



Scenes from the Blizzard of 1978: from left, Eugene O'Neill Drive in New London, the empty Gold Star Memorial Bridge, and a car in New London going nowhere fast. DAY FILE PHOTOS

Routine trip went awry at the worst possible time

FROM A1

The Whaler had been stripped down for the winter, with the seating for six removed. The two men stood for the short trip, Greenleaf in a cheap snorkel coat and Elwell in a down coat. Neither wore a life jacket.

As the boat slammed up and down on the waves, dark clouds appeared in the east, three hours earlier than forecast. Greenleaf, who had been sailing alone since age 11, wasn't alarmed. He figured he could easily outrun the storm.

But within minutes, the Whaler was engulfed in 6-foot swells amid winds of 40 to 45 knots — or 46 to 52 mph. Within sight of the spindle, a navigational landmark at the entrance to the Mystic River, the outboard motor quit.

Suddenly the distance between the men and their destination began to grow. Dead in the water, the boat was drifting westward with the wind.

"We pretty much understood we were stuck," Greenleaf said.

Storm shuts down region

After the relentlessly bad weather of January 1978, the last thing southeastern Connecticut needed was a blizzard. The region had just been through its worst winter storm in a decade, suffered several roof collapses after an ice storm, and endured two rounds of flooding.

But once snow started falling Feb. 6, it didn't stop for more than a full day. Sustained hurricane-force winds stacked the snow into huge drifts that left roads impassable. Wherever people found themselves, that's where they were to stay.

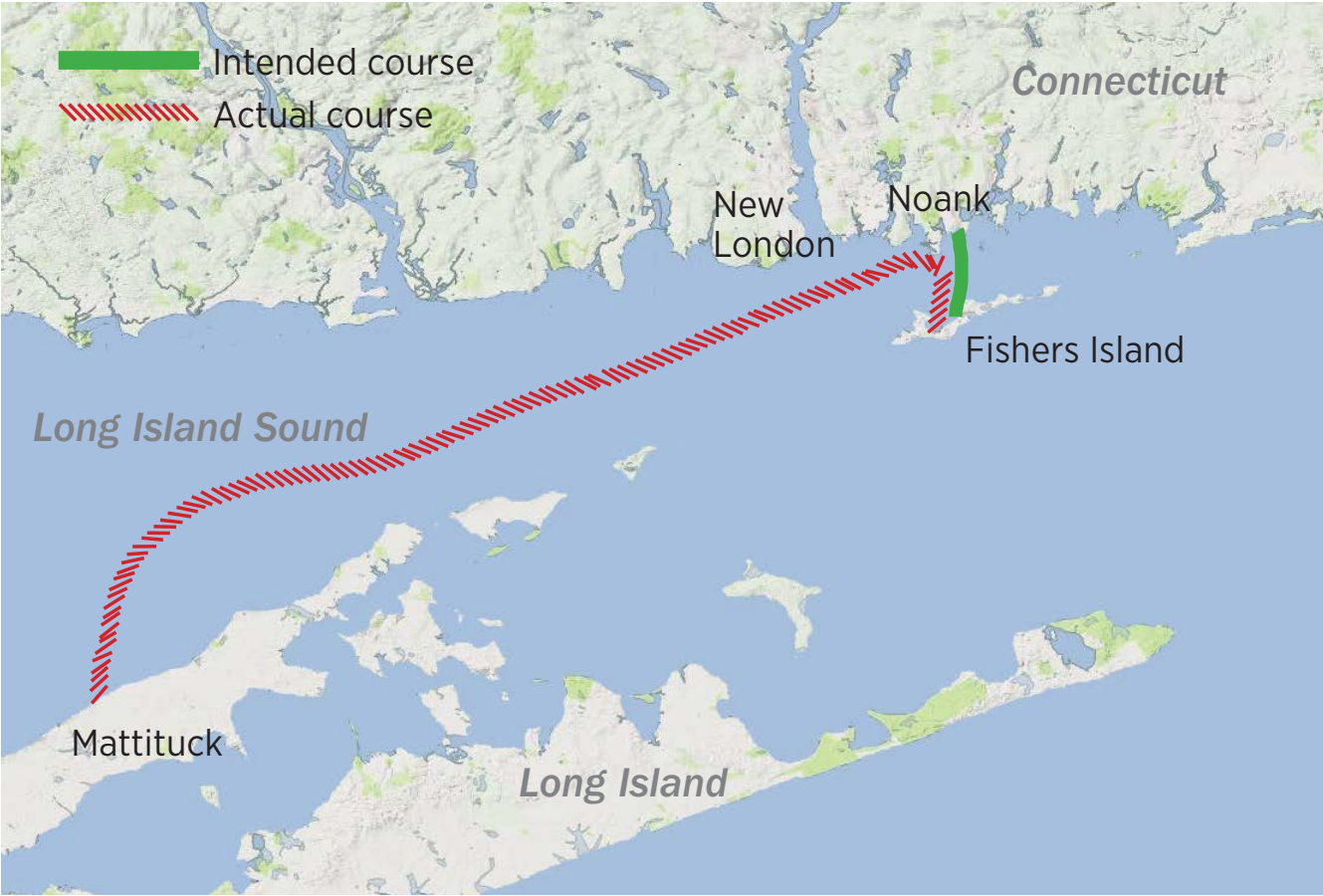
At Mystic Academy, 17 students were stranded and whiled away the night staging their own version of "The Gong Show." The night was less fun for four Mystic Oral School students, who spent seven hours huddled in a taxi before firefighters arrived in a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Thirty Amtrak passengers bunked at Union Station in New London, and as many as 100 truckers holed up at the R&R truck stop in North Stonington. Even if they had wanted to brave snow-choked Interstate 95, they couldn't. Gov. Ella T. Grasso had shut down all highway travel in the state.

