

PASSAGE TO RED BROOK

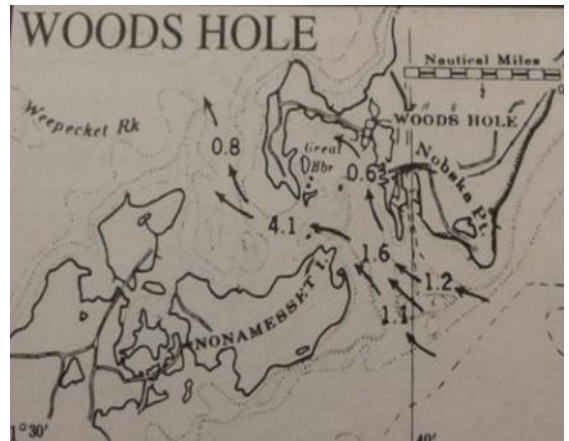
ROBERT PARMENTIER

Hon Ed's note: An unusual tale of derring-do for us from across the pond. I thought it might be of interest to check with Bob what engine he had in the boat. Answer: I put a 28 HP Westerbeke Diesel which has plenty of power. The original Volvo Penta actually worked fine but I wanted a new one. I sold the old one for \$525 on E-Bay!. The change necessitated a larger prop and required a cut out of the rudder.

So, the boating season in New England is over for this year. The dinghy is in the shed, and all of Dulcinea's gear is off and cleaned and stored away. That sounds like all is well, and perhaps it is. But several days ago, I wasn't so sure that such an outcome was guaranteed. Let me explain.

Dulcinea is a Macwester 28 bought by my grandfather in 1968. I am the fifth family member to have owned her. She has been totally renovated including engine, sails, cabinetry below and cockpit including changing from a tiller to a wheel. She is a strong vessel but she was severely tested on her last sail of the year. In late October, I moved Dulcinea from her summer home in Green Pond, on the southern coast of Cape Cod, to her winter storage site in Red Brook Harbor, on Buzzards Bay. It's a distance of about 19 miles, running west along the coast, then through Woods Hole passage, and on up Buzzards Bay nearly to the western entrance to the Cape Cod Canal. I had chosen the day carefully because I wanted a day that was not raining and one when the current through Woods Hole would be favorable. On that day the tide would be ebbing to the west until about 1:00 PM, and then be lightly in our favor all afternoon up the Bay. I had perhaps waited too long to make the trip but I had wanted to enjoy the cool, crisp weather in the Fall as long as possible.

Woods Hole is a narrow passage between Cape Cod and Nonamesset Island. This is the first of the Elizabeth Islands, a chain that extends out from the mainland in a southwesterly direction and separates Vineyard Sound from Buzzards Bay. There are other passages through the island chain but, for our trip, Woods Hole is the shortest one. Every six hours, at its peak flow, the Hole funnels water back and forth between the Bay and the Sound at over 4 knots. I could power Dulcinea against such a current but it would make for a very slow passage. In addition, the Woods Hole passage area is both physically



complex, with several marked channels converging in mid-passage, and heavily used by both commercial and recreational craft, particularly on the weekends. At peak current, maneuverability in the Hole is difficult, and the buoys are often pulled low by the water as it churns past the many rocks just outside the channel (see Fig 2. *Note: this picture was taken on a different day).*

I have been sailing Cape Cod waters my whole life, but I had never sailed through Woods Hole until I got Dulcinea. As a youngster, I was warned about the difficulty of the passage with its strong currents and many rocks. On Dulcinea I have transited it several times a year for over a decade, but always at slack or fair current and on good weather days. I always had a working GPS unit to know exactly where I was in relation to the many rocks but even with that, I was never relaxed while making the passage. Unfortunately, my GPS had malfunctioned shortly before this trip so I didn't have that to help me. I thought that no matter which way the wind was blowing, it would always be calm in the narrowness of the passage which provided only a short fetch for the winds and would allow clear sighting of the buoys. On this day, I was to realize just how wrong that statement was.

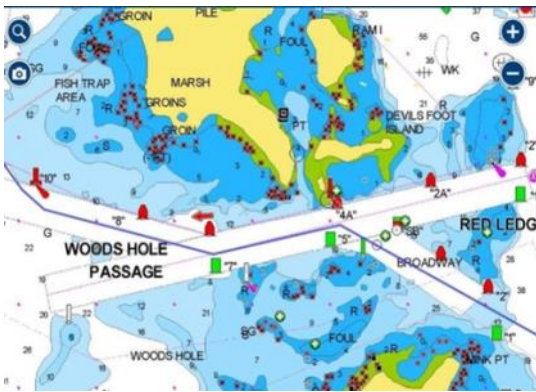
My crew consisted of two members of my coffee group. Both are experienced boaters, but like me, are getting up there in age. Bid is 76 and Del just celebrated his 80th birthday. Mobility is somewhat diminished in all of us and they both wear hearing aids. This meant that when the engine was on, our onboard communication wasn't that great.

We left Green Pond at 8AM as scheduled on a beautiful sunny day with the current favorable....just as I planned. Other factors, however, were not so favorable. There was a strong NW wind blowing about 20 knots with gusts up to 30 coming off the land. I had expected smooth going until we got into Woods Hole since NW is an off-shore wind. This wind was so strong, however, that unless we kept very close to the near shore there was a significant chop.

