



Straight-Up Bravery

THE COAST GUARD BESTOWS ONE OF ITS RAREST AWARDS ON AN OREGON MAN WHO SAVED A COMMERCIAL CREW

As he tells the story today, Curtis Green, 43, figures he has about 90 percent of the strength back in his right hand, even with the scars. But a year ago, as he sat in a hospital with one side of that hand looking like it had been raked across a cheese grater, a gaping hole where his knuckle had split open, and the whole end of his pinkie hanging off, he was genuinely stunned that he—or any of the other men—was even alive. That was December 26, 2019, the day on which a series of events would earn Green the U.S. Coast Guard Distinguished Public Service Medal, which he received in November 2020.

The lives Green saved were of men he had known if not personally, then profoundly since he was a boy growing up near the Charleston Marina Complex in Charleston, Oregon. These men were hardscrabble members of one of the state's biggest commercial fishing fleets, which docked, stocked and fueled there. Green's stepfather worked at the ice plant, which keeps

the catch cold. His birth father worked in the fishery. His grandparents owned the fuel dock. When they died, his mother took it over, and today, he's about to buy Russell's Marine Fuel & Supply from her. His whole life, he has looked out from that fuel dock, seen the birds circling above, talked to the men on their trawlers, and inhaled the stench of dungeness crab, salmon, halibut and cod. "It's the smell of money," Green says.

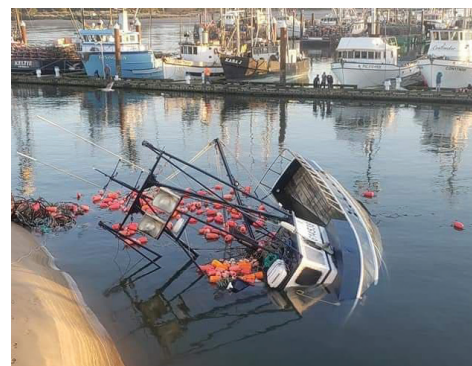
At the end of 2019, when Green looked out from the fuel dock, he also saw, all too often, boats stuck in the channel. The dredge had broken, creating a shoaling hazard that Green felt needed some kind of marker. That's why, around 3 o'clock on the afternoon of December 26, he was on the dock shooting a video of the *Darean Rose* after she found the bottom. All 40 feet of her was loaded down with a mountain of crab pots as her skipper tried to shimmy her loose, a scene Green wanted the authorities to see so they would install a warning to other mariners.

On board the *Darean Rose* were the owner, a 50- or 60-year-old father who served as captain; his son and a deckhand, both in their late 20s or early 30s; and a fourth man who was a half dozen years or so out of high school. As the father tried to break the *Darean Rose* free, using the throttles to push her fore and aft, she tipped over the edge of the shoal, with her starboard side leading the way down.

The youngster, who fast found himself standing upright on the port side of the hull, jumped and swam for shore. The son and deckhand, Green says, went inside the cabin to ask the father what to do.

None of them realized the boat's engine room was already flooding from a torn-off keel chock, Green says. They also didn't think, in that moment, about the single line that had been holding open the door to the cabin. That door had been kept open to create extra space for more crab pots to be stacked on deck—an important consideration, what with each pot worth about \$5,000 to \$6,000 per haul. But those pots, even when empty, are heavy. And as the *Darean Rose* tipped and the towers of pots tumbled, one of them snapped the line.

Top: It was a calm afternoon in Oregon when a commercial boat like this one capsized, trapping its crew in the cabin.



The door slammed behind the boys, Green says, and pots jammed it from the outside.

"All the water that was in the engine room swooshed forward," Green says. From where he stood on the dock, he could see through the boat's windshield as the water rushed into the cabin. The three men were standing not on the *Darean Rose's* sole, but on her starboard hull side, when it hit them. "I was standing maybe 40 to 50 feet out, but I could see the whites of their eyes," he says.

It's rare for a person to recognize an emergency happening in real time, says Lt. Justin Long of U.S. Coast Guard Sector North Bend in Oregon, who organized the award ceremony for Green. It's even rarer for that person to have the ability to respond. What happened next, Long says, can only be described as "straight-up bravery."

Green shouted for someone to call 911, and for his assistant to toss him a hammer. The water between him and the boat was 30 feet deep. He leapt in, wearing jeans and a hoodie, and swam as fast as he could.

The Coast Guard station is right next to the marina complex. First responders would be on the scene in less than six minutes. But

Green didn't know that. And the three men didn't have six minutes' worth of air inside that cabin. Plus, the clock was already ticking toward hypothermia, Long says. The waters in this part of Oregon, in the Coos Bay region, are 40 or 50 degrees. It gives a person 20 to 30 minutes of "useful consciousness" before the body shuts down.

Green made it to the windshield. The only tool the three men had in hand, as they tried to break free, was a Swiss Army-style knife. The son was bashing at the glass with it, leaving a trail of blood in the water. Green would see another leg or hand come into view as the other two men used their limbs as battering rams.

From the outside, Green pounded at the windshield with his hammer. But the *Darean Rose* was a solid boat, and her windshield was built for rogue waves, strong enough to sustain a force of 250 pounds per square inch. While heavyweight boxers can land blows of 1,200 to 1,700 psi, the average person's punching power is around 150.

