The Resurrection of Ensign 212

I love Dean and Kay Snider’s description of the Elder Ensigns. That is the only kind that I have ever known. In Maine at The Buck’s Harbor Yacht Club one summer, a member brought in an Ensign in the early 60’s. My brother, Rob Carter, took one look at it and said that is the boat we need here to replace the aging gaff rigged old Manchester 17’s that were being raced at the club. Rob started bringing up Ensigns out of the Chesapeake for himself and others and our fleet grew. Rob’s Ensign was always on free loan to me and our father. We had days of fun racing, picnics to islands and just wonderful sails on the Penobscot Bay.

Finally in Texas, I bought my first 22 foot boat, fixed it up and was sailing when I discovered that another club member, Randy Haynes, had an old Ensign sitting in his back yard. I sold my boat and called Randy telling him that “I was looking for a boat with a large cockpit, deep seats that grandkids couldn’t fallout of, a small cabin to store stuff and let the babies crawl into and play or sleep on longer sails. One that I could just play with and have hours of fun with.” “ I have one like that” was the reply. “Yes, I know. Would you sell her? No, but I’ll give her to you but you had better look at her first. That’s ok. I’ll fix her up,” I said. I had done a bottom job on my other boat, learned to cut out blisters repair and repaint her correctly with a barrier coat. How hard could an Ensign be?

Randy met me out at the impound lot where his friend had let him put her. She was full of water, --at least she didn’t leak! She sat on a trailer with 4 flat tires. Her topsides were black, her decks were spongy, her seats and bunks and floor were gone and there was only the upper half of the cabin bulkhead in place and that was pealing. The rubrail was mostly off and chunks were out of the splash rail and coming. But it was an Ensign… how hard could that be? I could fix her up in 2 to 4 months, I had just retired. The outside was scarred and pealing and blistered. But I had done that before. Besides it was an Ensign! My spirit soared. I saw myself skipping across Galveston Bay or the nearby lake, popping up a spinnaker just as long as the wind wasn’t too high. I saw seats and splash rails glistening. She had her original bronze winches that I remembered and surely with a little work, they would ring out again like only an Old Ensign Merriman winch can sound. It took me a week to pump her out, get 4 new tires on the trailer, then with one wheel wobbling oddly I pulled her into my yard. I took no pictures then. No lady should be seen in that condition. Soon she would twinkle.

It took a month to get the black off the deck, cockpit and hull. A former owner had painted her hull a dark blue, had extra paint so painted the inside of the cabin and cockpit as well. I sanded, scrapped and sanded more till the some of the original white could be seen, and the major flaking was gone. The deck was peeling white over that blue green. Remember it was the 60’s.

The first fix up was to paint the inside cabin walls with white. Did my soul good. A friend came over and helped me remove the thru hulls. I had found the Ensign forum by that time and the article in Good Old Boat. That guy said he had put only 150 hrs in on his and his boat looked to be in about the same condition as mine… well maybe a little better! I didn’t understand he had bought a bunch of the components from Zeke at that point. I could do 150 hours! But I did meet a retired Industrial Engineer, Rick Dulas, who just loved projects like this. Sure he would advise me and teach me how to do the repairs as long as I realized that I would do the work, not him. He had just had back and neck surgery and was losing feeling in his hands. Fortunately for me Rick kept having to step in and help me out. The two of us began a deep friendship and the 2 year trial.

First, I needed supplies. Rick took me to his workshop and showed me liquid closed cell foam of different weights. I had tried to find sheets of it from a Houston boat yard that repaired Ensigns but they were not interested in helping someone to do it themselves. I now know I could have bought it on line but I was new to the learning curve. Anyway I could fill it with 8 lb foam in the voids in the deck. We tapped on the deck, put x’s on the hollow voids, set the circular saw at ¼ inch and …yes… cut open the deck. There lay the rotten end grain balsa. Interesting. We tried foam applications. (Ask me if you are interested) and repaired cabin top, fore deck and stern. More than anything it was trial and error but the deck became solid but still light. But there was still a lot of give especially on the cabin top. Why? I began to learn what the bulkhead and bunks and floor supports are really for. They give the boat stiffness. Someone had written about sailing an Ensign with everything out of the boat. How could they? Wouldn’t the boat oil can apart?