The temperature was a cool 36 degrees(f) (2.2c) when we left, but the wind chill factor from 20 knots made it seem much colder. I was dressed for the cold, or so I thought. I had several layers on, including two hooded sweatshirts and a foul weather jacket. I was not, however, wearing my foul weather pants and my boots. I never expected to experience the amount of water we had coming into the boat. We all knew it would be worse in Buzzards Bay but if I had known just how much worse, we wouldn't have gone that day. Within 30 minutes I was soaked from the waist down and was starting to shiver...and didn't stop shivering for many hours. By the time we got to the entrance to Woods Hole passage, so much cold water had splashed on my face that it didn't much matter if my crew couldn't hear me. My mouth was so numb that I couldn't form words.

As we neared the Hole, I found I had another problem. On my earlier trips I had always been able to see as I traversed the passage. However, I recently had cataract surgery. With new lenses implanted in both eyes, my vision is quite good. My eyes, however, are now very sensitive to bright lights and I always wear sun glasses when outside. I soon realized that my sunglasses were all salted up and I couldn't see through them very well. When I removed the sunglasses, the sunlight was so bright that my eyes became full of tears and I couldn't see much then either.

Usually, when I go through the Hole I like to be very conservative and pick up the first buoy that marks the entrance of the ferry channel into the harbor and then follow that channel right into the Hole. Since we had been hugging the mainland, that maneuver would be a long diversion and would place us out into choppy water, so I decided to stay near shore, cross several channels and cut close to some of the marked rock ledges instead. We all knew the passage pretty well and I relied on my crew to keep a close watch and help me get through. I didn't see all of the buoys...and I was very uncomfortable...but we finally made it to the R2 buoy that marked the entrance to Broadway and on past Red Ledge, the big pile of rocks in the middle of the passage that creates the "Y" structure of the marked channel (See Fig 3). I thought our troubles were over.



But, that was not the case. As we turned westbound into the Strait and shot past the towering green marker on our port, we began heading directly into the wind. The current was running strongly and favorably in our direction, just as I had planned, but the opposing wind was a killer. This NW wind had an 8-mile fetch all the way across Buzzards Bay and now was funneled between the low hills of Uncatena Island and Penance Point on the mainland. It just came roaring through the Hole. We were confronted with larger waves than I had ever seen in this area. Suddenly they towered high above us...eight feet?...perhaps 10 feet?...terrifyingly high.

For the next quarter mile we powered up the waves at an impossible angle, and it was all I could do to hang onto the wheel to keep from falling backwards. When we reached the crest, Dulcinea would charge down into the trough with her prop and rudder out of the water...which meant I couldn't steer for awhile and we had no power. She would then plunge into the next wave, dipping fully up to the cabin in the water...and then pop up again. Several times we were thrown sideways as we were lifted up, and she rolled way over. And then a new worry emerged.

I knew that if we took two large waves sideways in a row, the cockpit would fill with water. Macwesters have scuppers to drain water out of the cockpit, but since we didn't expect a lot of onboard water, I hadn't inserted the wash boards into their slots at the entrance to the main cabin. The washboards were down below. Even if on-board communication had been possible, neither of my crew would have wanted to fight their way down below to find and install those boards. We were all being thrown around like BBs in a barrel...so we soldiered on.

Dulcinea has lifelines around the boat which we could grab ahold of, but I didn't have specific life lines attached either to me or to the crew which we would have installed if we were sailing off shore or at night. Several times I was thrown sideways against these lifelines and really had a hard time hanging on. There were many moments when we were grateful to be wearing life jackets.



This trip on Dulcinea was the first time that I was truly afraid aboard her. If we had taken on a load of water or if something had caused the engine to stop, it would have been only moments before we would have been on the rocks. For example, if a boat's fuel tank is low and the boat gets bounced around it's possible that the fuel intake tube will suck up air instead of fuel, and this can cause the engine to stall. We were also lucky that we had the channel to ourselves. There were no other fools out that day and the Fast Ferry from New Bedford either wasn't scheduled to pass through at that time or maybe wasn't running at all due to the high seas. The Fast Ferry is a large catamaran ferry that barely slows as she enters the Hole and takes up a large percentage of the channel so I'm glad we didn't meet up with her.

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The high seas probably lasted only about 200 yards but it seemed an eternity before we were able to turn north and head for Red Brook Harbor. At that point we were on a lee shore, and clawing away as the wind tried to push us on. The waves were still big but not as dangerous. And as we went north, they slowly diminished. This was different but not much better. Bid relieved me at the helm at this point. He was a good guy to have aboard at such a time.

I've since learned that there is a straightforward explanation for the enormous waves we encountered at that particular mid-point in Woods Hole passage. The strong wind that blew across the eight miles of Buzzards Bay that day was able to kick up significant waves as it passed over water about 40 feet deep. As those waves neared Woods Hole, however, they rapidly encountered much shallower depths of 8-12 feet. The energy in those waves caused them to grow above the average water level, just as they would when water reaches an open beach and come crashing ashore. It turns out that large waves in Woods Hole during a NW wind are not uncommon...especially when they encounter an opposing tide.

The remaining part of our trip up Buzzards Bay was a long, slow, cold slog but uneventful. Entering Red Brook harbor was a joy, and luckily there was plenty of dock space for us to tie up. As I jumped off the boat to fix the lines, I discovered that my legs didn't work well either, and that I was shaking uncontrollably.

I'm afraid I didn't leave the boat very ship shape that afternoon. We were met by another friend who had already warmed up his truck for us, which was very welcome. I took the whole crew to lunch where we ate and drank until we were again warm and happy.

What did I learn from this voyage? First, don't try to push the season. Second, temperatures below 40 degrees (4.5C) on the water are colder when you are wet. Foul weather gear, including pants and boots, are made for a reason. They'll keep you dry and therefore much warmer. Third, in my case, several extra pairs of sunglasses would have been very helpful as well as a working GPS unit. Fourth, you must have a good crew, as I did, to make such a passage. Fifth, and finally, I'll never do it again in a strong NW wind.

