

The Dangers Of The Dock

June 11, 2009



By Vincent Pica, Flotilla Commander, 18-06
(1SR), United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

Here's a hard-to-believe fact: statistics on boats sinking show that the dock is four times more dangerous than the open waters. Study after study shows that four times as many boats sink at the dock than under way! Why is that?

Well, candidly, there are lies, damn lies and statistics. If you are underway and you see water coming up from below, you are going to do something about it right away. Thus, the underway problems are going to be dealt with in real time and the odds are way in your favor that you can save the vessel, even if you have to drive her on to the beach to do so. But why do so many boats sink at their docks?

Why didn't the bilge pump save her, to start with? Many people believe "Big boat, big bilge pump. Little boat, little bilge pump." Wrong!

Big boat, lots of bilge pumps. Little boat, big bilge pump. You need to get the water out of your 17-foot Seahunt as fast as possible. Five hundred gallons per minute isn't half as good as 1,000. It is less than half as good because once she goes down, no bilge pump can re-float her. And experts estimate that it can cost 40 percent of the original value of the boat to re-wire and restore the engine. Oh, and throw out the radio, GPS and fish finder.

And remember, bilge pumps don't save boats. They buy you time. Statistics say that boats sink at the dock for two major reasons. Half the time a thru-hull fitting gives up the ghost and water eventually overwhelms the battery/bilge pump arrangement. So, check the thru-hulls with every lay-up. And check the screws around them. If the screws "rot" away, it is another source of water to enter that isn't so obvious. But it will add up.

The second most common source of sinking at the dock, at 30 percent of the time, is snow and rain. I had this happen to one of my boats because the self-bailing scuppers clogged from leaves. Rain followed, and followed, and followed—until I had a submarine. Also, many skippers believe that Bimini tops and canvas covers prevent water from entering the boat. Wrong again. They slow it, but don't stop it. In the winter, stow them someplace dry and shrink wrap the boat.

So, more than 80 percent of the boats sink for two reasons—all of which adds up to checking the boat from time to time. Or paying the dock hand to, or your teenager who wants some extra spending money. But check it.

Would you leave a box with \$20,000 unattended on your lawn for months at a time?

If you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at USCGAUX2006@aol.com and we will help you "get in this thing."