

HAULOUT HELL!

Hey, boaters, It's that time again! Yards are filling up. Special winter rates are gone. It's arrived, it's time for another terrible season of HAULOUT HELL!

We've seen them, struggling against the wind, the rain. The dwindling few boaters who do their own bottoms - boat bottoms, that is. Owners who know they can't put off a haulout any longer and can't, or won't, pay someone to do the work. Boaters who suspect, okay, who know, barnacles are down there. Boaters, who despite the poisonous paint, the awful underboat body contortions, the slow setting epoxies and the inevitable "surprises" that appear every time a boat emerges from the sea, still paint their own bottoms.

I know these types. I'm one of them. I've been out there in March. Lucky to get 3 days a week with no rain. Learned to make drip guides out of masking tape. Asked a yard guy about this little crack near the keel. He grabbed the crack edge and ripped a long strip of fiberglass tape loose. "Gotta take it all off, redo it with epoxy" he said walking away, the hanging tape exposing an ugly, hidden wound in her bottom. Huh? This was a 4 day haulout, a week at the most! And now this!

Not only is bottom work awkward, slow, and expensive, (what's in bottom paint anyway that costs \$200 plus a gallon?), there's the constant ticking of the "layday" charge. As far as the yard boss is concerned, you can stay forever at \$?? per foot per day - tick, tick tick. . . And hey, don't forget your monthly marina slip charge buddy! It's still ticking. . . ! So your \$500 budget just jumped - big time!

Suddenly, a simple little bottom paint isn't anymore. And try as I might over the years, my haulouts have always doubled or tripled the time and money I allotted. Now, the quick haulout can be done. I've seen it. Boat lifted and pressured washed, dropped into a cradle. Owner, family, friends waiting with sandpaper and scrapers, dressed in clean, white Tyvek suits. Sand, sand, scrap, mask off the waterline, a little putty here and there, roll on the paint, then splash, into the water on day two.

In fact, my latest, my optimistically last extended haulout, one that created a new low in boatyard hell, one that set up the nadir, the mother of all haulout hells, happened because I had a sure-fire plan that would curtail, or at least greatly reduce future haulouts. One of my business clients sells a

bottom coating called CopperPoxy, an intelligent mixture of epoxy barrier coat and antifouling copper flakes. I knew the product was effective and that it can remain effective for 10 years or more (without repainting!). Furthermore, you can scrub the slime off in the water (it doesn't slough off), something now banned for most bottom paint by the Washington Department of Ecology. Ten Years - good for ten years! I'll be dead before I ever have to do the bottom again! This is the stuff! I'll do it.



Now, the small print tells you that CopperPoxy cannot be applied over any other bottom coating. Got to get down to the gel coat or glass. My boat is 36 years old, so figure a bottom painting every other year; so say maybe 18 coats on the old dear. Okay, it will be a bitch to remove that much paint (it is such hard stuff!), but it will be worth it. This will be the LAST TIME! And

furthermore, I will fair out the bottom and keel and she will be so much faster!

Now besides hauling in the storms of March, I've twice chosen the dry month of August. Didn't rain, but nearly kilt me of sunstroke. Lord it was hot, and sweaty! How about a full Tyvek suit (they don't

breath you know) with a full face mask, under a protective hat with ear muffs on? Talk about Hell - and you're appropriately covered in red antifouling paint. And then, the new painting! - it's so hot and dry out that paint wouldn't spread. Ever tried to flow on Interlux Brightside Polyurethane in the heat? Never again in August.



This time, I would haul out in September, really one of the finest months in the Northwest - dry, modest temperatures, yard won't be crowded, the perfect time. And so it proved to be.

Day after glorious day of blue skies with perfect temperatures. I watched my fellow boaters glide by every day, down the ship canal to the sea, out for that most rare of Northwest voyages, a warm shirt-sleeve (maybe even shorts!) day on the water. A whole month of glorious boating weather, during which I dreaded even opening my eyes in the morning, knowing what lay ahead. A dread hugely fueled by the twin towers attack in New York. Was I safe down at the yard?

What was down there was a boat with bottom paint made of iron! I slathered on quart after quart, then gallon after gallon of environmentally friendly paint stripper. It hardly dented the paint. I could scrap - with a razor sharp scraper - maybe one, two layers per stripper coating. That was bad. What was even worse was the physical effort required. Almost all the work required above-the-head scraping. So I'm pushing up and scraping with all my might to get these little plops of stripper softened paint all over. And I mean all over - on feet, on Tyvek suit, on head and goggles. And of course it's building up on the plastic tarp that now goes under all boat haulouts, so when I stepped into the boat or into my car, guess what I brought along. I collected most that scraped paint and I kept it in a plastic sack. When it was all over, that sack weighed at least 150 lbs!

