

VINNIE PENN He would have gone down with his ship

When I was a teenager I had a raft that I named the SS Rampage. I kept it alive in my garage with a bicycle pump, and rowed it to a mooring by the New Haven Yacht Club with one big plastic oar.

Vinnie Penn Published 12:00 am EDT, Thursday, May 13, 2004



ICON
INTERNATIONAL INC
Eight Consecutive Years as a Top Workplace
Our employees are the reason!

TOP WORK PLACES 2018

THANK YOU!

We are the nation's top corporate-barter firm for smart, dependable solutions.
[CLICK HERE FOR MORE DETAILS!](#)

Despite the fact that had it overturned I would not have been able to tread water for a minute, I would careen through the wakes of yachts, a seaman at heart but a landlubber by nature.

The older kids would cruise by in hand-me-down canoes or paint-chipped rowboats and mock the SS Rampage, but I didn't care. The sun would be beating on my face, gulls singing to me, and I would just call the Coast Guard and tell them the older kids had cases of beer on board when I got back to shore, anyway.

Throughout the summer of 1985, I was a coxswain at the yacht club, a gig landed for me by a friend who had been doing it for the past few summers. He regretted it by my second day on the job. A coxswain, according to Webster's Unabridged is "a seaman in charge of a ship's boat in the absence of the officer."

Essentially, my duty was to bring yacht owners back and forth to their moored yachts on a tiny boat powered by what appeared to be a toy outboard engine. Getting this thing started was more difficult than the lawnmower back home that was left to my father after his father got it from his. My arm would ache so much after starting the engine every day that I could barely adjust the lawn chair that I would sleep on until the club members began to file in.

Bringing these pompous yachtsmen out to their vessels was one thing; bringing them in was something else altogether. They would cruise in, drop anchor, and blast their obnoxious boat horn three times as a way of alerting the coxswain to their needs. We were then to dash to the dock, hop into the yacht club boat, and fetch them and their freckled, debutante daughters.

One particular ride in, a snob of a 15-year-old spotted the SS Rampage and remarked that it was "sad," and then asked where the little boy was that must be its owner. I told her he was mowing lawns.

In the meantime, I had been spending the entire summer telling every girl I met that I had a boat. When one finally said that she wanted to go for a ride in late August, the words of that stuck-up teenage girl, no doubt at some cotillion at the time, went off in my head.

I wound up taking my new friend out in the yacht club boat, after hours, claiming ownership and yet signing my friend's name in on the yacht club log. In short, I had forsaken the SS Rampage.

Why this girl never questioned me naming my boat "New Haven Yacht Club I" is beyond me.

I retired the SS Rampage at the end of that summer. Three summers later, a girl that I was dating and I were in my garage and she spotted it, lifeless and hanging on a nail. "What's that?" she inquired, laughing. I told her it was a raft I used to take out as a boy, plain and simple.

"Well," she continued, "where's the bicycle pump?"