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July 18, 2012

More On Capsizing: How To Survive

By Vincent Pica

Last week, you read about what it would take to capsize a boat and, for most people, it is surprisingly little if the stars are lined up against you (see *The Independent* at indyeastend.com).

But what if it does happen? Can you survive? If the boat swamps, which makes a sinking even more likely, can you survive?

This column answers those questions.

Thank God For The Cooler!

No one goes to sea thinking, "Well, if we capsize today, I'll just do the following." Every capsizing or swamping that leaves survivors starts with the same story: "The wave came out of nowhere – and hit us broadside."

Thirty years ago, I was the tactician/navigator in a sailboat racing crew when a large wave, possibly a rogue wave, came back against a North Atlantic storm and hit us broadside. Thankfully, we didn't capsize nor did we swamp to the point that we foundered – but we did get battered. My scars still are visible.

Of more recent vintage, you can speak to David Mull, senior editor for *Lakeland Boating Magazine*, who would tell you about a different outcome. Mull spent three and a half hours adrift on Lake Michigan, clinging to a Coleman cooler after the boat he was on swamped and then sank.

Mull and his friends lived to tell the tale – but the story starts the same way. Calm day, catching fish. Kaboom.

Typically, this is how it happens. Capsizes often occur during daylight hours when weather and visibility are good, the winds were light, and the water was calm. In spite of this, someone reaches over the gunwale for the fish, gets toppled in from a wave hitting at just the right wrong moment, the propeller gets fouled (landing net, fishing line, etc) and the danger curve skyrockets upward. More than half of all boating fatalities are caused by man-overboard and capsizes.

An Ounce Of Prevention

Consider this list:

Avoid sitting on the gunwale, bow, seat backs, motor cover or any other area not designed for seating.

When we patrol under USCG orders, we are required to wear our life-jackets 100 percent of the time, dock-to-dock. Why don't you, and your crew, follow this "mil-spec?"

If you go over the side, with the ignition-switch-lanyard attached, the boat and your only hope for survival, stops. Without it, you may watch it motor away.

Don't overload your boat. Balance the load of all passengers and gear.

Small boats are more susceptible to swamping than larger boats. Be sure you have your bilge pumps working. Remember, small boat, big bilge pump; large boat, LOTS of bilge pumps.

Slow your boat appropriately when turning.

Don't risk boating in rough water conditions or in bad weather.

When anchoring, secure the anchor line to the bow, never to the stern.

All of this could happen -- to you. Wear your life jacket; it's hard to get out of a locker of a boat that has capsized or sunk.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you "get in this thing..."