

# Fleetwing Damage Repair Saga

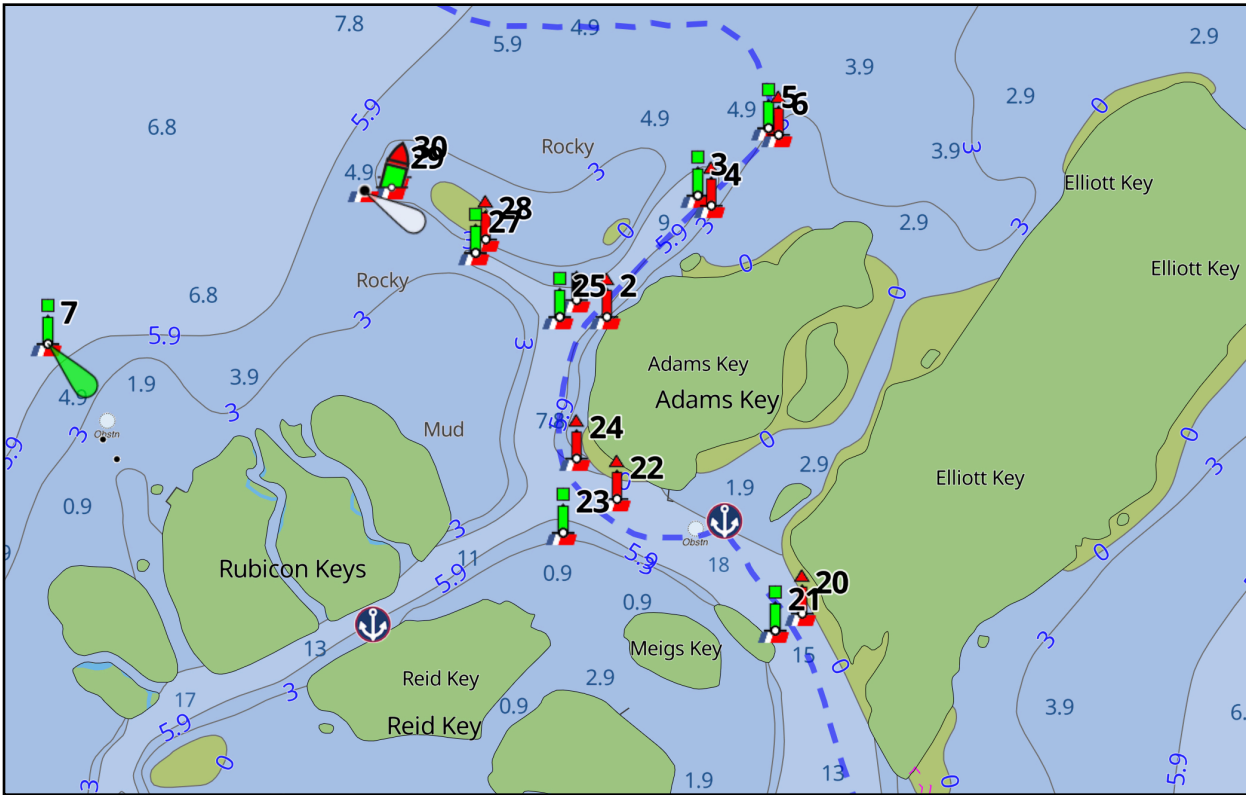


Fig 1: Caesars Creek anchorage by the Ranger station

Little did we know what was ahead of us when we anchored in Caesars Creek (see Fig 1) on a Monday afternoon. We've used the anchorage for over 10 years without an incident but that night was to be different. Sure, there's a lot of current just like all the inlets along the ICW and we've reversed in current without a problem for years. However, it was not to be on that night.

