



BY MICHAEL PETERS

SIGHTLINES

Boatyard Poison

A CAUTIONARY TALE FOR ALL YOU WEEKEND WARRIORS OUT THERE.

If this column is a bit cloudier than usual, please forgive me. I recently poisoned myself while working on my boat and I am still suffering some side effects. This was not the first time I have suffered bodily injury from my boating addiction, only my latest.

In the winter of 1971 while working alone as a caretaker on Catalina Island, I was leaning over the side of a boat drilling a hole with an old cast-aluminum ½-inch drill and caught my hair in the drill motor. Within a split second it wrapped my hair up inside and knocked me hard in the head. I walked up the hill to my cabin with the drill mounted on my forehead and, unable to see myself in the mirror, wacked at the space between my head and the drill with a knife, leaving a bald patch on my right temple for months.

I also once outfitted a Milwaukee grinder with a 10-inch carbide saw blade to make an inside cut on a bulwark. The thing never actually hit me, but it got away from me a few times! Then while shaping a mahogany rudder I stopped a Skil power planer dead against my stomach with the shirt I was wearing wrapped up in its motor, and I still bear a crescent-shaped scar from sticking my hand in a bandsaw blade back in the mid '70s. At least I wasn't one of those stoned-out surfers who ended up with catalyzed resin in his hair while shaping a surfboard to "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida." I was totally straight when I did this stuff.

But no matter how hard I seemed to be trying to cut off body parts, what really got me was paint. In the early '70s I was introduced to linear polyurethanes, known as LPs. We know them better today by names like Awlgrip, Interthane, or Imron. Back then, they were mostly considered aviation paints and they were slowly making their way into the marine field. We didn't know much about them other than that they far surpassed the old marine enamels in durability and gloss. They were also toxic as hell, due to a little-known chemical compound called isocyanate. It turns out that this is my Kryptonite, the very smell of it can kill me.



Come on, all you do-it-yourselfers! Surely somebody out there's goofed up royally while flailing away on a boaty project? Drop Michael a line at inbox@pmymag.com

In 1976 I painted my 19-foot Maelstrom with Black Z-Spar LP, using a standard vapor respirator. What followed was lung congestion so severe I had to sleep in a seated position for three weeks. If I lay flat, I felt like I would die from suffocation. Because the effects of the paint were not yet known, doctors were no help. It would be a couple of years before I would find out that painters were dying from this paint. Half the guys had no reaction to the stuff, the other half were like me. I am deathly allergic to isocyanate.

If you think you have never heard of this stuff, remember the Bhopal, India disaster of 1984? Up to 16,000 people died from a gas leak at a Union Carbide factory. The gas was methyl isocyanate. I am no chemist, but that sounds awfully close to isocyanate to me, and besides, anything with cyanide in the middle of its name has got to be bad shit.

I have known I should never be near this stuff for almost 40 years now. I have cancelled project inspections that were going to coincide with painting for years.

But over the holidays, the restoration of my new 20-foot Bertram Sportsman was underway, and the hull was being painted. I stayed away during the actual painting. But the next day, a full 24 hours after the paint had dried, I went in to take a peek.

I ended up in the hospital with cluster headaches—sharp jabs against the side of my head that occurred at 30-second intervals and produced pain I described to the doctors as a 9 on a scale of 10. I reserve 10 for dying by fire! I am allergic to isocyanates and should never have gone near the stuff. The chemical absorption is cumulative and never leaves your body. Even after 40 years.

So to all you weekend warriors, if you plan to use an LP, be careful. You don't want to find out the hard way that it's your Kryptonite too. I did end up with a beautiful Flag Blue paint job with an 18-inch-deep gloss. As beautiful as it is, though, I am just not sure I'm ready to say, "It's to die for." □