

## Personal Risk

WRITE THIS WITH A GREAT DEAL OF TREPIDATION. It's a personal story, one that has consumed my thoughts more than I'd thought a single event not affecting me or my family could. It's a story of risk-taking, stubbornness, intense focus, self-reliance, and—yes—plain selfishness. It's the story of a good friend, Nenad Belic, who retired two years ago at 60 from a successful career as a cardiologist.

Nenad decided to act on a lifetime dream in retirement—rowing across the Atlantic solo. Many would say this was crazy. Though several have accomplished this feat, only six had done it the hard way, west to east, and he was the oldest to try it. So he waited until his kids were older, his youngest two still teenagers.

This project was all-consuming for Nenad. He was in great physical shape, and his rowboat was custom-built for this occasion. He had planned meticulously for years, asking the experts for their advice, and even taking some if it suited his purpose and plan. Unfortunately, most of his family didn't share in his dream, but he didn't care. Once he had his mind set, he was going to do it, come hell or high water.

We had a great send-off party for him last May. Once in the Atlantic, he kept up a continuous stream of e-mails from his boat and nightly talked to his family. We just wished it would end quickly and successfully with his coming home safely. After an entire summer of tracking his progress daily on the Web, starting in early May from Cape Cod, many people across the globe counted down from months to weeks and then days until he would land and fly back to Chicago.

Then, after four months at sea, in the first week of October only 200 miles off the coast of Ireland, Nenad disappeared. It was a vicious Atlantic storm, one he was warned about by his oceanographic consultant, who insisted without success that Nenad call the Coast Guard to pick him up before the storm hit its peak. But his stubbornness was so great that he

thought more of his odyssey, his boat, and the fulfillment of his dream than his life and his family. Like many of us, he never thought the worst could happen to him.

His empty boat was found a month later off the Irish coast—a moment in the evening news, just one more piece of bad news. Did it happen because he didn't bring a life preserver or wet suit? Was it a freak accident during the storm that no one could have done anything about? We'll never know.

Looking back, you could easily praise him for his courage, audacity, and persistence. But it's just as easy to condemn him for his stubbornness and selfishness, leaving his family (and friends) the way he did. The risk involved with his adventure was assessed and managed with both reason and deep conviction; the risk he took in the middle of a ferocious storm was based on stubbornness and pride.

What have I learned from this event? Why do I feel compelled to write about it? Maybe just to get it off my chest. Maybe I'm even a little envious because I don't have such a bold dream—and even if I did, I'd be too risk-averse and conscious of others' feelings to pursue it.

And maybe it's because I'm still angry with my friend for being so stubborn, for not taking the risk management steps he was advised to take and should have taken.

Everyone should have a dream. One hopes its pursuit would be more successful and less risky than Nenad's was. But actuaries have to remember that risk doesn't just involve work; it gets personal, too. Balance the risks against what's important to you, listen to the experts, and always be prepared to bail out if you have to. ●

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