

The Officers, Directors and Members of
US SAILING
are pleased to present the
ARTHUR B. HANSON RESCUE MEDAL
to
Don Whelan & Alan Johnson

for the rescue as follows:

A day before the 2010 Huntington Lake Yacht Club's Annual Regatta, Don Whelan (Bonita, Calif.) and his crew, Alan Johnson (Seal Beach, Calif.) in their 18-foot Mercury Class racing sailboat were practicing against another boat skippered by Richard Whiteley (Los Alamitos, Calif.) and crewed by Kate Wall (Long Beach, Calif.). Their tune-up exercises ended when the four sailors heard shouts for help from the water in the distance.

At first, locating where the shouts were coming from was confusing. They could see an individual shouting and waving from a small rock island 100 yards off shore. They also saw three people in the water close to the island. Clearly in distress, the swimmers were bobbing in and out of the water.

Whelan immediately changed course and prepared to rescue the swimmers. Whelan, 57, and Johnson, 65, were both wearing flotation devices, and they had a pair of flotation cushions on board as well. On the first rescue pass the boat was going too fast to stop for the swimmers in the 12 knots of wind, but the two cushions and a life jacket were dropped in the water as they passed by.

"As we approached the swimmers, the first decision was how do we get each of them a flotation device," said Whelan. "They all looked tired and struggling to stay afloat. We had two cushions and one of us took our own life jacket off and threw something to each of them."

Whelan circled back immediately, and on the second pass the three swimmers were grabbed as they held on to the leeward side of the boat in the 55 degree water.

"The next decision was how we would circle around and coast up to them and get each of them alongside the boat," explained Whelan. "We went forward a short distance, and tacked around, bore off, then jibed, and approached with the swimmers on the leeward side of the boat."

"As we circled, and approached, we saw that one swimmer did not get to the flotation device so we coasted up to him first," he continued. "As we approached him, his head went below the surface of the water, and we coasted up to him so we could grab his arm. The others were not far away and could get themselves alongside the boat, with the aid of the flotation."

While the swimmers were holding on to the boat, Johnson retrieved one of the cushions, laid it on the deck and lifted the first swimmer's body onto the cushion. The remaining swimmers were more fatigued, so they tipped the boat as much as possible to get the rail closer to the water and

lift the swimmers onto the cushion and into the boat. The cushion served as a slide that quickly and securely facilitated getting the swimmers over the rail and into the cockpit.

After the swimmers were safe and secure, they picked up the remaining swimmer on the island. The swimmers were breathing and conscious, but in need of medical attention. They sailed a mile back to the launch ramp where the paramedics could more easily access the swimmers coming off the boat. After they were evaluated at the paramedic vehicles, two were released, but one was evacuated by helicopter to a hospital in Fresno.

“For me the lesson learned was how vulnerable anyone can be in, or around the water. Always take precaution, know your capabilities, and do not take unnecessary risks,” commented Whelan.

Later in the weekend there was a tearful reunion of swimmers and rescuers at their campsite. The young men had gone camping to celebrate a birthday, when they decided to swim to the island. The cold water and high elevation proved to be exhausting for the swimmers. One turned back, while the others continued. Whelan and Johnson were in the right place at the right time.

Whelan said, “It all happened so quickly. We responded with common sense and instinct.”



US SAILING has awarded Hanson Rescue Medals to two crews who saved three lives in an incident on Huntington Lake near Fresno, Calif. on July 23, 2010.

Dr. Gino Bottino, MD
Chairman, Safety at Sea Committee
By Direction

NOMINATION:

Date 11/29/2010 8:04:25 PM

Date of Incident Friday, July 23, 2010

What was the nature of this Incident? Rescue of 3 swimmers from drowning

What happened? "For 56 years the Mercury Class sailboats have been racing on Huntington Lake in the Sierras of California. On Friday, July 23, 2010 Don Whelan , 57, of Bonita, CA and San Diego Yacht Club and crew Alan Johnson, 65, of Seal Beach, CA launched their 18-foot sailboat to practice for the upcoming racing on Saturday and Sunday. They had sailed up and down the 5-mile-long lake once and were on their way up a second time. As Whelan and Johnson had not sailed together for a year and a half they joined up with another boat owned by Richard Whiteley of Los Alamitos and Alamitos Bay Yacht Club and crew Kate Wall of Long Beach to test their speed when they heard shouts for help. There is a small rock island about 100 yards off shore, but the direction of the shouts was confusing as they also were coming from the shore (Kenneth Ly). From a quarter mile away they could see one person on the rock (Rob Revilla) shouting and waving and soon also spotted three people(Eric Glover, Austin Hua, Tim Deng) in the water close to the island. The swimmers were obviously in trouble as they were thrashing and their heads were bobbing and disappearing out of sight underwater. Remembering back to my lifesaving class, i knew they were in trouble.

