

Sharks and lost hope: Women rescued after 5 months at sea

By CALEB JONES
Associated Press

HONOLULU — Their engine was crippled, their mast was damaged, and things went downhill from there for two women who set out to sail the 2,700 miles from Hawaii to Tahiti.

As their 50-foot sailboat drifted helplessly in the middle of the Pacific for months, their water purifier conked out, sharks started ramming their vessel, and their distress calls and signal flares went unanswered day after day.

Some nights they went to sleep wondering if they would live to see the sun rise.

Then their fortunes changed on Tuesday: Five and a half months after Jennifer Appel and Tasha Fuiava embarked on a journey that might normally take about three weeks, a Taiwanese fishing vessel spotted their boat 900 miles off Japan and thousands of miles in the wrong direction from Tahiti. The U.S. Navy sent the USS Ashland to their rescue.

"I had tears in my eyes," said Appel, the Sea Nymph's 48-year-old captain, who blew kisses to her rescuers as they pulled alongside. She and Fuiava quickly clambered aboard, followed by their dogs Zeus and Valentine, who were hoisted up.

"It was actually quite mind-blowing and incredibly



Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jonathan Clay/U.S. Navy via AP
In this Wednesday photos, Tasha Fuiava, an American mariner who had been sailing for five months on a damaged sailboat, climbs the accommodation ladder to board the amphibious dock landing ship USS Ashland. The Navy ship rescued the two Honolulu women and their dogs after they were lost at sea for several months while trying to sail from Hawaii to Tahiti.

humbling," she told reporters during a conference call from the ship.

All four looked remarkably fit, and Appel credited that to veteran sailors who had warned them to prepare well for the voyage. They had packed enough food for a year, mostly dried goods like oatmeal and pasta.

"They said pack every

square inch of your boat with food, and if you think you need a month, pack six months, because you have no idea what could possibly happen out there," Appel said. "And the sailors in Honolulu really gave us good advice. We're here."

Appel, who has been sailing the Hawaiian islands for 10 years, said she had

been planning the Tahiti voyage for more than two. But she acknowledged that perhaps she and Fuiava, a novice at sea, weren't as ready for the crossing as they could have been.

"I had no idea what I was getting myself into," she said. "When I asked Natasha, I told her I have no idea what's going to happen out there and

she said, 'That's OK, I've never sailed.'"

The two set sail on May 3 and ran into trouble almost immediately, Appel said, hitting a storm that pounded their vessel with 50 to 70 mph winds for three days as they traveled the Hawaiian islands.

Their engine went out toward the end of the month. They thought they could continue on with just their sails, but the rigging on the 57-foot mast was damaged and they were unable to make any headway.

So they drifted, sending out distress signals every day for 98 days straight. They said they also tried without success to hail a number of ships and fired off 10 signal flares. One of their cellphones had been washed overboard early in the voyage, and they were out of cell range anyway.

One night, a group of tiger sharks began attacking the vessel, and the next morning, a shark returned and rammed the boat again, Appel said, adding, "We were just incredibly lucky that our hull was strong enough to withstand the onslaught."

"There is a true humility to wondering if today is your last day, if tonight is your last night," she said.

Meanwhile, loved ones had no idea where they were. Appel's mother said she contacted the Coast Guard when she hadn't heard from

her a week and a half into the voyage.

Still, as the months passed, Joyce Appel said she never lost hope that the pair would be found.

"She is very resourceful and she's curious, and as things break she tries to repair them. She doesn't sit and wait for the repairman to get there," said Joyce Appel, 75, who lives in Houston. "So I knew the same thing would be true of the boat."

She finally got a call from her daughter early Thursday.

"She said, 'Mom?' and I said, 'Jennifer!?' because I hadn't heard from her in like five months," she said. "And she said, 'Yes, Mom,' and that was really exciting."

Despite the ordeal, the pair said there were positive moments, such as when they fixed their broken water purifier and used their long days adrift to learn more about the sea and the weather.

"You may as well use the time you have to do something beneficial," Fuiava said.

They said their dogs helped keep their spirits up.

Although the Navy declared the Sea Nymph no longer seaworthy, Appel said she hopes to eventually recover it and perhaps take it out again.

"Well, you got to die sometime," Appel said. "You may as well be doing something you enjoy when you're doing it, right?"

BRIEFLY

House backs \$4T budget, faces challenges on tax plan

WASHINGTON — Republicans powered a \$4 trillion budget through the House on Thursday by a razor-thin margin, a close vote underscoring the difficulties that lie ahead in delivering President Donald Trump's promise to cut taxes.

