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Hard Aground! Now What?

By Vincent Pica

When I teach seamanship courses to private boaters on the South Shore, I note that, if you boat in our local waters and have never run aground, you're lying. Even USCG regulars have been known to "touch bottom" at times in these waters. So the issue is not *if* you run aground but *what* you do afterwards.

There are a couple of things to do right away. First, determine if the grounding has caused a leak. Even sand, if you hit it hard enough, will stove in a hull (or a through-hull fitting or a drive-shaft fitting through a stuffing box). While the water obviously isn't very deep right where you are, if your hull starts to fill with water, she may slide into deeper water and now problems will start to escalate. At roughly the same time, get everyone into life jackets. You're the skipper and are responsible for the safety of everyone on that vessel. Next, check your tide charts and determine whether time is an ally or an enemy; i.e., if the tide rising (the rising tide lifts all boats, said John Kennedy) or falling. If it's falling, time is now working against you. (See "[Time Waits for No \(Wo\)Man](#),"; also check the tide tables provided by SSP.)



At this point, you know whether the boat has sprung a leak (if so, get right on VHF-16 and hail the USCG; get the "rescue starts now" clock ticking asap), you have everyone in life jackets and you know if you will be helped by time or not. This should have taken you less than one minute.

If the hull isn't leaking, try backing away the way you came in. Increase throttle moderately and keep turning the wheel back and forth, port to starboard and back again. Why? Well, it's a little like rocking a car in the snow. Sand and boats can get into a very powerful embrace caused by suction of the wet sand and a smooth surface of a boat's hull. Perhaps more important, you're sending sand from the stern directly forward – increasing the "hump" that you have to float over. By turning the wheel, you'll break the suction and spread the sand around. Be conscious of what's behind you because, if you suddenly break free, you don't want to go flying into a busy seaway.

Assuming this tactic is working, it's quite possible that you'll make more progress when the wheel is to one side or the other. Once you see the stern making more way down one exit path than the other, make that your new centering path. In short, don't waste time and fuel trying to back down a path that isn't getting you anywhere – but don't fail to sway the helm back and forth down your new exit path or you may fill it with sand and ruin your escape. Most times, this will get you out. If it does, unless you got out pretty quickly and easily, I would head for the marina and get a hose on that engine and start to wash out the sand. I'd also have somebody look at the running gear. A small nick in a prop can do a lot of damage to an engine's "innards" because the running gear is no longer balanced. At a minimum, get the boat somewhere where you can get a water hose on the engine and flush it – with the engine OFF. If there is sand in there, don't grind it out of your engine.

Wash it out.

What if you're at this for four or five minutes and nothing is happening? Well, if the tide is against you, and you have towing insurance, call for help. Any more time wasted and you might be spending the night. The commercial towers are well-equipped and largely well-trained. (You DON'T have towing insurance?? Think again, Bunky... It's the cheapest insurance that you *will* use.) Get familiar with the differences between "salvage" and a simple tow, especially if you don't have contracted commercial insurance. Maritime law is complex.

What if the tide is with you? You can still call for help but you also have an opportunity to engage in some seamanship that might hold you in good stead sometime in the future when you have more difficult circumstances in hand. How about putting an anchor out towards the deeper water and "kedging," i.e., pulling yourself along it from the bow? You are introducing a new angle of pressure and that might pull you free or at least loosen the bottom-suction. At a minimum, as the tide rises, it will keep you from being blown higher on to the beach by the wind. If your boat is big enough to have a tender (dinghy), get it to work pushing the boat. Think like what you are. A sea captain.

About the Author: *Vincent Pica is a coxswain and the Commander of Flotilla 18-06 East Moriches. He was a navigator in a brown-water and blue-water sailboat racing crew for eight seasons. From the "iron sails" side, he is a licensed US Coast Guard Master of Steam and Diesel Powered Vessels, carries a Radar Observer endorsement, Unlimited, on his license and is certified in Marine Diesel Engine Operation and Maintenance.*

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