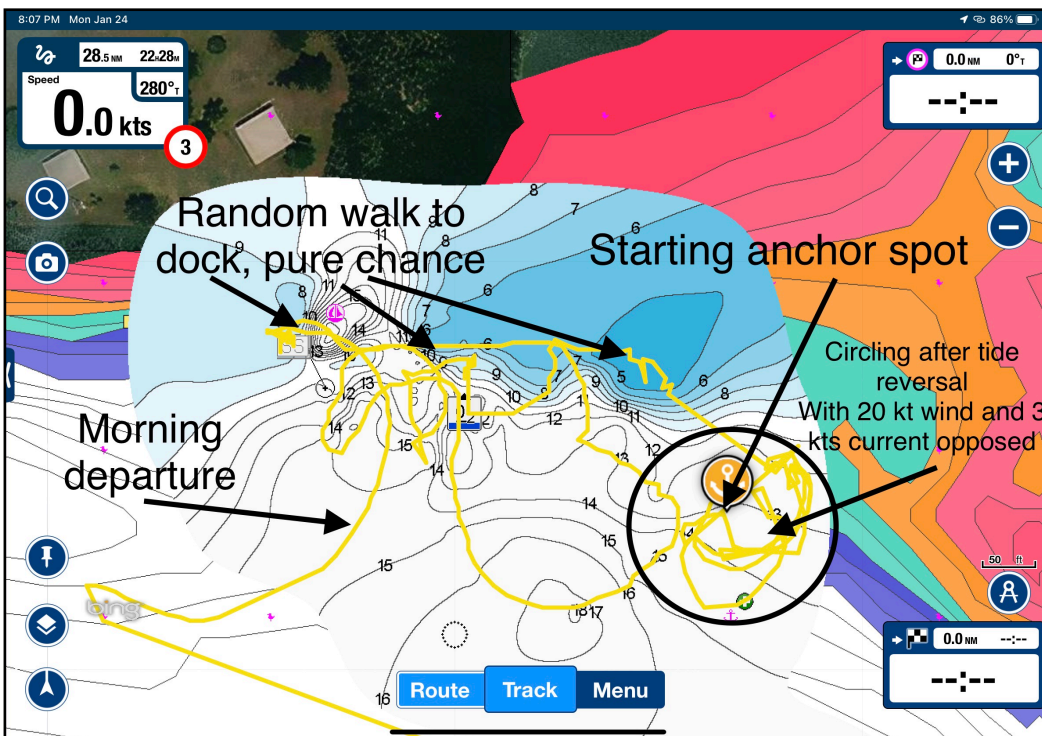


Fig 2: this was very disorienting at 2:00 am in the dark

We anchored well out of the channel to the north side in 15 ft of water and backed the anchor in as always. Our first hint of trouble was later that night when I watched my handheld GPS I keep in the forward cabin showing Fleetwing going in circles around our anchor after the tide changed, resulting in wind against tide. We were caught in a whirlpool, it appeared. Still, with a 70 lb anchor, I thought I was fine - but not so. After an hour and a half of circling and with the wind increasing to 20 kts (against the 3 kts of current), the anchor dragged. I can only imagine what the anchor looked like with 3/8 inch BBB chain dragged around it for 1.5 hours, a chain ball? See Fig 2.

Although the anchor dragged, the rode was still attached to the bow, preventing the bow from being turned to deeper water. To make matters worse, the rode was wrapped around the keel from all the circling of the anchor. Letting out more rode didn't help the issue, it remained wrapped. With no way to turn the bow, I attempted to back away from the shallow water on the side of the channel. I succeeded for a while. It didn't help that it was a moonless night although there was a lone light on the work tug renovating the docks at Adams Key. I have a floodlight on the back of the boat for illumination of the swim platform in taking Hoolie ashore at night but it never occurred to me to turn it on(!) in all the confusion, that light would have helped.

As we continued to fight the current to keep Fleetwing out of shallow water with the bow still tided to the anchor, the rode eventually worked it's way to the propeller and was severed. Suddenly, we were free and the current quickly took us towards the tug by the dock - which we hit with a thud at the swim platform. Miraculously, hitting the tug caused Fleetwing to pivot 180° and closer to land, out of much of the current, between land and the inside of the Adams Key docks (the side towards land).

Once close to land, the 20 kt wind in the opposite direction took over and pushed us against the pilings just as if we had docked there on purpose. We only found that out when we suddenly saw pilings on the port side of Fleetwing - we both yelled - "Throw lines to those piling"! They appeared to us as if by magic. At that point, we were safe and sustained no further damage. We waited until morning, exhausted.



Fig 3: perfect docking at 2:00 am on a moonless night with 3 kts of current and 20 kt winds

When the sun came up, we found we could not have better aligned Fleetwing to those pilings in broad daylight with no current! We had 8 ft of water there. I checked the bilge and found no water intrusion so I mistakenly thought the damage was minor. I was out in the middle of nowhere as far as repair facilities were concerned so I had to move northward to Miami or southward down the Keys. I called the Adams Key ranger office to alert them to my troubles. They wanted to know if I damaged the dock or the steel tug, I said, "err, no". The work crew then arrived at the tug and barge to start work again and the foreman inspected the steel tug confirming no damage.

To move to the bayside would require me waiting for high tide again, due at 3:00 pm. I had enough tide to leave to the ocean side in the morning and since I didn't see water intrusion overnight, I decided to head down the Keys to a haulout there.