For now, Republicans sidestepped divisions within the party by voting 216-212 to permit them to begin work on a \$1.5 trillion tax cut without fear of blocking tactics by Democrats. The legislative landscape is strewn with land mines, however, as GOP tax-writers pick winners and losers among interest groups, business sectors and rank-and-file voters.

The tax bill is the top item on the GOP agenda and would be Trump's first big win in Congress. Republicans hope it would provide a much-needed jolt for the party's political fortunes in advance of next year's midterm elections. Republicans view passage of the upcoming tax measure as a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and its importance has only grown since the party's debacle on health care.

The goal is a full rewrite of the inefficient, loophole-laden tax code in hopes of lower rates for corporations and other businesses and a burst of economic growth. But evidence is growing that some of their hoped-for bold steps — such as eliminating the deduction for state and local taxes — will be replaced by half-measures dictated by politics and a narrow margin for error.

GOP leaders scrambled in recent days to overcome resistance from House conservatives unhappy about deficits and debt, as well as opposition by lawmakers from high-tax states upset about plans to eliminate the state

and local tax deduction. That could mean higher taxes for many middle-class earners, and top Republicans like Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin promise a compromise that won't be as costly to middle-class taxpayers.

Trump calls for liberation from 'scourge' of addiction

WASHINGTON (AP) — In ringing and personal terms, President Donald Trump pledged that "we will overcome addiction in America," declaring opioid abuse a national public health emergency and announcing new steps to combat what he described as the worst drug crisis in U.S. history.

Trump's declaration, which will be effective for 90 days and can be renewed, will allow the government to redirect resources in various ways and to expand access to medical services in rural areas. But it won't bring new dollars to fight a scourge that kills nearly 100 people a day.

"As Americans we cannot allow this to continue," Trump said in a speech Thursday at the White House, where he bemoaned an epidemic he said had spared no segment of society, affecting rural areas and cities, rich and poor and both the elderly and newborns.

"It is time to liberate our communities from this scourge of drug addiction," he said. "We can be the generation that ends the opioid epidemic."

Deaths have surged from opioids, which include some prescribed painkillers, heroin and synthetic drugs such as fentanyl.

Administration officials said they also would urge Congress, during end-of-the-year budget negotiations, to add new cash to a public health emergency fund that Congress hasn't replenished for years and contains just

\$57,000. White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders on Friday suggested \$45 billion might be a "good number" for added funding. That's the same amount as Republicans had suggested in one of their failed "Obamacare" replacement bills.

White House disavows Puerto Rico power contract

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration said Friday it had no involvement in the decision to award a \$300 million contract to help restore Puerto Rico's power grid to a tiny Montana company in Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's hometown.

The White House said Friday that federal officials played no role in the selection of Whitefish Energy Holdings by the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority.

Trump spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the president had asked Zinke about the contract and that the cabinet secretary said he had nothing to do with it. "He had no role in that contract," Sanders said of Zinke. "This was a state and local decision made by the Puerto Rican authorities and not the federal government."

The administration is seeking to distance itself from the issue amid a growing number of investigations and a bipartisan chorus of criticism from Capitol Hill.

Spain cracks down hard after Catalan independence

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — In one of the most momentous days in recent Spanish history, Spain fired Catalonia's regional government and dissolved its parliament Friday after a

defiant Catalan declaration of independence that flouted the country's constitution.

Lawmakers in the Catalan parliament voted to unilaterally declare independence, prompting the swift crackdown by the Spanish government, which also called an early election in the region.

Hours after Catalonia's secession move, the Spanish Senate granted the government special constitutional powers to stop the wealthy region's move toward independence.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's conservative government then called an urgent Cabinet meeting late Friday, after which Rajoy emerged to announce the emergency measures, including regional elections called for Dec. 21.

U.S. economy shows resilience with solid quarter

WASHINGTON (AP) — Powered by businesses and consumers, the U.S. economy grew at a solid 3 annual pace last quarter despite two devastating hurricanes — evidence of economic durability and all but assuring that the Federal Reserve will resume raising interest rates late this year.

Friday's figures from the government marked the first time in three years that the economy has expanded at a 3 percent or more annual rate — historically, a normal pace for a healthy economy — for two straight quarters.

More than eight years since the Great Recession officially ended, the economy is still posting consistent gains — in the job market, in business investment, in consumer spending and corporate earnings. Unemployment is at a 16-year low.



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By Renee Struthers


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