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Death of Alameda sailor in Mexico a mystery

Tyche Hendricks, Chronicle Staff Writer
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(02-03) 20:07 PST San Francisco -- A 78-year-old Alameda man, fulfilling a long-held dream of sailing back to his native Ireland, died under mysterious circumstances in the waters off southern Mexico, family members said Sunday.

The bruised body of John J. Long was found floating Saturday in the Pacific Ocean off the Mexican state of Chiapas, not far from the Guatemala border, after Long's boat ran aground a couple of miles away near the town of Puerto Madero, said the sailor's son, Philip Long.

U.S. Coast Guard officials contacted Philip Long on Saturday after receiving a distress signal from an emergency radio beacon aboard the Culin, John Long's 55-foot steel-hulled ketch.

That phone call was followed by another on Sunday from the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City confirming the man's death, said Philip Long of Castro Valley.

"We're shocked," he said of himself, his mother and two brothers. "But we're not entirely surprised, because he'd had quite a few close calls."

A month earlier, the Culin, named for a Gaelic song about a sailboat, had electrical problems and was towed to the port of Manzanillo, in the Mexican state of Colima, Philip Long said. The Coast Guard had phoned that time, too, but fortunately the senior Long was fine, he said.

Authorities in Mexico believe Long's boat may have had electrical problems again, U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Judith Bryan told the Associated Press on Sunday in announcing the death.

An official with Mexico's navy, who asked not to be named for security reasons, told the Associated Press that Long's body was covered with bruises and that authorities were investigating whether the boat had any links to drugs after they discovered a cargo compartment below a false bottom on the vessel.

The news service also reported that Saul Gomez, head of a local fisherman's group, said residents of the town had seen two people carrying suitcases leave the boat.

Two people were detained in connection with the case, state police spokesman Bernardo Gomez told the Associated Press, but it wasn't immediately clear if they were the same pair who allegedly fled the boat.

Philip Long said he was confident his father was not involved in smuggling. "If you know anything about boats, any space is cargo space," he said. But the embassy did tell him

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that the boat had been looted, Long said, and he and his family were distressed at the possibility of foul play in his father's death.

"They said that the coroner hasn't looked at him yet, and tomorrow is a Mexican holiday," Philip Long said Sunday. "He was on blood pressure medication, he'd had a stroke years ago. For all we know he had a stroke and ran aground. ... I'm trying not to let my imagination run away with this."

John Long had dreamed of making this journey for a very long time, his son said. A retired carpenter and avid sailor, he had spent years fixing up the boat and living on it at the Alameda marina.

His goal was to sail solo around Cape Horn and across the Atlantic to Ireland, where he planned to live out his retirement.

"Everyone had the same reaction - people who didn't know about sailing and people who knew everything about it - 'You're crazy!' " said the younger Long. "But he really had an unimaginable drive. He was very strong-minded, and if he wanted to do something, he was going to do it. In the end, we said, 'OK.' "

John Long set sail almost four months ago, stopping first in Santa Barbara to visit another son.

About a week ago the sailor set off from Manzanillo, considering a shorter route through the Panama Canal, Philip Long said.

Now his sons are awaiting the results of an autopsy and making preparations to go to Mexico to collect their father's remains.

"We always assumed he would go to Ireland, and that's the plan," Philip Long said.

E-mail Tyche Hendricks at thendricks@sfnchronicle.com.

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