Whelan and Johnson were the closer of the two boats and prepared to rescue the swimmers. On the boat were two flotation cushions and the sailors were wearing personal flotation devices (PFD's). On the first rescue pass the boat was going too fast to stop at the swimmers but the cushions and a PFD were dropped as the boat went by. Whelan quickly circled to make a second pass and the three swimmers were grabbed and held close to the leeward side of the boat. When the three were securely holding onto the boat, Johnson retrieved one of the cushions, laid it on the deck and lifted the first swimmer's body onto the cushion. Being slippery nylon fabric on the cushion the swimmer was easily slid across and into the bottom of the boat. The remaining swimmers were more fatigued so Whelan and Johnson would tip the boat as much as possible to get the rail closer to the water then together lift each swimmer onto the cushion and into the boat.

Whitely and Wall stood by to render additional assistance if necessary. As the swimmers were secure, they sailed up to the island to retrieve the one man on the island. They stopped the boat a few feet from the island; he grabbed hold and was assisted aboard. After establishing that the person was in good condition, they sailed back to the shore and dropped him off with the fifth member of the group. Whelan and Johnson were immediately assessing their condition and talking to the swimmers. They were conscious and breathing but probably in need of medical attention. Even though the wooded shore was only a hundred yards away, there was no appropriate place to land the men where rescue personnel would have easy access. During the one mile sail back to the launch ramp their breathing was shallow, and they would slowly respond to questions such as names and where they were staying. Once back at the dock a cell phone from another boat was used to call 911. Paramedics and Fresno County Sheriff Office responded immediately. One swimmer had enough strength and was able to get on to the dock, but the other two remained until the paramedics arrived and administered oxygen. After they were all evaluated at the paramedic vehicles, two were released, but one was evacuated by helicopter to a hospital in Fresno, CA for observation."

Event Name High Sierra Regatta

Sponsoring Yacht Club Huntington Lake Boat Club

Event City Lakeshore

Event State CA

Body of Water Huntington Lake

Day or Night? Day

Air Temperature 70
Water Temperature 55
Wind Speed 12
Wave Height 6"
Name and Home Town (City, State) Eric Glover, Stanton, CA
Name and Home Town (City, State) (17) Austin Hua, Stanton, CA
Name and Home Town (City, State) (21) Tim Deng, Stanton, CA
What position(s) was/were the victim working before they went in? Swimming from shore to offshore rock island
Was a PFD worn by the victim(s)? No
Skipper's Name Don Whelan
Boat Make & Model (39) Mercury Sloop
Crew's Names and function each performed in the rescue: "Alan Johnson, spotted swimmers in water and alerted skipper of location, organized boat for rescue, pulled swimmers on board, assessed swimmers' condition after rescue."
Boat Name (41) bushwacker
Boat Length (42) 18'
Skipper's Name (43) Richard Whiteley
Crew's Names and function each performed in the rescue: (47) Kate Wall- rescued 4th swimmer that had successfully swam to the island
Boat Make & Model (48) Mercury Sloop
Boat Name (49) Karina
Boat Length (50) 18'
What recovery method was used (Quickstop, Reach Method, Figure 8, etc)? Reach method
Was GPS or other electronic MOB function used to track or help locate the victim? No
Was a rescue swimmer put in the water Y/N? No
Did the victim have a strobe light, a light or whistle? No
What color clothes were visible above the water? None- swimsuits only
Was the victim able to help in the recovery? No
How did the victim get hoisted from the water level up onto the deck? Heeled boat over so leeward deck was at water level then grabbed victims under their arms and slid aboard.
Was any injury sustained by the victim? Yes
Was a Lifesling aboard? No
What type (hypothermia included)? hypothermia and exhaustion
Was it used? No
How much time did the victim spend in the water? 10-15 minutes
Did a Mayday call go out? cell phone call when returned to dock
Who responded? Fresno County Fire Paramedics and Sheriff's Dept.
Name Alan Johnson
Do you give permission to have this story published? Yes
Can you provide copies of articles published about this event Y/N? Yes