

First in War, First in Peace, First in the Hearts of all Mariners - Safety

By Vincent Pica

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On Saturday, Feb 28th, while we were all going about our business, four men made way from a dock in Florida in a 21' powered vessel to visit their favorite fishing hole in the Gulf of Mexico and to meet a date with destiny. On Monday, March 2nd, one of those men, Nick Schuyler, was rescued by USCG Forces as he sat upon the over-turned hull. The bodies of the three others, Oakland Raiders linebacker Marquis Cooper, owner of the boat, Detroit Lions free-agent defensive lineman Corey Smith and William Bleakley, a former South Florida football player, still lie out in the Gulf. Their souls lie, no doubt, in God's loving arms. This column is about all the things that, in a game of inches, would have made a lifetime of difference.

They Are Not Alone

The capsizing of the 21-foot fishing boat carrying the four men to a favorite fishing spot in the Gulf of Mexico was the latest of 200 such incidents reported to the U.S. Coast Guard in the past five months. "The oceans are an unforgiving environment," said Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Chris O'Neil. "Weather can be unpredictable. Any time you are in an open environment, you are taking a certain amount of risk.", quoted in a CNN story.

Official USCG reports cite that there were 398 accidents from capsizing, causing 204 deaths and 284 injuries in 2007. Back in early March of this year, Florida state officials recovered the bodies of a 48-year-old man and his 7-year-old granddaughter after their 15-foot bass tipped over in Lake Okeechobee, according to CNN affiliate WPTV-TV in West Palm Beach, Florida.

200 in the Last 5 Months - Let's Stop It NOW!

According to the Center for Disease Control, the number of people who die in recreational boating accidents each year is about the same as those who perish in general aviation accidents. There is a high perception of the potential dangers inherent in aviation, while boating is thought to be relatively safe. In most places a person with no boating experience can rent a boat and take to the high seas - no questions asked. The same is not true for operating an airplane or even an automobile.

Most boating accidents are preventable. It starts by everyone on a boat wearing a properly fitting U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket. Wearing a life jacket will keep you afloat and help delay the effects of hypothermia (see "Surviving Hypothermia", SSP, 2/14/07.) Remember LIFE JACKETS SAVE LIVES and you may not have time to find it and put it on (see "Life Jackets Save Lives - Yours!", SSP, 2/11/09)

Preparation and Planning: Have your boat checked out to make sure it complies with applicable Federal and State regulations for boats. These checks conducted by the Coast Guard Auxiliary, for free, help make sure that you have needed safety equipment on your boat. SAFE BOATS SAVE LIVES; get a Vessel Safety Check. See "No Fuss, No Muss - and Your Favorite Price (Free!) - Vessel Exams", SSP, 4/02/08.

File a Float Plan (www.floatplancentral.org) with a friend or other relative. Make sure they know where you plan on boating and when you plan on returning. They also need to know who to call if you do not return at the indicated time. See "Float Plans - Nothing but Upside", SSP, 10/4/06.

Make sure you have effective communications for your boating outing. There is a lot of material on

these related topics (radios and cell phones) so see

"Can You Hear Me Now? Cell Phones and Boats", SSP, 1/7/09

"Sounding Smart on the Radio", SSP, 8/1/07

"Your Radio - Installed Correctly?", SSP, 4/9/08

"Your Radio - Shot Gun or Rifle?", SSP, 4/16/08

"Rescue 21 - 21st Century Savior", SSP, 4/23/08

Semper Paratus:

Be prepared for sudden and dramatic changes in weather. It is common for fog to develop or strong winds to start blowing. Listen to weather forecasts before you go and on your VHF-FM marine radio while underway. Many times, weather near shore is significantly calmer than weather offshore and knowing the forecast for your intended destination can help you decide whether to leave the dock, stay in more protected areas or even stay at home. Again, there is a lot of material on these inter-related topics:

"Skippering in Heavy Weather", SSP, 10/11/06

"We're Sinking", SSP, 12/13/06

"Weathering the Weather", SSP, 11/28/07 and 8/2/08

What if you do end up in the water unintentionally? If you are wearing your life jacket you're half way there. If the boat does capsize, keep everyone together and stay with the boat. Electronic Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRB's) and Personal Position Indicating Radio Beacon or PPIRB's are life savers. When one gets activated, it sends a signal to the Coast Guard telling us you are in distress and where you are. See "EPIRBs, GPIRBs, PPIRBs - What's that!?", SSP, 11/29/06. In fact, "two days before Marquis Cooper set off on the ill-fated fishing trip, the NFL player was casting for redfish off New Port Richey with fishing guide Clay Eavenson, an old friend," reported the St. Petersburg Times. Eavenson asked Cooper if he had an EPIRB. Cooper had never heard of it, and despite assuring Eavenson he would get one, he didn't purchase one before the ill-fated fishing trip two days later. Flares, mirrors, strobe lights, whistles, and other signaling devices allow rescuers to quickly locate people who are already in the water and need help. The Coast Guard will search at night as well as during daylight and anything that will make you more visible significantly aids your ability to be detected. See "Help Is On The Way - How Hard Will You Be to Find?", SSP, 10/8/08. Again, always wear a life jacket. LIFE JACKETS SAVE LIVES!

And thanks to Thomas Nunes, Deputy Chief, Public Affairs Department, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, for his assistance in the body of work here. If you would like copies of the columns cited above, email me below!

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2009@aol.com or go direct to Lisa Etter, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you "get in this thing..."