

MARITIME RESCUE INSTITUTE
COASTAL NOTES – 16 OCTOBER 2007

Amongst the most enduring and sea worthy objects to set loose on the ocean are bottles; as long as they are well sealed they will survive hurricanes that would sink the largest ship and bob their way through the heaviest seas. The bottle needs to be made of glass for longevity: plastic bottles will degrade and break down into smaller pieces, presenting their own risk to wild life.

Both the British and the American navies have made extensive use of bottle to compile intricate current charts. The movement of oil slicks, mines and even fish has been predicted with the help of seaborne bottles.

How many youngsters, on holiday at the seaside, have written a message, sealed it in a bottle and cast it out onto the ocean in the hope of a response from some romantic faraway place. Harmless fun, but messages in bottles have also been put to serious use. In 1875, the crew of a Canadian ship mutinied and murdered their officers; they spared a steward because he could navigate. He steered them to the French coast, while surreptitiously dropping bottles over the side telling the whole story. One was found by the French authorities, who boarded the ship and arrested the surprised mutineers.

Perhaps the longest ever bottle voyage was made by a bottle known as 'The Flying Dutchman'. It was launched in 1929 by a German scientific expedition into the South Indian Ocean. The message inside, which could be read without breaking the bottle, asked the finder to report where it had been found and throw it back into the sea. After being found several times at the southern tip of South America, it then made its way back into the Indian Ocean, passing roughly the same spot where it had been originally dropped and arrived on the west coast of Australia in 1935. It had covered 16,000 miles in 2447 days, which averages out at a very respectable 6 nautical miles per day.

Elizabeth 1 once received an intelligence report sent in a bottle. She was so disconcerted that the bottle had been opened by a boatman at Dover, that she appointed an official *Uncorker of Ocean Bottles*, decreeing that no unauthorized person might open a message carrying bottle on pain of death!

In 1948 a Russian fisherman found a message written in Norwegian and English. Once translated it made little sense: *"Five ponies and 150 dogs remain. Desire hay, fish and 30 sledges. Must return early in August. Baldwin"*. It transpires that the polar explorer Evelyn Baldwin sent it in 1902, and he had returned alive and well.

The strangest case may be that of Chunosuke Matsuyama, a Japanese seaman who was wrecked in 1784 with 44 shipmates on a Pacific coral reef. Shortly before he and his companions died of starvation on the barren island, he carved a brief account of their tragedy on a piece of wood, sealed it in a bottle and cast it into the sea. 150 years later, in 1935, it was washed up on the Japanese coast; supposedly it arrived at the very seaside village where Chunosuke had grown up. Too late for any rescue, but a remarkable journey.

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