With the decks finally sound again, I read that the Achilles heel of the Ensign was the mast step support. Mine had been replaced in the not too distant past but the years of sitting filled with water and not being covered properly had lead to rot. It had to come out. One thing that Randy gave me was the complete print out plans for everything that was built in the Ensign (available thru the Ensign Class). Don’t leave home without it. I cut the first round of mast supports out of foam board, the kind you put on the outside of the house under the brick veneer. This allowed me to fit and trim or add to till I had a close fit of how the material fit into the hull. Then I cut treated ¾ inch marine plywood. I hear you EWING up now. But we then coated this with 5 coats of epoxy so that water would not be able to get to it and when we screwed into it, that hole too was filled with epoxy. We leveled the boat and set these in with Cabisol and fiberglass. That was not enough yet. We set a drain path under the supports and then filled the void between the supports with 16 lb foam. The boat might pass away but the mast supports would stand!

Rick had come over and taken off the three barely connected worm eaten pieces that were once a rudder. New rudder? Ouch. Rick said no problem, fill it with epoxy filler, shape it and we will put several coats of real fine fiberglass cloth over it. Sounds easy. Not. Took a month but with a large belt sander that we could bring the rudder to and many applications of bonding material, sanding, sanding and sanding, a beautiful Ensign rudder appeared. Rick did the final fiber glassing and filled the holes for the bolts and screw with silicone so we could get it out again but nothing could get in till we were ready.

The remnants of the old bulkhead had to come out and a new one replaced. How do you attach a piece of wood to the side of a fiberglass hull? Cut the old one out with a grinder wheel and sand down the side of the boat to the level of the hull and TAB a new one in. ??? What was tabbing? “It’s easy lady“, said Terry Hurzeler from HYC. “Just mix up the Cabisol in Epoxy to the consistency of mud pies and fill it along the seam so you don’t have a sharp edge and lay in your fiberglass tape and you have at it.”. Ok I had played with mud pies… Looking at it now I got a little carried away, it is thick but not going anywhere for awhile. And it is in.

Next the bunks. ¼ plywood, yes ¼ inch, covered in Epoxy and fiber glassed on exposed surfaces, cross supported and laid in with Cabisol and tabbing. They are stout. We built in a battery box just in front of the mast step, a box in front of that for gear and a box on the port side for gear. I’m a woman, I want a place to “put “ stuff. We bought 2 plastic sealable tubs about 10 x 22 and 7 inches deep and built it to fit it inside. At the same time we took PVC pipe and fitted it from the battery box to where we would have the switch box and ran a wire thru it. Under the center we continued the drain so that any water that did work its way under the forepeak or bunks would drain down into the bilge. Then we began to fill the bunks with 2 lb liquid foam. That was a lot of area. We found that materials that were shipped to us had peanuts made of …you guessed it, closed cell foam. So I began mixing these with my closed liquid cell foam and spread them in, letting the foam rise around them and cementing them in. When filled, I cut and sanded the foam down to the tops of the bunks, put on my 1/4 inch fiber glassed reinforced tops , screwed them together and put fiberglass tape and epoxy over the edges. I then tabbed the seats to the epoxy covered floor, set in drain holes that would empty into the bilge and smiled.

The floor supports were next. I still had the teak floor boards but the wood that ties them together and the floor supports were gone. The question was what to build the floor supports with. White oak was mentioned but Rick had epi flooring. It was super strong almost too dense but epoxied together long ways it formed really strong supports. Again, level boat, level the floor and fiberglass and Cabisol it in and the boat became stronger. The only problem was to screw anything into it you had to drill a pilot hole and by that time I added epoxy in every hole.

The seats were built out of African mahogany. We handpicked the boards and got some with beautiful flame, used hardwood from packing crates for motorcycles from Japan that was gorgeous. It was hard to drill access holes up through the supports but the seats came together and we fitted them in. I really got excited. I also had to refinish the doors, probably the first time in their life but they came out beautifully. I bought two splash boards that were a ½ inch short on one end . My buddy Rick showed me how to scarf a piece that we cut off from the other end. We set them up on the kitchen island, glued with gorilla glue and pegged them with small wood dowels. We sanded them, applied 5 coats of epoxy and then 5 coats of 2 part polyurethane. They gleam and the coating is hard and strong. Hopefully they will keep the boards in good shape.