Fig 4: Everyone was very helpful and professional - Ann and I great appreciated their efforts while waiting for SeaTwo to arrive

Once underway, the aft end dips into the water on Fleetwing. That now allowed water intrusion into the damaged area that was out of the water while the boat was stationary. I then called SeaTow but he was 45 minutes away. He alerted the Coast Guard. The harbor police and FWC boats came out to watch over me while we waited for SeaTow to arrive with his high volume pump.

The closest haulout was at Ocean Reef but they were not open to taking me in. They said they had no travelift capable of hauling a 42 ft sailboat. Next on the try list was Pilot House but they would not let me come in if I

was taking on water (which I was, although the pumps were taking care of it). Finally, SeaTow made contact with Brett Roach of Bottoms and Props (see Fig 5) at 305-240-0304, I highly recommend his services. He is a 100 ton USCG Master and a PADI Master Scuba Diver. Better yet, he knows everyone in the area - who to depend on to do a good job. He was a lifesaver! He arranged for Key West Harbor Marina to haul us that afternoon.



Fig 5: Brett Roach of Bottoms and Props. He was a lifesaver in getting the repairs done quickly and interfacing to our insurance. He found a marina to haul us that afternoon!  
<http://www.bottomsandprops.com/>

for that, the minimum would have been 5.6 ft at low tide.

SeaTow called ahead to “crash corner” to be sure there was no oncoming traffic and we arrived for haulout at Key Largo Harbor Marina. They expertly hauled Fleetwing and had it blocked and on land in no time. It’s the first time I saw a marina place boat stands every 2 feet on Fleetwing, it was very well supported. SeaTow had a contract with Progressive, my insurance, so they settled between themselves without my involvement. I had a towing contract with SeaTow but this was more than a tow with the water intrusion. At any rate, it didn’t cost me anything.

However, I had to get there first, it was 2 hours away at my 7 kts cruising speed which also resulted in more water coming in. SeaTow put a high power pump on board just in case and I had the bilge pump, my 1/2 inch vinyl hose connected to a shower pump, and the manual pump in the cockpit. At speed, the pumps kept up with the water inflow.

But wait, there’s more! The bilge pump and manual pump took care of the water in the bilge but to reach the bilge, the water had to flow from the aft of the boat forward. In between, was the engine and battery compartment. The engine was high enough, no problem there but the battery compartment (poor design?!) started to fill up, it couldn’t flow out fast enough. The 1/2 vinyl hose connected to the aft shower pump did the trick, I put the hose in the battery compartment and the water level there went down to zero, preventing it shorting out which would have killed my bilge pump - although I still had the manual pump in the cockpit.

Onward I motored with all pumps going. It’s the first time I had used the manual pump mounted in the cockpit. It’s a powerful pump and it cleared the bilge with 4 to 5 pumps every few minutes. The shower pump kept the batteries dry. Now all we had to do was clear the shallows on the approach to Key Largo. The NOAA chart shows a 3 ft MLLW spot and I only had 1 ft of tide. Brett assured me there is plenty of water, more than what’s on the chart. He was right, I saw no less than 7.5 feet of water on the approach, much more once inside. It turns out that the water level has been running almost a foot higher than MLLW for the past month and even corrected



Fig 6: Fleetwing haulout - it's a big boat travelift!

I called Progressive the next morning and an adjuster was assigned later that day. I gave the name to Brett Roach and he interfaced with the adjuster, the yard, and arranged work on the hull (rope marks), and cutlass bearing. Meanwhile, I had to find lodging for us and Hoolie, our dog. Brett found a place but at \$200/night at Marina Del Mar. It's a vacation area in the high season, good luck finding anything cheaper. He drove us to the motel but later I found I had forgotten Ann's meds, she needed them. I called Brett after hours, he picked up (a plus just for that), came over drove back to the marine. Brett negotiated with a stern looking guard with a large pistol at his belt. We were allowed through and I retrieved the meds. Brett took me back to the motel, great service.

The first order of business after getting the estimates was to start the repairs but the adjuster wouldn't be there until later that week at the earliest! I called Progressive and the just assigned adjuster and he agreed to let the yard and Brett start work as long as they documented everything with lots of photos. Brett supplied the photos directly to the adjuster and everyone agreed that work could start, that alone saved a week!

Brett worked directly with the adjuster on estimates and documentation, everything went smoothly. The adjuster I had talked to was in a central office but the on-site adjuster wouldn't be there until Friday (we were hauled Monday) but work continued in the meantime. I met the adjuster in the yard on Friday and Brett was there too to ensure all documentation and estimates were in order. Progress on the fiberglass was hampered somewhat by the unseasonal cold weather over the weekend but all repairs were completed by Monday afternoon.

