



***Higher Ground, the Cranstons' 41 foot American Tug***

## **Tampa to Tarboro**

***Lt/C Kendall M. Cranston, AP***

9'....6'...5'....4'.....thump. "We couldn't have run aground! The chart shows 11 ft of water!" Shallow water is a hazard of navigating the Intra-Coastal Waterway (ICW), but this uncharted shoal was actually in Rock Creek, a small creek leading into the waterway, that we hoped would provide a safe anchorage for the night. We were in the fourteenth day of our voyage to bring our new (to us) 2004 41 foot American Tug from Palmetto, Florida, to our slip in Oriental, North Carolina, and then for my wife, Kaye, and I to get back to our home in Tarboro. The uncharted shoal on Rock Creek, about 15 miles north of Beaufort, SC, was just one of many hazards and challenges we experienced on trip I call – *Tampa to Tarboro*.

The purchase of our boat "Higher Ground" was the culmination a long, plodding analysis of many boats that we had considered over the past 3+ years. The study included years of poring over magazines like *Passagemaker*, *Soundings*, *Living Aboard*, and *Power Cruising Magazine*. We went to a Trawler Fest and the Annapolis Power Boat Show. We even joined the Hatteras Long Range Cruiser club to learn more about that particular boat and see firsthand what members' boats looked like at the two Hatteras Rendezvous we attended. Nevertheless, when the decision was made to buy this particular American Tug, it seemed to be so sudden and was followed by a whirlwind of activity. Details to be managed included where to get financing, where to get insurance, and above all - how do we get a 41 foot boat from the West Coast of Florida to our home in North Carolina? Complications included the fact that I had never captained a boat bigger than 24 feet and insurance companies give a large discount if you can get a boat out of Florida before hurricane season that officially begins 1 June. I will credit our Ft. Lauderdale Broker, John Dennison, with holding our hands and providing suggestions that helped resolve many of the problems. Our offer on the boat was on 24 April during our third trip to Florida since February. We closed on "Higher Ground" 21 May and were on-board in Palmetto Florida on 22 May. John put us in contact with a professional transit captain that actually had maintained and captained our boat for the previous owner. I hired Captain Blair Cook to bring the boat from Palmetto to Ft. Lauderdale with Kaye and me on-board. This would be a sort of shakedown cruise and my training. We decided to layover a day in Ft Lauderdale to catch our breath and work with our broker, who is also a licensed captain, on docking training and some other aspects of the mechanical

systems of the boat. After that, we were going to be the "rookies" - Kaye and Kendall on our own heading north – captains everywhere watch out!

One of the trickier decisions was how do we get Kaye and I from Tarboro to our new boat so that we could begin our voyage north without leaving a car in Florida or at an airport in NC. We decided that renting a U-Haul box van that we could load with boat supplies and return to a U-Haul office in Florida was the simplest and cheapest solution.

**Day 1:** With Captain Blair on-board, and after a stop at the fuel dock for \$1,200 of Florida's finest diesel fuel (slightly less than 400 gallons) to top up the 640-gallon fuel tanks, we left the beautiful Rivera Dunes Marina in Palmetto on 25 May. Rivera Dunes Marina is by far the nicest marina we have ever enjoyed with its twin swimming pools, an on-site indoor and outdoor 4-star restaurant, and internet accessible surveillance cameras so you can keep an eye on your boat from afar. All for the bargain price of \$800 per month. (We only stayed there three nights before leaving for cheaper lodging.)

From Rivera Dunes, the course led us out through Tampa Bay into the Gulf of Mexico. Turning south, we experienced beam seas of 3-4 feet that started a rocking and rolling that dumped most items off the pilothouse and galley counters. While picking items off the floor and wiping up a spill I experienced a slight case of seasickness that was soon alleviated by an hour at the helm. Much to my relief Kaye experienced no seasickness during the whole trip although the boat motion at times made it hard to hang on. We appreciated the few handholds installed on "Higher Ground" but wished for a couple more on stairways. I grew to love the Pompanette helm seat. With the arms in the down position, a captain is well secured for any rolling. About mid-afternoon, we came inside some protective islands at Boca Grande. We had been having some problems with vague rudder response to the steering wheel and determined that the hydraulic fluid level of the steering system was low. Captain Cook called Sea Tow to ask for locations of marinas near our current course. He located one that was willing to deliver our needed fluid. So without altering course we slowed to a stop to meet a small boat from that came out to meet us, and I performed the hand-off from the swim platform. Some fluid was added and the steering straightened out. The first night, we anchored in a sandy bottom bay near Captiva Island south of Ft. Myers/Cape Coral. Since the wind was blowing about 20 knots, Captain Cook spent a restless night sleeping in the pilothouse monitoring the anchor. It was nice for me to have someone else to worry about the boat while I slept soundly. This would change later in the trip once we were on our own.

