

48 hours adrift leaves two jet-skiers shaken

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Two bone-weary and very hoarse but otherwise healthy water-scooter riders thanked their lucky stars and their rescuers yesterday after spending two full days bobbing in the frigid water of Lake Ontario.

"It was a real-life episode of the show *Survivor*," said Sasha Opacic, 27, of Maple, Ont., who boarded a personal watercraft at a marina in Mississauga on Saturday afternoon for what was planned as a one-hour tour of the shoreline.

He and Arlie Kadri, 30, of Mississauga, spent the next 48 hours clinging to their machines amid choppy waves in disorienting fog.

"I was hesitating about going out," Mr. Kadri said. He knew Mr. Opacic, a financial adviser, from social functions where they had discussed their mutual interest in the water-skimming machines.

Mr. Kadri, who is a mechanic, bought his two-seat Sea-Doo last year but had always used it in good weather on small lakes.

Things started to go wrong quickly as they headed east along the shore in a light rain.

Mr. Kadri hadn't filled up the tank of his machine, and it developed engine trouble. By the time they got it started again, a dense fog descended "like someone dropped a blanket on us," he recalled.

Fortunately, the men had dressed in wet suits and thermal boots and had a nylon survival suit to share, but they had no compass to lead them to land. Tying their machines together, they tried unsuccessfully to find the shore, then decided to drift to conserve what little fuel they had.

As dinner time came and went on Saturday, Mr. Kadri's wife, Christina, phoned Peel Regional Police

"It was freezing, freezing cold," Mr. Opacic said. "The first night I was depressed and upset, and Arlie kept me going. He said expect the worst and hope for the best."

The men developed a routine to prevent themselves from falling asleep and tumbling into the water. "Every 15 minutes we asked each other, 'How are you doing? Can you see anything?'" Mr. Opacic said.

Whenever they heard the sound of a boat or a plane they would yell, but found themselves hoarse and disheartened by the inability of rescuers to find them in the dense fog.

Throughout the 48 hours, the men had only a vague idea of where they were. On Sunday morning, Mr. Opacic decided they must be near the Toronto

Islands because they could hear propeller planes taking off from an airport and the foghorns of boats.

Meanwhile, police marine units and the Coast Guard were doing a widening search from Mississauga to Hamilton.

As the hours dragged on, exposure to water that was about 4 degrees began to take its toll.

"Everything went downhill for Arlie. His face turned blue and he started to shake. I put two and two together and knew it was hypothermia," said Mr. Opacic, who gave Mr. Kadri his goggles and thermal gloves to wear.

Mr. Kadri said he recalled that the gear helped warm him up, but "I had a delusion of someone coming and giving us drinks and filling our gas tanks. I was so convinced that I tried to start the engine."

It was a near-fatal error, because as his machine started to run, the rope holding it to the other slipped off. The two men became separated and were unable to see each other.

"For two hours, I thought he was dead," Mr. Opacic said.

"Suddenly, I heard a weird voice. It was Arlie. He said, 'Sasha, tie up. I just live over there; we can go ashore.' He was completely hallucinating."

"I was getting really sick. Nothing made sense to me. I couldn't remember anything for a whole night," said Mr. Kadri, who credits Mr. Opacic with helping him get through the ordeal.

Both men remember one event with absolute clarity. At some point, a freighter passed so close to them that they could almost reach out and touch its side. They yelled for help, but apparently were not heard.

"I felt nobody was coming for us. They're not even trying," Mr. Kadri said. But then, "I said to myself, 'I've got kids. I've got a wife. I've got to survive.' I started punching my fists together to get warm."

As the second night passed, the men were still out of sight of each other but kept in communication by blowing on whistles.

"It requires a lot of physical work just to stay on a jet ski," Mr. Opacic said.

After a day and a half of search patterns, a Canadian Forces Hercules spotted the men floating about 15 kilometres from Jordan Harbour, northwest of St. Catharines.

At about 4 p.m. on Monday, like a vision of heaven, "there was a break in the clouds. I saw a chopper and they were shooting flares in the water," Mr. Opacic said.

The men were airlifted to St. Catharines General Hospital, where they were treated for exposure but had no permanent injuries.

Real-life survivors

Sasha Opacic and Arlie Kadri's jet skiing trip quickly turned bad after one machine ran out of fuel, leaving the two men disoriented in dense fog.

Saturday - The two men leave the Lakefront Promenade Marina between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m., expecting to return by 5 p.m. At 9 p.m. Arlie Kadri's wife alerts the police that the men are missing.

Sunday - Coastguard aircraft and a police marine unit search areas of the lake

throughout the day, hampered by fog.

Monday - The search resumes in the morning and the pair are spotted by a Canadian forces helicopter around 4 p.m. They are taken out of water at 4:30 p.m. and flown to St. Catherine's General Hospital.

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