



We're Sinking!

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Why Do Boats Sink at Sea?

The single most reported reason is water coming aboard from the stern through the out-board engine cut-out. While a boat with this configuration may be fine for the bays, be extremely cautious about such a boat onto the high seas. A following sea can easily "poop" you from behind and overwhelm your capacity to off-load the water. (See "Heavy Weather Skippering," SSP, Oct 11, 2006)

As to other reasons, roughly one in five sinkings at sea are due to direct leaks in the vessel itself, not caused by violent contact with the bottom or the sea itself. Areas of ingress, in order, are: through-hull fittings that give way; stuffing box leaks (the spot under the boat where the drive shaft exits the engine space of a cruiser and enters the water), knot-meter plugs and bait well discharge back-ups. Roughly one in eight sinkings at sea are caused by failures of seawater cooling and exhaust systems. High heat from engine exhaust gases and the corrosive effects of salt water simply wear out mechanical parts – and then you

are pumping water from the sea into the engine spaces.

Hitting something, often rocks, accounts for another ten percent. This is called "holing the boat," i.e., you just put a hole in it. Roughly six percent of sinkings at sea are caused by excessive force or speed causing the hull to come apart.

What Do I Do Now?

Put Your Life Jackets On – Right away, direct everyone to don their life jackets. On my vessel, I have a heavy weather, type-1 life jacket on the back of my helm seat. Across the back of it, where the crew can read it, is the warning, "If you see the captain put this on, try to find one for yourself."

Don't Be Bashful – Immediately get on the radio and call the USCG. Tell them where you are, how many people are aboard and where the water is coming from. Why how many people? Because if they get there after the boat goes down, you want to be sure no one gets left behind.

Stop the leak – If water is coming through a hole in the hull, try to

plug it. Jam towels, cushions, extra life-jackets – anything – into the hole. Brace the plug with a shoulder only if you have to (you want to avoid having anybody below when the boat sinks.) Use a spar, oar, bimini cover pole, boarding ladder – anything – to jam your plug into that hole. An old trick is to jam a sail into the hole from the outside. Let the sea pressure work for you. Not a lot of power boaters carry sails on their Bayliner – but it may give you an idea. You won't stop the water but you will likely slow it. It is going to take time for help to arrive so you have to start doing things to buy yourself more time. You may have to reduce speed to contain the water pressure on your plug, a trade-off – less water but more time to shore. Start with less water and evaluate who is winning – you or the sea.

Trim the Boat – If you did hit something, it is likely that the hole is in the forward part of the boat and possibly near the waterline. Trim the boat upward so the hole is above the waves.

Any Port in a Storm – If you are losing the battle after doing every-

thing above, beach the boat if you can. Who cares what happens to the boat at this point. We might be talking about living or dying now.

Create a Ditch Bag – If the situation continues to deteriorate, say your prayers but don't leave the boat until it sinks out from under you. But have a "ditch bag" ready – cell phone, handheld radio, fresh water, dry clothes, medical kit, flash light, flares, etc – come immediately to mind. It is always good to have a ditch bag ready whenever you go "outside." Hit a 45' container that fell off an ocean-going cargo ship on its way from Brazil to Maine and you won't have to take your shoes off to count the minutes you have left on your boat.

When you have a leak in your boat, secure the crew, call for help and try to stop the leak. You're the captain.

If you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at USCGAUX2006@aol.com or go direct to MaryJo Cruickshank, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you "get in this thing..."