

2 SURVIVE 8 HOURS IN LAKE ORDEAL TESTED COUPLE'S WILL TO SURVIVE

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Three times Char Tallman, wearing a twisted and half-fastened life jacket, let go of the nearly submerged boat and started to float away in the dark night.

"I'm done," she told her fiance, Tom Fox. He was holding on to the bow of the 14-foot speedboat and a rope, which was tied to the boat and loosely wrapped around Tallman.

"Come on, buddy. They're going to come and find us. We're going to see a helicopter," the Avon man said, pulling her toward him.

They saw the Coast Guard helicopter before they heard it. Just after 3 a.m. yesterday, after nearly eight hours in the 66-degree water, the chopper plucked them out of Lake Erie, just southeast of Kelleys Island.

The pilot said that the bow's red and green lights, turned on right before the storm hit, are what saved the couple. The boat, which is primarily black, was vertical in the water. Only its bow was afloat.

"If those lights hadn't been on I honestly don't think we would have found them until morning. And then would we have had a body recovery?" said Lt. Junior Grade Karl Dornburg from Detroit.

Dornburg, who was dispatched after concerned relatives reported the couple missing, emphasized repeatedly how amazed he was that the battery, submerged in water, continued to keep the lights on. He was also surprised that the two boaters were able to survive in the water as long as they did.

"The first and last hours were the worst," the North Ridgeville woman said yesterday, lying in bed at Firelands Community Hospital, constantly gazing at Fox, who was holding her blistered hand.

The couple, both 34, suffered from hypothermia. Tallman was badly

bruised and Fox had a slight fracture. They hoped to go home this weekend.

The couple said it was a combination of prayer and each other that kept them afloat. "I don't know where I got the strength," said Fox, a mechanic with the Avon School District.

Outwardly he acted confident, he said, but inwardly he was preparing for death, wondering how it would feel to fill with water and sink. He figured if the lightning didn't kill them, the cold water would.

"It was so cold. My legs were knotting up. I had fractured my spine. We were starting to doze off," Fox said.

They recited aloud Our Fathers, Hail Marys and any prayer they could remember. They dozed. Fox tried to make jokes about wanting a glass of water, but Tallman couldn't laugh.

"I kept waiting for the sun to come up," said Tallman, who works at a pizza parlor and delivers Plain Dealer newspapers.

The sun had not set when they pulled away from Kelleys Island about 7:30 p.m. Thursday. They had motored there from Lorain for the day, their maiden voyage to the islands.

The sky was hazy when they left Kelleys Island, and the water was calm. "The next thing I saw was the water rippling. It almost looked like rain was hitting it, but it wasn't. Then two seconds later the waves were seven feet," Fox said.

The boat went vertical, giving the couple time to grab one life jacket and an air horn. The flares slipped out of Fox's hands, another life jacket floated away. They had no radio.

After they climbed onto the bow, Fox wrapped the bow line around Tallman, loosely in case the boat sunk, and held the rope in his hands.

Then the storm passed and the sun came out. "Tom said, 'Look at the beautiful rainbow. That's God's covenant with us,' she said.

Stars came out, but the swells and lightning persisted. During the

night a freighter and a pleasure boat passed by, but the couple's air horn and screams were drowned out.

Occasionally Fox would maneuver up to the lights and look at his watch. The last time he checked it was 2:30 a.m., just about the time Dornburg's four-man crew got the call that a boat between Lorain and Kelleys Island was overdue.

Dornburg's crew fueled up their helicopter at Burke Lakefront Airport, took off for Lorain and then flew northwest, 300 feet above the lake. As they shone a searchlight, nicknamed "night sun," a crewman looked through night-vision binoculars.

At 3:12 a.m. Dornburg saw a red light, which he thought was a marked buoy. Then it disappeared and when it was sighted again it was green.

The helicopter descended to 100 feet and a rescue swimmer was lowered in a sling.

"They were waving frantically," said Dornburg.

The swimmer, wearing a flotation jacket, wet suit, snorkel and flippers, calmed the couple and handed his life jacket to Fox. "[Fox] was in worse shape than her, but he insisted she go first," Dornburg said.

The couple finally made their way onboard the helicopter, but Dornburg was worried that the fuel was getting low. He was ready to throw out a raft for the swimmer and come back for him later when the swimmer scrambled on board.

"I walked over to [Tallman] and she said to me, 'I didn't expect to see you guys so soon,' Dornburg said.