After graduating high school, I enlisted in the United States Navy. I was stationed on the nuclear aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz as a diesel technician. This position required me to know how diesel engines and other machinery work. This understanding propelled me into the coveted role of boat engineer. That position was a part of the ship’s small boat search and rescue team. The position required me to assist in search and rescue operations and lead any damage control efforts needed on the boat, including any mechanical casualties while underway.

One day I was enjoying lunch in my work center. It was like any other day underway. We were approximately 60 miles off the coast of California, conducting flight operations. We were launching and recovering the Navy's F/A-18 fighter jet, and the sound of the jet engines revving for take-off was deafening. Suddenly, the ship’s general announcing system announced, “man, the ready lifeboat.” This was a standard call, one that I knew all too well. Typically, this call is made during flight operations when the duty search and rescue helicopter needs to be refueled. Protocol would have the boat team on standby as long as the helicopters refueled. This call ensured that search and rescue teams were on station if someone needed assistance during flight operations. However, this was no ordinary day. When I arrived on the boat deck, the ship’s Bos’n, who is the senior ranking member of the Deck Department, looked at me and said, “Engineer, are you ready? This is the real deal.” I suddenly felt the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I knew this experience would change my life. After all, the ship's Bos'n, who has been in the Navy since I was born and has conducted dozens of search and rescue operations, had an uneasy look.

The boat deck was a flurry of activity, with security forces arming themselves with their standard-issue M4A1 assault rifles. Medical personnel taking inventory of their first aid kits and a portable de-watering pump loaded on the RHIB (rigid hull inflatable boat). As it turns out, a civilian sailboat nearby had turned on its distress signal. The Coast Guard had responded and tried hailing the sailboat with no response. Since we were the closest vessel, we grounded the squadrons of F/A-18s and turned to respond.

When we arrived on the scene, the boat crew was armed and outfitted with bulletproof vests. After all, we did not know what we were about to find. The boat was lifted from its cradle using a hydraulic crane and pinned to the side of the boat deck. We embarked with adrenaline still running through our veins. The boat was lowered into the Pacific Ocean, and the five of us began approaching the vessel in distress. The feeling of leaving the safety of the ship for an unexpected adventure is a feeling that I doubt I will ever recreate. We were 60 miles off the coast of California, possibly making our way to save someone’s life.

As we made our way down the right side of the ship and past the ship's rear, the civilian sailboat came into view. It looked about twenty-five feet long and out of its element. It was a scene out of a movie. Four helicopters were ordered to stand by and provide backup in case something went wrong, including the fully loaded aircraft carrier with hundreds of curious eyes watching what would happen next. We slowly approached the vessel, the mighty Nimitz behind us loaded with fighter jets and military helicopters circling above. As we approached the sailboat, the security forces drew their weapons. At the same time, the rest of us took cover behind the control console.

We hailed the sailboat's operator as we neared the boat's rear. After a few minutes, an older man emerged from the cabin with an oxygen tank in tow. He was struggling to move from the cabin of his sailboat. He examined the scene himself and appreciated the impressive view of the U.S. Navy. However, he was also very annoyed that we had interrupted his day and rousted him from his midday nap. We yelled and asked him if he needed assistance. He angrily replied, “NO!” We informed him that his emergency distress beacon was on, “I will turn it off!” the man yelled as he retreated to his cabin. According to international maritime law, we had to respect his wishes and return to the ship.

The situation had ended as quickly as it had started. However, this did not discourage me in the least. The older man had become my hero; he told the United States Navy to leave him alone in full view of a fully loaded aircraft carrier, with four helicopters circling above and an armed boat crew on his doorstep. In this brief encounter, he had done something I had only dreamed of as a junior sailor who was not old enough to drink alcohol. However, years after the incident and after living a lifetime’s worth of adventures, the reality of the situation soon began to set in. For any number of reasons, this man, who was struggling, had denied assistance. We needed to respect his wishes and “go with the flow,” even if it was against our best judgment. As I reflect on this moment, with a few more years of experience, the proper theme emerges that one must respect people’s wishes and opinions and always show the utmost respect because one never knows what is happening behind closed doors. This experience was the ultimate “go with the flow” moment that changed my perspective.

After we returned to the ship and disembarked from the RHIB, activity on the boat deck calmed. The Nimitz began to turn into the wind so flight operations could resume. The maneuver brought the sailboat into view one final time before disappearing over the horizon. Even though I do not know the sailboat's fate, it was a turning point that helped expand my worldview. Even all these years later, I hope the old man found whatever he was looking for on the Pacific Ocean.