We thought we were ready for a Tuesday launch but then the travelift operator came down with an attack of hepatitis! Will this never end? He was admitted to the local hospital and there was no one to launch Fleetwing. Luckily, it was only a one day stay and he was back on the job Wednesday. I paid all my bills via a VISA card and Fleetwing was launched. We had a dock at Marina Del Mar and a home finally not in a motel room.

Progressive paid all the bills and the estimates on other losses I had (Spade 140 anchor, 60 ft 3/8 inch BBB chain, etc.). I had several options on getting paid by Progressive but the best one was a refund via my debit card directly into my checking account in less than an hour. I had the money the same afternoon I paid the yard, how's that for service - and it included all the items I had lost but not yet had the chance to buy (anchor, chain, etc.) I had to pay the time in the motel, I did not have "travel interruption insurance", something common with RV insurance but not so common with boat insurance. At \$200/day, it mounted up. I am going to get that rider for sure!



Fig 7: Note bow high in the slings

Okay, story over, right? NOT SO. Motoring to my slip, I noticed water in the bilge. Where did that come from? I pumped it out that night and decided to check it in the morning. I looked again Thursday morning and sure enough, there was more water in the bilge (I had pumped it dry the previous night). I called Brett and said I thought I still had a leak. He checked with the marina and said the earliest available haulout time was Friday at 3:00 pm. Ann and I hit a new low that day but the person who repaired my fiberglass said he wanted to come over to see if the water was coming in at the repair location or somewhere else.

You can imagine our feelings at this time - not again. Leno (spelling?) who did the fiberglass repair arrived and inspected the engine compartment, the stuffing box - all were dry. Moving to the aft section he somehow got his frame into the repair area, not an easy task in such close quarters. He said he didn't see water coming in. What could have happened? The boat bilges were once full of water. It dried out while on land but then the boat was picked up and launched, bow high. Water could have rushed in from all the nooks and crannies to the aft of the boat - and filled up those aft nooks and crannies.

So what to do? He then took my famous 1/2 vinyl hose connected to the aft shower pump and drained all the water collected in every spot he could find, it took about two hours. The flexible hose could fit everywhere with a satisfying sucking sound - out goes the water! The test would be if I found water Friday morning, then indeed there was a leak and they would haul the boat and fix it - under warranty. They had no problem doing that, they just want to be sure it was a real leak.



Fig 8: At Marina Del Mar - Waiting for the next morning to see if water came in

Going to bed that night, I made sure the bilge was dry with a final pump out. I was apprehensive as you might imagine. The next morning I checked and found all areas we had pumps dry the previous day were still dry! A cheer went up that ran through the boat! (Well as much a two people can cheer - it was heartfelt). The water we found was water sloshing around that was left over from the aft damage.

We are now in Key West and today we've haven't done much. I think we'll just chill out for the next week, Ann and I could use some dull days - but at least it's warm with a calm slip, power, and outstanding WiFi (30Mbps) from OnSpotWiFi. It's time to start our winter vacation!

Now comes the best part. What did I do wrong? I think the best solution is not to put yourself in such a situation in the first place, don't anchor when you know there will be 20 kts or greater winds against 3 kts of current. The Ranger there said the current can reach 5 to 6 kts through there. I knew about the 20 kt winds and the direction but I had anchored there before and became complacent. The anchor spot is off to one side, out of the channel and probably has mangrove debris on the bottom, not the best for anchoring.

Once anchored, what could have been done differently? I had a 70 lb anchor and 60 feet of 3/8 inch BBB chain with 60 feet of nylon rode. One could argue that is not enough and that, for example, all chain would have been better, perhaps, it certainly couldn't hurt. I never had such a problem in sand or mud but in a mixed bottom condition, it's a challenge.

Once the anchor started dragging, what then? I could have tied the end of the rode to a float and let the anchor line go with the float whipping around the boat and unwrapping around the keel. In fact, i did that once before 5 years ago. However, it's one of those situations - you've got to be there - to appreciate what was going on. A moonless night, no lights except for the one on the tug, moving to shallows, can't control the boat. Securing a float (fender) to an anchor line under those conditions (untying the anchor line, feeding it through the anchor roller, and then tying the float on - challenging).

The best solution given the difficulty in tying on a float under those conditions could be just to cut the rode and say goodbye to the anchor but save the boat. With no anchor rode pulling on the bow, the boat now had maneuverability.



I'm sure someone would say, get a shallow draft powerboat, no problem then. Oh well, live and learn. I hope you enjoyed our little adventure. Consider all the conditions the next time you anchor. I think I'll have some wine and dinner at Schooner Wharf!

Fig 9: A nice relaxing dinner at Schooner Wharf