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NY Times

Trying Very Hard To Die: The Preventable Disease in Commercial Fishing

By [Mario Vittone](#) On January 3, 2014

Yesterday, the New York Times published an outstanding piece of journalism – [A Speck in the Sea](#) by Paul Tough. In it, Tough tells the story of John Aldridge, a [Montauk lobsterman who fell overboard off Long Island](#) this past summer. Aldridge spent 12 hours in the Atlantic using his boots for flotation until a Coast Guard helicopter spotted him and returned him, alive, to shore. Tough’s writing is outstanding, the story is incredible, and I think anyone who works offshore should [read it](#). But what struck me most wasn’t Aldridge’s will to live or the harrowing details of his survival; it wasn’t the incredible search effort to find him, either. It was that Aldridge, like so many commercial fishermen before him, seemed to be trying very hard to die.

I’m beginning to think there is a disease that is caught early in a working fisherman’s life; it’s as if there is something in the scales of fish that wants to pay them back, something that gets under their skin. Once in their blood it affects the brain and makes them more likely to die than any other group of professional mariners. It makes them believe that they are different; that fishing is more dangerous than every other job out there, and nothing can be done about it.

Tough unwittingly stumbles on the disease and expresses it perfectly toward the end of his article. Trying to explain the Montauk fishing community’s still-tearful recollection of Aldridge’s survival he writes “...what seems to go mostly unspoken in their lives is the inescapable risk of their jobs, and the improbable fact that Aldridge hadn’t drowned in the Atlantic somehow underscored that risk for them even more.” Did you catch that? “...**the inescapable risk of their jobs...**” And there you have it – the disease. Most commercial fishermen, or most of the ones I’ve met in the back of a helicopter, believe that. They believe that the dangers of being at sea are greater for them than for anyone else who goes to sea, and that the danger is inescapable. That belief causes them to not even try sometimes, to take risks that most professional mariners successfully avoid.

I am thrilled John Aldridge survived, but if there was ever an example of CFD (Commercial Fishing Disease) in action it was this incident. John Aldridge fell into the Atlantic after a handle broke on a cooler he was attempting to move – he fell backwards and off his boat. Here are some other details from his story:

- At the time of the incident he had been awake for 22 hours.
- He was working alone – in the middle of the night – on the open deck of his lobster boat that was on autopilot.
- The other two members of his crew were asleep.
- He was supposed to wake up his partner for relief and get himself in the rack 4 hours earlier, but didn’t.
- His crew, expecting to be woken up at 11:30 PM, finally awoke with the sunrise.
- And of course, like so many others of his ilk, he was not wearing a PFD.

I’ve never heard of someone trying so hard to fall overboard without being noticed in my entire life. All that was missing was an icy deck. Inescapable danger? Not even close.

Now I hate an armchair quarterback as much as anyone, but I believe I have enough experience to throw a yellow flag on this play and make just a few comments about things that Aldridge and his crew might have done to “escape the risks” – or at least lessen their severity.

**1. Never work alone on the deck of an open boat while 40 miles offshore when the boat is on autopilot.**

Regardless of any incident, someone seeing it happen can make all the difference. When the boat is moving, the chances of catching it are somewhere between zero and less than zero. (I've tried catching a moving boat... wearing fins... I didn't come close.)

**2. If you are going to work alone on the open deck of a boat while 40 miles offshore in the dark, consider wearing a life jacket.** This no-life-jacket habit among commercial fishermen is the most common indicator of CFD. Despite the fact that almost every other professional workboat mariner in the world does arduous offshore work while wearing flotation (even when they are not alone on deck), CFD makes fishermen believe that donning a life jacket will make their work impossible or somehow more dangerous. ("It's something else to snag and pull me overboard!") This is a statement made by many of those afflicted by CFD. If you believe this, then you have it. Seek help.) For more thoughts on commercial fishing's apparent attitude toward life jackets, safety rules, and other generally good ideas, click [here](#).

**3. If you go offshore for a living, consider spending about \$275 on a Personal EPIRB.** These [magical devices](#) have no idea what you do for a living and will make sure that no matter when, where, and in most cases how you fell overboard, someone will immediately know who you are, where you are (exactly), and that you need help. In Aldridge's case, he would have likely been rescued within an hour of falling overboard for want of a button to push. Less than 300 bucks buys about six years' of "HELP!" insurance in the event that you fall off of your wide open lobster boat while working alone at night, with or without a life jacket. Caution: CFD can make you believe that \$275 is too much money. If I was stranded offshore in the water, I'd trade my left leg for one.

**4. Try to sleep more than zero hours every 24.** Sleep makes you think better and operate more safely. Numerous studies over the past decade have shown that staying awake for 22 hours causes impairment equal to a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .08%. Aldridge was essentially drunk without alcohol by the time he pulled on that cooler. A more "sober" mind may have decided to wake someone up to help.

**5. If you work on a boat where one person is awake while the rest of the crew sleeps, then 1. Reconsider that arrangement, and 2. Spend five dollars on an alarm clock.** This will make sure you are awake to prevent other crew members from even trying to work 24 hours without sleep under the false romantic notion that being tough enough not to sleep is admirable.

There is hope out there that CFD is not a real disease, but rather a culture problem within the industry that some are trying to change. [Fred Mattera](#) is a fisherman [on a mission](#) to shift the culture and reel in the cowboys of his industry. The death of a friend's son on a nearby boat affected him so much that he started a movement to make things better. I hope he is successful. I'm sure he is making a difference.

Perhaps Aldridge and his crew will change some things as well. It's hard to imagine that they haven't already. Aldridge apparently knew that what he was doing was a bad idea – but CFD is powerful. From Tough's article: "Looking back, John Aldridge knew it was a stupid move. When you're alone on the deck of a lobster boat in the middle of the night, 40 miles off the tip of Long Island, you don't take chances."

If you think that the dangers of your job are inescapable, then taking chances is all you've got. Perhaps it is time for commercial fishermen to realize that their job is more dangerous than it needs to be, that most of the risk in their work is unnecessary, and perhaps they should stop trying so hard to die out there.