So I'm scraping and scraping, a layer at a time. Days go by. No one blows up the Space Needle. The weather remains perfect. Other boatyard workers come by to talk (this I come to understand is an important method of getting the day to pass). I'm still a long way from the gel coat. I've purchased the entire stock of environmentally polite stripper from my source. I'm disgusted with the process and the stripper. I'm directed to a store that sells auto body repair materials. They have real stripper. Don't read the small print.

But it does the job. Now I get through maybe 3-4 layers per scraping. I can see the bottom. Two weeks have passed. I work down at the yard from 9:00 to 6:00, 7 days a week. The weather remains perfect. Everyone is headed down the ship canal. I'm stuck here on the other, strangely dark end of a boater's world.



36 years of bottom paint

ready to spray the Copperpoxy



I'm surrounded by an odd mix of vessels. A big fish boat comes in for zincing and antifouling. The owner does his own work. He and another fisherman talk a lot about zincs. He tells me later that zinc volume is critical on fish boats - not just to counteract electrolysis, but to "neutralize" the boat from the fish. They don't like boats with the wrong zinc mix. Who would? Further, the right zinc mix changes from location to location, fishery to fishery. He installs zincs, paints the bottom and is gone. The next bay is the kind of project yard owners love. A big wood cruiser with most of the bottom planking stripped off. The ribs are mostly rot. The entire transom is rot. You can look right through the boat. No one works on it during the 5 weeks I'm there. It's lost.

Next is a graceful wood sailboat. A classic racer-cruiser of the 40s or 50s. It's draped in blue plastic. A newly repainted motor sits nearby, apparently awaiting installation. A young couple comes down late on weekends. They peel back the blue plastic and do a lot of looking. She kinda sands on the mast that lies on sawhorses. He digs at, then yanks, great sections of rotted cabin off. Later, he peels some rotten planks off the bottom just above the keel. Black goo runs out. Some weekends they don't come at all. Her sanding the cracked mast and his ripping off rot doesn't make much sense - the tip of the iceberg. It's hopeless.

On the other hand, next door, is a wonderful classic motor yacht of the 1920s. It's being completely refurbished by professional shipwrights. They arrive early and work steadily. They have an extensive mobile shop at the site - bandsaw, steamer box, table saw, etc. They completely replank the hull, fabricate a new wood bow section, caulk seams (actually, they hire Mexican men to do that) spread red lead around, shape and fit new cap rails, paint, varnish, even shine the brass. The owner comes around frequently. He stands and talks with the foreman. He smiles a lot. He knows he's getting a lot for his lots of money. The boat is a beauty. The shipwrights must love the project. It looks like wooden boat school.

At the far corner is a unique project. A family lives in it. The kid squirrels around on his little bike. The father works on the boat every afternoon. They've been there for weeks. I never see the wife. Okay, it's hardly a boat and certainly not a yacht. The father is epoxying plywood sheathing to a 30' Army landing barge, the kind where the front door flopped down. The family has lived aboard for years. Now they are kind of enjoying living on the hard. Lots of people to talk with. The father shows me some epoxy tricks and how to save \$. "You go to McDonalds and buy a small coffee. While you're putting in half and half, you pocket a bunch of the plastic knives. You drink the coffee and get a free refill. Come back to the boat and use the knives to mix and spread epoxy. They work great!"

Nearby is a late 1940s motor cruiser. While I love the lines of 1940s-50s Chris Crafts, this brand is rather ugly to my eye. The owner lives in California and is up here staying aboard while work gets done. He's sub contracting most of the labor. There's an odd guy doing the caulking. He sings and talks real loud as he swings his caulker's mallet. He likes real loud rock and roll on the radio. He sings along or talks (shouts!). (Thump) (Thump) "Oh, god I don't remember whether (Thump) I forgot to take my pills this morning, or (Thump) whether I took them twice!" "But, I'm here to tell you, I'm feeling (Thump) real strange today." (Thump) (Thump) "I don't believe (Thump) I can keep this up (Thump) much longer." And he didn't, leaving for a lunch that never ended.

He was one of several men who seem to float in and out of the yard. Some worked - for a while - on

this boat or that, many just talked with others. They arrived and left in cars that were not new, cars that looked as though they doubled as rolling homes. A couple of these guys lived on a rotting, listing motor yacht scrunched in between some long-moored commercial vessels. A long, long extension cord snaked from the yard down to their "yacht." Four o'clock was a favorite yard time and someone almost always showed up with a six pack, which effectively ended any work and accelerated the talking.

Since I was close by the California 40s yacht guy, I heard and watched a lot. He was pouring a fortune into it; new bottom planking - with full caulking of course - new shafts, props, new flybridge, hand-painted name on the transom, mysterious engine work, all of which caused him to vacillate between excited bragging and anxious moaning.