**Day 2:** An early start and a slightly higher speed cruise to get down to Matecumbe Key. We took the inside passage which would later lead us to "Channel 5". This avoided having to go outside Key West and around the keys in a much longer distance. The anchorage for Day 2 was in a bay inside (west) of Matecumbe Key. We arrived about 1930 after a long day and anchored. While finishing dinner we realized that the boat was drifting. The anchor had not caught. We pulled up our anchor and found thick grass coming up with it. We moved and reset but it seemed to drag a long ways before catching. The next morning while weighing anchor we discovered how the anchor

finally took a set. It was caught on another anchor chain. We tried to pull the other anchor up, but in the wind, we were not able to generate enough force by hand.

**Day 3:** Traveling up through Channel 5. This was supposed to be clear Florida Keys water but with the persistent strong 15-20 knot East winds that Florida had experienced for the last week or two the bottom was stirred up and clouded from sand. So visibility was only a couple feet. We touched bottom three times in the channel, but with the skeg protecting the prop, there was no damage and the boat continued unabated. By mid-day, we past the turquoise water of Key Biscayne, where we had toured a 42' Nordic Tug a month earlier, and motored into Miami. The big buildings were a marked change from the scenery of the last three days. Several bridge openings later, we made our way to Bahia-Mar Marina in Ft. Lauderdale. Captain Cook coached me while I docked the boat. With beginners luck, I backed into our space without drama. It sure helps having a personal coach telling you everything to do. In addition, the bow thruster was amazing in the ability to control the bow but also, to my amazement, the stern is controlled in the opposite direction from the bow movement. Captain Cook had rented a car for his return trip to his home in St. Petersburg, so at 1630, I thanked him for his guidance as I helped him load gear into the taxi for the ride to the airport.

**Day 4:** Bahia-Mar is located on the ICW, but is only across a street (about 100 yards) from the Atlantic Ocean beach. The marina caters to large vessels and at least six were tied up that must have been over 200 feet long. On one of these boats, two young men were polishing the anchor to mirror sheen. We used Broker John Dennison for some fuel dock and docking practice and imposed on him for a trip to a grocery store for supplies.

**Days 5 – 6:** We're finally on our own heading north on the ICW. Needless to say, we were both a little nervous with a new boat in new territory. We soon became the fourth boat in a line of boats waiting for bridge openings over the next 20 miles. There must have been about five bridges. Apparently, the Bridge Tender, who is hailed on Channel 9 in Florida, has to record the boat names (or at least the last boat through) because we were asked our boat name each time. The previous owner had never put a boat name on the boat and we had not had time yet. At least we got a complement about the nice appearance of "Higher Ground" from one Bridge Operator. The scenery along the waterway in Ft. Lauderdale is astounding. The extravagant houses are something to behold. I believe that the area called the "Million Dollar Mile" was the most impressive. The house designs were all unique and the landscaping I'm sure cost more than our whole house. The day ended at a marina in N. Palm Beach and the next night we stopped at the Vero Beach Municipal Marina. The Vero Beach slip was a somewhat tight fit around a 46 Nordhavn that stuck out a little. I had warned the dockmaster about my inexperience so as we approached the slip - two dockhands and owners of two nearby boats were at the slip to help (and protect their boats.) Fortunately, my head-in docking went fine.

**Days 7-8:** The waterway was changing to more open natural areas and fewer houses. After a long day, we anchored in Mosquito Bay, which fortunately did not live up to its name. It

was a pleasant anchorage in a huge shallow body of water with no one else around. Since it was my first anchorage, I was up several times during the night checking on things. The next night we attempted to use an anchorage up the Elizabeth River in St. Augustine that was recommend in the Skipper Bob Anchorage book. Normally his recommendations were reliable, but this anchorage was only big enough for about a 28 ft boat and we actually ran aground trying out the spot. I was looking for a protected spot since Tropical Storm Barry was coming. So instead, we retraced our steps 2-3 miles back down the ICW to an anchorage in the Matanzas River south of St. Augustine. The site was a little strange because there were four uninhabited sailboats anchored there. The night was very nerve racking because the current and tide were fairly strong. I spent the night in the Pilothouse bench seat, which doubles as a bed, periodically monitoring the track patterns on my GPS units to make sure we had not drifted. This was one of my first experiences with current and tide. We reversed direction with the current three times while we were anchored. The anchor held but I resolved that night to get a much bigger anchor than the 44 pound Bruce copy on "Higher Ground".



**The Helm aboard *Higher Ground***

**Day 9:** We awoke to Tropical Storm Barry blowing 25-35 knots and a steady rain. As we headed north we saw only a few boats and those seemed to be commercial fishing boats. With the wind and rain, I decided to stop early and seek a protected spot. Of course, the spot in Ft. George Creek that I selected was also selected by three other sailboats just before me and they took the best spots. Ft. George Island was home to a very old restored house that was open for tourists. We anchored about 1400 near the house, trying to get some wind protection from the trees. Unfortunately, this creek was narrow and shoaled and as the current would change, it would push the boat around into either shallow water or into the stone bulkhead protecting the property of the house. I tried putting out my fluke anchor off the stern to stop the swinging but this was really a waste since I couldn't get enough scope to be effective and after several current reverses by the next morning the rode was caught under the stern of "Higher Ground" and was so tight I couldn't pull it in. I finally had to let out more rode so that I could work the line under the boat up to the bow where I could pull up the fluke. Between the shoaling, the current, the narrow channel, and the tropical storm this was another night with little sleep.

