

Retired Richmond-area teacher rescued after storm rolls sailboat in near freezing temps near Iceland

- [By BILL LOHMANN Richmond Times-Dispatch](#)
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Three Virginia sailors, including a recently retired teacher from Richmond, were plucked from the cold waters of the North Atlantic on Wednesday after their 40-foot sailboat rolled over in stormy seas 200 miles off the coast of Iceland.

The men were in good condition and still on board the Icelandic Coast Guard research vessel Thursday as it headed to Iceland, said Carol Piersol of Richmond, whose husband, Morrie, 65, was among the rescued.

“They’re OK,” said Carol Piersol, who spoke with her husband from a phone aboard the ship. “There are a lot of things that could have happened: drowning, hypothermia, head injuries when you’re tossed around like that.”

She expressed her gratitude for the Icelandic Coast Guard, the Royal Danish Air Force and the crew of the research vessel Árni Fririksson that rescued the men.

“The crew was unbelievable,” Carol Piersol said in a phone interview. “They were so nice to them and supportive. The crew found state rooms for each of them, washed their clothes and fed them.”

She said her husband and the two other men — boat captain Wes Jones, 74, of Gloucester County and Bobby Forrest of Mathews County — were experienced sailors, “but you can’t predict the weather.”

According to [an article posted on its website](#) by Iceland Review, a Reykjavik magazine, the men sent out a distress signal at 4:30 a.m. local time Wednesday. The ship’s mast had broken, and it had lost power in deep water well off the southwest coast of Iceland.

“When the call was received, the worst was feared, as the yacht’s distress signal was activated manually, indicating that the situation was likely to be very serious,” according to Iceland Review. “The Icelandic Coast Guard’s research vessel Árni Fririksson was 30 nautical miles away at the time and immediately set off for the site.

“In addition to the Árni Fririksson, the Danish Air Force also deployed a patrol plane from Greenland. Isavia, the Icelandic company that operates all airports and air services in Iceland, also sent out a plane equipped with a powerful tracking device. It was this plane that found the yacht at 11:00 a.m.”

Based on her conversation with her husband, Carol Piersol said the boat, a sloop named "Valiant," had been buffeted by winds of 50 mph and rolled over in 20-foot seas, smashing the mast and rigging and dumping the men in the water. The air temperature was about 40 degrees, she said.

"Morrie said he thought he was going to drown," she said.

But the keel remained intact, and the boat eventually righted itself, though it was flooded. The men started bailing and stripping off and wringing out their soaked clothes, then cutting a foam mattress pad in three pieces and wrapping it around their cores in an attempt to stay warm and avoid hypothermia.

They spotted a search plane overhead and were able to contact the crew through an emergency radio in their life raft. The research vessel was closest to the damaged boat and was dispatched to the scene, where it rescued the men about seven hours after the boat rolled over.

The Valiant left the Fishing Bay Yacht Club in Deltaville on July 1. The sailing itinerary included planned stops in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Greenland and ultimately Iceland, but the Greenland port was iced in, requiring the men to undertake a longer-than-planned trip between St. John's, Newfoundland, and Reykjavik.

Carol Piersol said her husband has sailed all his life, and he often has brought boats back from Bermuda and other off-shore locales. "But nothing quite like this," she said.

He retired last month from the Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts and Technology in Petersburg, where he taught theater.

"He figured he was retired and he had plenty of time to do whatever he wanted," she said of his decision to go on the trip.

The men were due to arrive in Iceland aboard the research vessel on Friday, she said.

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