flashbacks—quite the contrary. "I learned that, under pressure, you can do anything," Amelia says.

"Since the accident," observes Ben, "we're all a little nicer to each other." His father continues to marvel over Ben's actions during the crisis, which recently earned him the Boy Scouts' top medal for heroism.

For John, the rewards are unmistakable. Over lunch, he gestures around the table at his family. "Sure, I lost a leg," he says. "But look what I've still got."

TO BE CONTINUED...



I was waiting at a busy intersection when two shopping-bag-laden women got off a bus chatting animatedly.

They had said their good-byes and were heading in opposite directions when one called over her shoulder to the other, "I'll phone you when I get home."

A minute later she stopped. "Better yet," she shouted, "you call me. You'll get home before I will."

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