It is, of course, our mysterious duty to pour money into boats, but I couldn't help but think, "If you're going to spend big bucks, at least spend it on a boat of beauty." But then, he probably thought I was nuts for crawling around under my little boat scraping and scraping and scraping. So we were all a little mad down there in Hell.

Most of the nasty yard work was done by Mexican men. They worked hard, usually doing the really dirty work like gel coat grinding, bottom sanding, caulking and the like. They were eager to work and didn't participate in the on-going B.S. sessions. Haulouts would take a lot longer if they weren't around.

There were, of course, fiberglass boats as well as wood boats at the yard. A newish boat ("I've only owned it a year") was there with bottom blisters. A snappily dressed lawyer owned it and came down every afternoon to check the progress. There wasn't any. Day after day went by until the specialist with his little chipper machine showed up. He was quick. He had the gel coat all off in a couple of hours. But then the boat had to "dry" for "a while" before being sprayed with CopperPoxy which would be the new gel coat and antifouling. Then the boat needed tenting and further grinding and the rain came and the grinding wasn't right and days went by - weeks. The lawyer wasn't that pleased. He took closeup photos of the work. Hummm, what is he thinking?

Eventually, I got all the paint off my bottom only to find that surfaces needed fairing and areas needed glassing. So, day one - saturate the area with epoxy. Day 2 - sand and apply epoxy, glass and fairing compound. Day 3 - sand and fair. Day 4 - new layer of materials applied. Day 5 - final sanding. Only, oops, not so fast, here's a problem area I overlooked, back to day1 and so on and so on. Then there was the keel. Since I had scraped it down to the metal primer coat, it began to break out in accelerated rusting. As I ground down the rust spot it spread and spread until I decided to stop. Filled the now



just sprayed

huge sections with fairing epoxy only to come back the next day and find new rust sections breaking out. My fellow yard persons smirkingly pointed out that I needed to take it down to bare iron and put on solution X, then solution Z, then prime it with . . . , and on and on. I couldn't face it. I returned to the philosophy of what you can't see can't hurt you (much) and only dealt with the worst outbreaks.

Just as I approached the day when the CopperPoxy guys were scheduled to spray the bottom, the weather changed. The rain fell. The yard became a series of huge puddles and lakes. The already overloaded electrical system began to spark and short with bright flashes. Walking over to the circuit breaker, standing in water, looking at the rain running into the box and trying to figure which switch to touch became an existential exercise. "If I touch this, I could be electrocuted. I will zap every man, drunk and boat in this yard." Or, "I can flip it and power will be restored and all will be normal." "Who knows? Is this end of life, the end of sanity as we know it, or just another frustrating, expensive day?" Fortunately, it was the later.

The weather and the pending spray painting necessitated tenting the boat in plastic. I did this just as a strong wind began to build. Yards and yards of plastic make powerful sails. Tenting turned into building as I scrounged the yard for 2/4s to lash to the boat to keep the plastic off the expensive paint. But it got done, the rain eased, the tent stood and the spray crew actually arrived. They mixed the CopperPoxy and sprayed the bottom in just 20 minutes. Then they did the lawyer's boat in even less time. Four weeks of preparation came down to 20 minutes. I felt relieved and deflated, but the end was in sight.

The next day I inspected the spray job only find a few missed or thin spots. Okay, we had to get the areas under the support pads later anyway, so I'll just move these pads, . . . Oh Lord!, The Copperpoxy wasn't as set up as I thought and now I've got even more "touch-up" spots. The yard days began to stretch out once again.

By this time I was a bit nuts. Nearing the end of week five, I had missed two races I wanted to do, had spent and spent, had terrible aches in my neck and arms and I was beginning to admit the madness of the whole process. But given enough time - tick, tick, tick - everything can be fixed. Finally the CopperPoxy covered everything, finally the boot stripe was repainted, finally the bottom had been sanded (CopperPoxy sprays out with a sandpaper-like finish - the copper flakes on edge - which is fine for power vessels and cruising sailors, but would-be racers like me need to sand it smooth). I rolled on a coating of SeaSlide, a hydrophilic overcoating that makes submerged things very slippery, took off my Tyvek suit for the last time and trudged to the yard office, checkbook in hand. The bill was high, of course, but I was so relieved to be done, I didn't really care.

Finally, splash down day, and after a long wait for the Argosy to go up and down the locks (oh, how I hate the Argosy!), the boat was back in the salt. Was it worth it? Well, like childbirth, we tend to forget the pain and rejoice in the product. The boat does seem faster, we've been doing better in races and after almost 4 months of being in saltwater, I see no sign of slime or algae coating the bottom. So, I'm happy, and rather smug when I drive by the yards observing the blue tarps flapping in the breeze, the space-men grinding and sanding, the anxious owners looking and wringing their hands. No more of that for me!

Ya, sure, ya betcha!



waiting for the travelift or something like it!