The outside of the boat was in terrible shape. Basically I had to sand down the paint, cut out the blisters… lots of blisters. Each was filled with watertight and sanded. And sanded and sanded. Randy Haynes had suggested getting a soda blaster but I couldn’t get one near enough. I finally got the boat jacked up enough and slung off an A frame and the stern resting on barrels and reinforced beams. That allowed me to get to the bottom of the keel. There were big chunks out of the bottom. I hated to do it but I had read about the void in the back of the keel on Ensign Forum that filled with water. Yes, I knew that I had to drill at least 2 holes in to see what was there. I could feel dampness on the fiberglass that came out on the drills. I put the air pump on the upper hole and bubbles and some dampness came out. I started putting pressure on it 2 or 3 times a day to really get it dry. Meanwhile I started filling watertight into the chunks out of the fiberglass on the bottom of the keel. I filled them with watertight and then put the air pressure on the holes in the void in the keel. I heard a loud pop and looked to see the watertight on the ground and open on the bottom. I kept blowing the air into the holes and got more water dripping out. I put 3 more holes into the bottom and forced the dampness out. Oh my. When I was satisfied after several days that I had it pretty dry, I forced closed cell foam up into the holes as far as I could get the hose up and into the interior. I filled the outside of it with watertight and sanded them smooth. I cut three sheets of fiberglass of increasing widths, fiber glassed over the entire length of the bottom keel. It lay in nicely. After it dried and cured I sanded the edges smooth.

The next day when I returned to my house I saw something white lying on the ground. A rain had softened the ground and the A frame had moved, come apart and laid the boat on the ground. What a horrible feeling. However, there was no damage to the boat. But if you have lemons, make lemonade. I had the hull sanded so I began to apply the barrier coat to the exposed side. My buddies came over, rebuilt the one A frame and built a second one. This time we didn’t just screw them together, we bolted them through and multi braced them. Then with two come-a-longs, a board driven into the ground to keep the keel sliding, we raised the boat back up. Thank God for engineers!

During this down time I had the trailer rebuilt with new surge brakes, new bearings, and wiring. Then I lowered the boat back down and put the pads back in place.

Then came the invitation from the Houston Yacht Club. They were having an Ensign Day on the Bay day. We weren’t ready but close. I had to call Zeke to ask which hole the long bolt went in the rudder, one of many calls to Zeke. We put sails, life jackets and battens aboard, took all tools and fittings and stainless with us and arrived late at HYC. Dean and Kay Snider and John Cutler had been waiting for us but had to leave but we were greeted by Mike Little. He helped us hoist the mast up. The mast step was too high by about three inches. By then Dean and Kay arrived back and helped us settle the boat in for the night and agreed to meet us early the next morning. By 7:30 Dean was climbing over the boat. I had brought the cut off tool and took the 3 inches off the mast. That was easier than trying to cut down the mast step support. We then stepped the mast and attached the new turnbuckles. I was asked how I was planning to cleat down the halyards. I said that I still had to put the cleats on. They were polite enough not to laugh. We drove the boat over to the lift. Dean attached the lift frame on to her and we lifted her into the water. It was thrilling. After 50 years she finally lay in the same waters where she was first splashed. We had learned that she was the third Ensign in the original Ensign fleet at HYC. (Kay and Dean keep track of every boat.) She was now back home with her sisters. We worked to tension stays, apply cleats to affix halyards. The rest of the fleet members arrived and we set sail. I backed her out of her slip they had put me in and I pulled in her jenny sheets across the original Merriman winches. If you had an old Ensign you would smile at the loud clicking . I commented that that was how an Old Ensign sounded. Randy Haynes, the guy who gave her to me had driven down to join us. He took the helm and sailed her out. The wind was picking up on the bay but she just danced. I finally wrestled the helm from Randy and she played in my hand. What a feeling! In too short a time the other Ensigns began to head back home. I reluctantly headed back in. I could have sailed her all night.

We put her to bed and went up to the Beachcomber where John and Paula Cutler were cooking for the crowd. I had bought champagne for her and everyone. They went down with me to the dock and we officially rechristened her “Breezin Up”. Yes, I cried, wanted to take her back out but I hadn’t finished her lights yet. But I had an Ensign in the water next to her sisters. Alas, I had to bring her back home. I had the waterline too low and I knew that the paint would blister if I left it that way. I had rigging still to put on and had to finish screwing down the seats. But basically with the help of all of you on the forum and encouragement from HYC and offers from Austin, even "I" redid an Ensign. Would I do it again? Probably not until I saw some grand old lady that I knew that if I didn’t take her would end up in a landfill. They are too nice of a boat to let that happen. Plus this is probably, like Zeke says, the last boat I will ever own. We shall grow old together. And then my grandchildren or great grandchildren can continue playing with her.