Drivers were abandoning their cars on the Gold Star Memorial Bridge or, if they could manage it, turning around and driving off it in the wrong direction.

For all intents and purposes, southeastern Connecticut was at a standstill.

BLOWN OFF COURSE BY THE BLIZZARD OF '78



DATA: © MAPZEN, OPENSTREETMAPS AND OTHERS; USGS; GOOGLE; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU; WES GREENLEAF
SCOTT RITTER/THE DAY

Wes Greenleaf and Lance Elwell had no way to know where they were as they drifted because even in daylight, the visibility was poor in the blizzard. They came ashore just west of Mattituck Inlet on Long Island's North Fork.



TIM MARTIN/THE DAY

Wes Greenleaf stands on the floating docks at Noank Shipyard, with the Morgan Point Light in the background. The shipyard was where he was headed when the motor in his Boston Whaler died. He's wearing the same L.L. Bean boots he had on that day.

A pitch black night at sea

Greenleaf, a mechanic at the marina, took his gloves off to tinker with the motor, and the gloves were quickly soaked by a wave. Whatever happened now, he would face the cold bare-handed.

When the motor wouldn't start, he and Elwell feared the Whaler might be blown over by the wind. So they rigged a sea anchor using rope and a couple of gasoline cans and hoped that would be enough

to hold the stern in the water. There was little else they could do. Both were scared, Greenleaf said, but survival training had taught them not to panic. They knew they were heading west because at one point they heard New London Ledge Light's foghorn. Uneasily, they settled in for the journey.

Unable to stand in the wind, Elwell sat on a gas tank, Greenleaf on the hood of the motor. As night fell and the

shriek of the wind intensified, they could no longer see or hear each other, though they were just a few feet apart. In the pitch black, all they could see were some lighted buoys. Six inches of water and slush washed in and out of the boat as it rocked in the waves. Icicles were forming on the motor. Horizontal icicles.

His hands bare and his clothes soaked, Greenleaf grew so cold he eventually stopped shivering. With his

arms locked under the boat's siderails, he sat numb and motionless, holding his legs straight out to keep the water out of his boots.

He said his thoughts turned to his wife and 2-year-old daughter, and to the dark possibilities that lay ahead.

Region digs out

When the snow finally ended, life in southeastern Connecticut didn't simply resume. The recovery effort was monumental.

In New London, snow-removal crews were joined by private contractors and National Guardsmen, and it still took two days to make on-street parking possible. There was nowhere to put all the snow, so it was dumped in the Thames River — 700 tons' worth.

As the Finast supermarket at the New London Shopping Center reopened two days after the storm, 800 people mobbed the place, wiping out supplies of bread, milk, soda, snack food and beer. Most schools were closed for a full week.

Norwich was so overwhelmed that after three days, many streets still were unplowed. It took 550 Army troops from Fort Hood, Texas, to get the city back on its feet.

Journey's end

As the black of night faded into a gray dawn, the snow stopped but the wind kept

howling. Greenleaf saw that the boat was running parallel to land a mile off, and Elwell recognized it. Somehow they had drifted all the way to Mattituck, on the North Fork of Long Island, 40 long miles from Noank.

Greenleaf turned hard to port — even without the motor, the Whaler could be steered — and soon they were about 250 feet from shore. Elwell jumped or fell out, and for a moment Greenleaf feared the boat would strike his head.

Then Greenleaf fell out and was surprised when the water didn't give him a thermal shock. He said he has no idea how they made it to land. But with their feet barely touching bottom, they got there, the Whaler tumbling after them in the surf.

On a desolate beach, with nothing visible but sand dunes, the two tried to run to regain circulation but they could hardly move. They found a wooden staircase going over the dunes, and at the top, Greenleaf was startled to see huge drifts, his first look at accumulated snow.

There were cottages on the other side, but they were abandoned and in the process of being torn down. Yet the luck that had kept them alive held out, and they found one that was still occupied.

The worst of the ordeal finally behind them, the two soon found themselves struggling out of their frozen clothes as the couple in the house helped them into a lukewarm bath.

Greenleaf called his wife, and a half-hour later, a Long Island acquaintance arrived with another man on snowmobiles. They took Greenleaf and Elwell on a five-mile trip to the nearest hospital, where they were treated for frostbite and exposure.

Two days later, Greenleaf, now fully thawed out, bounded off the Orient Point ferry in New London and into the arms of his wife. His daughter handed him a pair of gloves.

When it was time to return to work at the marina, he borrowed his father's Boston Whaler, which was just like his except for one thing: It had an auxiliary motor.

"Young fella!"

Greenleaf looked up as he was preparing to depart in the Whaler from Groton Long Point. A man was calling to him. Be careful, the stranger urged, because two men had nearly gotten themselves killed on the water during the blizzard.

Without saying who he was, Greenleaf assured the man he knew what he was doing.

"I always carry a spare motor, sir," he said. "I'm all set!"

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