

THREE DEAD OFF TAMPA

Tragic. Brutal. Untimely, and like most accidents unnecessary. Dear readership you must have heard the story about the small boat capsizing and three men dying off the Tampa coast last week. Like many of you I watched the news and said prayers for the men. As the days past I found myself saying those same prayers of strength for the dead men's families. I will not use this time and space to critique the actions and decisions of those lost souls but I will use it to help belay some poor decision-making on your part. We learn from tragedy, or at least we should.

Once upon a time while working insurance claims I interviewed a gentleman who (along with his wife) had spent 6 hours of the previous Saturday clinging to his overturned boat hull waving at passing boats. It seems that he had just bought the brand new center console fishing boat, which was a beautiful blue color. The hull and sides were blue. The top was white. The whys and wherefores of the capsizing are a story for another day but I'll never forget the mans face when he said "Ill never buy another blue boat" The boat had blended with the surrounding water and made for excellent camouflage effectively concealing him from passing boaters.

Most of what I tell you today will cost some money. It's a boat after all everything costs money. But the saying "what is your life worth" definitely applies.

On large yachts you have the luxury of space. The guys we lost last week were on a small center console boat with very limited storage. I have been on that model of boat before and I cant think of anywhere I would want to store a life raft.

The first piece of equipment every boat should have and use is the VHF radio. **USE THE WEATHER FEATURE PLEASE.** Go down to the docks in the early morning. You will hear every charter boat radio there tuned to hear the latest forecast. Today's radios have a nifty feature called DSC. (Digital Selective Calling) is a simple red button that with one push is capable of transmitting your boats position and ID to the Coast Guard or more importantly, any and all other DSC equipped boats within 20 miles. As almost all VHF radios being sold now are DSC capable this feature is set to save more lives than any other piece of technology in recent history. Including EPIRB units. The radio must be wired to your GPS and you must register your boat (free) so take the time and do it right.

Lets take a poll; you are off shore and your VHF lights up with a DSC radio emergency signal. Your radio (and maybe your plotter if you have a good rigger) lights up with the vessels position and ID number. Would you call the CG? If out of range would you hail anybody closer to land to hand off the signal? Would you change course and investigate?

I think most of you would do all that and maybe more.

So this feature is pretty cheap at entry level radios being sold for around (\$200) and will likely render faster support than an EPIRB.

EPIRB: Emergency Radio Position Indicating Radio Beacon. You can get them for under (\$900) If at all possible please get and register one.

A good option here is the newly available PLB Personal Locator Beacon. Basically the same thing as an EPIRB but much smaller and around (\$500) this should go in your ditch bag or be attached to your life jacket.

Ditch Bags. Most ditch bags I see are too big and heavy. Remember that someone other than you will likely retrieve the bag, as the captain is busy trying to keep the boat upright and floating. If you can't grab it with one hand and run, it may be too big.

My idea of a good small boat survival plan starts with just that. A plan. A float plan. I tell my wife and also a couple of fishing buddies the actual wrecks I'll be fishing and the general direction and distance. "55 out West on the California" etc.

Next come the life jackets. Nothing other than a Type One will do. Put them on, size them to fit attach a whistle and at least two chemical light sticks to each and have them in a readily available location that is marked "life preservers".

Now for your ditch bag. I like the small waterproof gear bags found in dive shops.

Choose a bright color like yellow or OSHA orange.

A well-stocked small boat bag would, in my opinion, contain the following:

1 PLB

12 cyalumes (chemical light sticks)

1 mirror

1 length of light yet strong 1/4" or 3/8" Dacron line one and a half times the length of your boat.

3 dye packs

2 SOLAS rocket signals

2 SEA SUCKER suction cup handles.

1 Boson knife with lanyard.

All of these items are relatively maintenance free and waterproof. No C cell batteries to rely on. This bag may help; the DSC radio and EPIRB may help.

Learn and respect the limits of your skill and the limits of your boat. Listen to the weather and adjust your plans accordingly. We live on and play on the Gulf of Mexico and things can change very quickly. Remember this: If you find yourself off shore and disabled or overwhelmed by heavy seas don't set the anchor! Make a sea anchor by tying on anything with mass (except an anchor) to a long line and deploying it from the bow. A cooler works very well. Buckets work well. Milk crates work well. Your console cover or even your Bimini top works well. Setting a sea or drift anchor will set your bow to the seas and help keep your boat in time with the swells. The calming effect is very pronounced and effective and is the best means of avoiding a broach that I know of. I know this first hand but that my friends is a story for another day.