

# Caught in Heavy Weather

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**E**ver check the weather and leave the dock under perfectly calm skies, only to later witness a transformation into a snarly, potentially life-stealing condition? To battle the beast and arrive home safely, you need the proper skills.

The moment the weather turns, the skipper must direct everyone to don life jackets. On my vessel, I have a heavy weather/type-1 life jacket on the back of my helm seat. Across the back, where the crew can read it, it says, "If you see the captain put this on, try to find one for yourself."

Those waves that you are trying to muscle through pack tremendous power. Cross the waves at a 45-degree angle and "tack" across the storm like a sailboat moving to windward, and slow down! Combined with five knots of wave speed, your 20 knots multiply the force of the pounding, so slowing down divides the forces.

If things start to get dicey, get on the radio and call the U.S. Coast Guard. Tell them where you are, where you are heading, and what concerns you about the situation. Most likely, the watch stander will take that information and ask you to check in with him or her every 15 minutes.

You may have promised your spouse you'd be back by 4:00 pm but at 6:00 pm, you're struggling against a nor'easter. Don't bet your life on a perceived deadline; remember "any port in a storm" and head to the nearest harbor you can safely reach.

If things really grow hazardous, don't leave the boat until it sinks out from under you. Have a "ditch bag" ready, with (at least) a cell phone, handheld radio, fresh water, dry clothes, medical kit, flashlight, and flares.

Fog has its own special nasty weather category. When it suddenly rolls in, you can't see the land or the buoys or, worse, the bow! Immediately slow down to "a slow bell" (just enough forward propulsion necessary to maintain steerage) and put on life jackets.



Photo by Vincent Pica

While underway and making way (engine in gear), give one "prolonged" (four-six seconds) blast on your whistle (you might call it a horn). Navigation rules specify the duration, and require the blasts to be "not more than 2 minutes apart." Let me make it plainer: sound your whistle **less** than every two minutes.

If at a dead stop on the engine but not at anchor (underway but not making way), give two "prolonged" blasts, a couple of seconds apart, no less than every two minutes.

As sound travels more efficiently through fog than clear air, be sure to bring your engine to dead stop from time to time and listen. Listen for the sound of surf (move away from that), buoy whistles, horns, bells (move towards them, carefully), or other engines. If you hear other engines, sound the danger whistle right away and bring the engine to neutral— but don't turn it off. This way, you can dart away if the other boat appears out of the fog, heading right for you!

Don't hug the shore. If you're caught in the surf line, you'll capsize and face an imminent threat to life. Instead, be sure to stay beyond where the surf is crashing as you make your way safely towards the safety of your home port. ⚓

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