

2015 IAMI Investigator of the Year Award

So there you are... you live in South Carolina within spitting distance of the water. Unfortunately, you don't have a boat. Fortunately, you know exactly what boat you want. Unfortunately, you don't have enough money to buy the 28-foot Hydra Sport you've been lusting after. Fortunately, there's a 28-foot Hydra Sport in a nearby marina that's just begging to be yours. Unfortunately, you know that the boat's HIN and engine identifiers will make it difficult to steal the boat without getting caught. Fortunately, you're clever, and you know of a 26-foot Hydra Sport that sank some time ago. As far as you're concerned, that should have been the end of the story. Unfortunately, two IAMI investigators foil your plan... Unfortunately for you, that is.

This story starts in April of 2013 when Lawrence Girard's 2000 28-foot Hydra Sport with twin 250-hp ETEC Evinrudes was stolen from a marina on Folly Island just south of Charleston, SC. That claim was handled by Marine Investigator Louis Harrison, and in February of 2014, Mr. Girard contacted Harrison with a report that his boat had been sighted at a residence on Johns Island, SC. Harrison and a Folly Island detective went to the location on February 18, 2014, and Kayla King, the wife of the owner, allowed them to inspect a Hydra Sport as well as the titles and registration for the boat and the motors. At a cursory glance, the titles and registration looked to be in order and matched the identifiers on the boat and motors, though there were indications that these may have been altered. In addition, the boat had a custom-built blue foam board under the bow hatch, extra rod holders on the transom and each side, and was missing its centerboard. Mr. Girard still had his 28-foot Hydra Sport's centerboard, and he had described the other modifications found on the boat during the initial claim investigation.

What now? Harrison had met several members of the South Carolina DNR at the IAMI ATS in 2013 in Isle of Palms, SC. He sent an email to Investigator Greg Brown the day after inspecting the suspect Hydra Sport. The two met on February 22, 2014 to review the photographs of the boat. The motor serial number decals by the manufacturer were showing the VOID hologram, and the HIN appeared to have been altered. The outboard motors were titled as 2000 model 225-hp Evinrudes, but they carried the Evinrude ETEC seal – models that had not been available before 2005. Brown and Harrison were convinced that the Hydra Sport in the King's yard was actually Girard's.

Next, Harrison contacted Hydra Sport about the serial numbers on the hull and discovered that it belonged to a 26-foot model with a different hull design than the 28. The Marine Theft Office sent Brown a file that had the history of owners for the two HINs and the motors. Now here's where the small world part of the story comes in.

While discussing how to recover the boat, Brown told Harrison the name of the previous owner of each boat. Harrison thought he had handled a claim for one of the owners. When he checked his files, he found a 26-foot Hydra Sport that sank in 2010. The file had all the photographs of the boat, motors, and

serial numbers. The black 28-foot Hydra Sport on Johns Island was titled under all the serial numbers associated with the 26-foot Hydra Sport that Harrison had adjusted as a claim in August 2010.

With search warrant in hand, Brown and Sergeant J.B. Kinsey returned to Johns Island on February 25, 2014 – one week after Girard had contacted Harrison – to confirm their findings and seize the stolen vessel. A close inspection showed that the HIN had been altered, the hidden HIN had been ground off, the freeze plugs on the engines had been tampered with, and even the names on the life jackets had been changed, though GIRARD could still be made out under KING. The serial numbers on the onboard computers confirmed that the engines were the ones from Girard's Hydra Sport. The vessel and motors were released to adjuster Louis Harrison as a representative of the insurance company that paid the claim to Girard. The value of the stolen property was listed as \$56,000.

The following week on March 12, 2014, Magistrate Lisen of Charleston County signed off on seven arrest warrants. Graham Adam King was served in the Charleston County jail with warrants for offenses ranging from a felony count for receiving stolen goods with value in excess of \$10,000 through two counts of obtaining an outboard motor certificate of title through fraud.

Fortunately, you were clever and had some idea of how to avoid being caught. Unfortunately, two IAMI investigators foiled your plan... Fortunately, IAMI turned your attempted theft into a small world story, and you ended up getting caught.

IAMI Investigators of the Year for 2015:

Investigator Greg Brown, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

Marine Investigator Louis Harrison, Industrial Marine Claims