**Day 10:** The worst of the storm had passed, so it was a more normal voyage north leading to St. Simons Island and the Golden Isle Marina. This marked a milestone because we were not officially out of Florida Hurricane area. Our original insurance contract said we had to be north of Cumberland Island by 1 June. In Ft. Lauderdale, we realized that we wouldn't quite make that date, so for another \$125 we got an extension until 15 June. We actually made it north of Cumberland Island during the day of 4 June. Next to the Golden Isle Marina was an excellent restaurant, which was a nice break from four days on the boat.

**Day 11:** Motored north through some great natural areas. Spent the night anchored at Walberg Creek with no one around. It was a beautiful spot with plenty of swing room.

**Days 12-13:** Time for a marina again. We had debated about which "old town" we would visit on the voyage. We had been to Charleston, Beaufort, and Georgetown all within the past few years. Since we had not been to Savannah for over 10 years, we decided to spend extra time there. We obtained a slip at the Isle of Hope Marina, which is about 15 miles SE of downtown Savannah, and rented a car. That afternoon a person from Hertz picked us up at the marina and, after signing some paperwork at their office, we were free to enjoy the city. We visited the sights downtown. The next day's highlight was a visit to Mrs. Wilkes's Boarding House for an excellent southern lunch – family style. Later that day we did a trolley guided tour and visited a Civil War fort. The heat and humidity were a little stifling and once we got back to the boat, the air conditioners ran all night and all the next day.

**Days 14-15:** We left the Savannah area and moved past Tybee Island. The anchorage that night was the infamous Rock Creek that I described in the opening paragraph. Skipper Bob's book said to stay on the left side of the channel. He just did not say the channel was 5 feet wide. The following day was more ICW with an anchorage at Stono River in 9 feet of water. This was a spot just a few miles south of Charleston. The river was well used with boats sending out a wake until well after dark. Again, there were three other uninhabited or derelict sailboats anchored in prime spots.

**Days 16-17:** As a Civil War buff, I had to cruise by Ft. Sumter in Charleston Harbor before turning back into the ICW. Now we were finally in a section of the waterway that we had actually traveled on by boat. We had done a Holden Beach to Charleston voyage during the Thanksgiving four-day weekend in 2003 or 2004, so I felt a little more at home now. Stopped at Butler Creek in a great wide spot where the waterway forks leaving a somewhat secluded spot for us to relax, although the heat was again high enough to make us run the generator and the air conditioners all night. South Carolina and Myrtle Beach should be avoided on weekends during the summer. The traffic with boats and PWC's was terrible. At one particularly congested spot in Myrtle Beach we passed by three injured boaters being treated for injuries suffered when one boat apparently ran up over another. People were a little crazy. It was a relief to stop at the Myrtle Beach Yacht Club for the night.

**Day 18:** Made it all the way to Wrightsville Beach. The current coming through Snow's Cut was something to behold. I

was seeing about a 3 to 3.5 knot difference between water speed and ground speed. We anchored at Banks Island Lagoon in Wrightsville Beach; or rather, we tried to anchor. A sailboat arrived at the spot I wanted just seconds before I did. I tried two spots that either had poor holding or after letting out sufficient scope were going to allow us to swing into other sailboats. Finally, as darkness approached (and after two marinas I called said they were full) we got adequate holding. We probably rubbed bottom at low tide but the anchor held. I find that a 41-foot boat does not fit in nearly as many anchorages as our previous 24-foot boat .....Duh!!!



**The Galley has all the comforts of home!**

**Day 19:** Familiar territory now though the Surf City swing bridge, although I did time it wrong and had to wait over 30 minutes for the opening. We hurried to make the Onslow Bridge and just missed being delayed for an hour at Camp Lejeune since they were live firing that day. Apparently, the military patrol boats that let us proceed normally lets traffic proceed for an hour and then stop it for an hour during firing. We made it through non-stop. This night was a stop at Dudley's Marina at Swansboro. It was the scene of a rookie mistake since as I was making a wide turn to head into our assigned slip the current carried me into a shoal where only brute force from high engine RPM got us out. Since at that point, I was backwards to the slip and I couldn't back into the slip due to the current, they sent us to another dock with a tee-pier. I just barely made fast to that before getting swept into the shallows. All in all a rather embarrassing end to the day.

**Day 20:** Morehead City went by quickly and we pulled into Whitaker Creek Marina in Oriental about 1500. To finish the voyage, I managed to run aground coming into the marina. I somehow managed to go on the wrong side of the last green marker. My only excuse is that for three weeks I had kept green markers on my right while headed north on the ICW. So in a moment of lost concentration, I guess I just automatically put the green day marker on my right. Again, the application of engine power managed to bump us back into deeper water to allow us to get to the slip. At least I backed into the slip perfectly. After a good washing of the boat and packing items to take home, we were ready to say goodbye to "Higher Ground" until the next voyage. Graciously, Al and Dot Paetzell soon met us at the marina to take us back to Tarboro. This trip was completed.