"Use the claw! Use the claw!" the son yelled from inside, the water up to his neck, urging Green to spin the hammer around.

That didn't work either. So, Green climbed atop the boat's port side—the part still touching air—and swung his hammer at a side window. It was built of the same storm-proof glass.

"I'm looking down, and they're completely underwater," Green says. The deckhand had red hair, which Green saw come up, then go down. "Then I saw a body that was vertical but went flat. That was the dad. He told me later that he'd said goodbye to his maker and in his head, told his wife that he loved her. He was out, but not gone yet."

That's when Green realized his foot was stuck. He's not sure on what, or how, but debris had ensnared him. He was now tethered to the sinking boat. He felt water rise over his foot, his ankle, his knee, his thigh.

"I looked at them one last time and started crying. There was nothing more I could do with my hammer," Green says. "I started thinking about my wife. I was yelling, 'I'm

Clockwise left to right: Green and Duner; the Darean Rose, tipped over in the channel; Green used his right fist to smash the cabin window so the trapped crew could escape.

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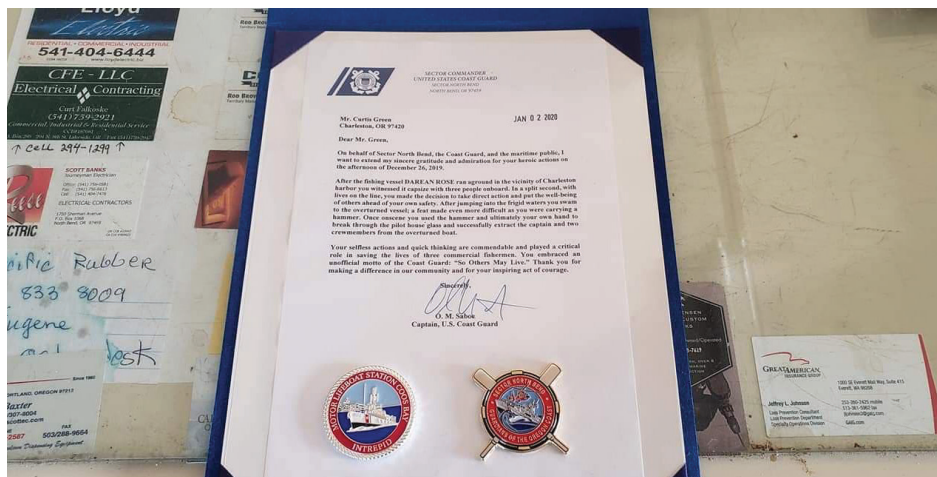


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FOCUS



sorry! I can't get you out!"

Gravity was merciless. The *Darean Rose* shifted and sank deeper. Green could hear glass smashing inside. The boat groaned. "They were on their very last breath," he says. "I was watching the bubbles come out of their mouths as they were going deeper and deeper in this cabin that was full of water."

That's when Green noticed the starboard downrigger, and on its end, a big, lead ball. He figured it weighed 30 or 40 pounds. He put down his hammer, "picked it up with all my might, with my leg still trapped, and I threw it down as hard as I could onto that window."

Boomp. It just bounced back off. "My arms felt like they were coming out of their sockets, but that thing was still within my reach, and now my ass was wet. I'm in serious trouble. I had to get my foot undone and get off that boat."

He gave it one last try.

"I hit it again, and there was a crack," he says. "And then the boat shifted again. I looked over to grab my hammer, but it slid right off the bow and into the water. Now, I've got a half-broken window, no hammer, my foot is still caught and the water is coming up my back."

The only thing he had left was his fist. So, he punched the crack in the window. His fist made a hole. And despite all the men being far larger than that hole, Green somehow was able to reach into the cabin and pull all three of them out—as his foot, in ways he doesn't understand, broke free. "You tell me how they got through there," he says, still incredulous a year later. "We don't know. Neither does the Coast Guard."

As the men reached the surface, they

gulped for air. "The water emptied out of their mouths," Green says. "Then they come back. They open their eyes."

The four of them sat atop the boat in silence, arms folded and shivering. The sun was shining. The water was flat calm all around them. "We just put our heads down and cried together," he says. "Four grown-ass men on the side of that boat, we just all started crying."

And then, Green squinted and said, "Is that my dog?" Duner, his yellow Labrador Retriever, had jumped off the fuel dock and swum out to help. The dog, along with the four men, boarded the Coast Guard boat when it arrived a minute or two later.

That night, Green received a Facebook message from the deckhand's wife. They have a kindergartener. "She said, My husband is home tonight reading a story to my little girl like he does every night when he's not out fishing," Green recalls. "That's because of you."

The next day, after the *Darean Rose* was hauled to nearby Giddings Boatworks, Green went to look at that window. He couldn't understand how the men had gotten through it. And he wasn't alone. "All these people started coming out of nowhere, all the families. They wanted to see this boat and to shake my hand." Then, the kindergartner approached. Green says she wrapped her arms and legs around his leg, "looked up at me with tears in her eyes and said, 'I love my daddy.' That is when I knew how small we all are."

Top: The official notification from the USCG that Green was the recipient of the Distinguished Public Service Medal