

ABANDON SHIP AND LIFE RAFTS

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The basic principle is not to abandon the vessel before it becomes evident that it will sink and after we have taken all measures to save it. The vessel is the best life raft.

The chance of survival aboard a boat is considerably higher than that aboard a life raft, where it may drop to 50%, as the survivors are faced with the unknown challenges of survival in a life raft that are mostly unprepared for.

A tragic example is the 1979 FASTNET Race. The 303 participating boats faced severe weather and high waves. Some crews, due to lack of experience and overcome by panic abandoned their vessels and boarded life rafts. In the following morning, the rescuers found the vessels afloat but, unfortunately, seven crew members had lost their life aboard the life rafts.

Actions before abandoning the vessel:

1. Make distress calls with DSC.
2. Activate the EPIRB unit and transfer it to the life raft.
3. Take with you the portable VHF device, the SART device and all available cellphones.
4. If we believe that other boats are within 20 nautical miles from our position, we deploy parachute flares.
5. Depending on the season and especially during winter, we dress in warm clothes, preferably of isothermal fabric and, if we have access to one, diving suit.
6. Make certain that all crew members are wearing their personal life jackets properly.
7. Take with you additional water, any personal medicines, anything useful from the vessel's medical cabinet and the grab bag with additional equipment.
8. Make certain that the life raft tether line is securely attached to the boat.
9. Launch the life raft from the leeward side of the vessel so that there is some protection from wind and waves, thus making boarding easier.

Caution: Launching the life raft prematurely may cause problems later on if you save the boat and have to sail through rough seas.

Dangers after abandoning vessel

The most serious problems encountered in a life raft are:

1. Sea sickness (nausea)
2. Large temperature variation, low night temperatures against high daytime temperatures.
3. Lack of drinking water.
4. Lack of food.
5. Lack of confidence and composure, usually leading to panic.
6. Difficulties in communication with the outside world.
7. Non-effective use of the survival equipment in the raft.
8. Loss of survival equipment

9. Risk of injury, ranging from dislocation to bleeding.
10. Deterioration of health problems among crewmembers.
11. Damage to the life raft that may lead to its sinking.

Dealing with the danger

Proper preparation is our best means of dealing with the above dangers. Proper preparation will also give the confidence to draw on the mental reserves required to survive. Through proper preparation the crew can join forces and together face the dangers.

Life raft equipment

The supplies and the equipment in a life raft are prescribed according to its navigation category. Apart from those included in the life raft, additional quantities of drinking water, isothermal waterproof clothing, personal medicines and communication equipment (VHF, EPIRB, SART) are necessary supplies.

Crew Management

The skipper of the vessel is responsible for the management of the crew and is leading the survival effort.

The skipper must communicate his strong belief that all crewmembers will overcome the difficult conditions presented to them. This will elicit the required mental power to the crew in order to remain alive. Therefore, the attitude and behavior of the skipper is of vital importance for the discipline and finally the survival of the crew. The most important duty of the skipper is to inspire solidarity among the crew.

Boarding the life raft

1. Jumping from the vessel onto the life raft, during boarding, should be avoided because there is danger of injury. The most capable member of the crew should board first placing himself on the windward side of the raft to prevent capsize from the wind force.
2. This will demonstrate to other crewmembers the difficulties they will face, the boarding procedure and fix any last details that will make it easier for the rest of the crew to board the raft without coming in contact with the water.
3. After all crewmembers have boarded the raft, it is time to cut the tether line and deploy the sea anchor. This will reduce the risk of the raft capsizing and limit drift.
4. After boarding, each crew member must sit himself as low as possible, remove his life jacket and use it as a seat (if conditions allow it). The life jacket will work as insulation.
5. Seasickness pills must be distributed. It is particularly important to avoid the effects of seasickness as any potential vomiting will adversely affect the crew.
6. The skipper will collect and distribute all available quantities of drinking water and dry food.
7. The skipper will assign watchman duties to all crew members. Short duty times are advised. In case of another ship in visual range the skipper must be notified, the communication devices (VHF and SART) must be activated, and parachute flares deployed.

8. The skipper should demonstrate the proper use of all communication devices with the purpose of extending their use for as long as possible. The target usage of a single battery pack should be at least 4 days.
9. The skipper should assign watches (with frequent rotation) with duties of listening to communication devices.
10. The skipper will make a virtual demonstration of the use of existing pyrotechnic devices and instruct the crew in sending distress signals with flashlight or mirror.
11. The skipper must device ways to keep the crew and their minds constructively occupied. This will keep the group calm and their morale high.
12. The skipper must allocate watches with medical and maintenance of equipment duties. Medical conditions (hypothermia, panic attack etc.) should be treated immediately. The crewman on duty responsible for equipment should make certain that it is functional and used properly. For example, make certain the EPIRB is active, and safely affixed to the raft, the radar reflector is in its proper position and so on.
13. Drinking water rationing should start 24 hours after boarding the life raft. Dry food (if available) rationing should start at the same time.
14. The skipper must supervise and forbid, with any means possible, behavior that may alienate and create divisions between members of the crew. His highest duty is to impose harmony and cooperation between the members of the group.
15. Another duty to be assigned is fishing, which can prove a beneficial activity for the crew.
16. The skipper must define basic hygiene procedures.
17. The skipper must prepare the crew for the rescue phase. He must set the order of rescue. The weaker crewmembers will need help from more capable ones.
18. The skipper must negotiate alternative rescue procedures with the rescue team if the required effort is deemed beyond the capabilities of his crew.
19. The skipper will supervise all rescue operations. He must inspire optimism to his crew. It is possible that the remaining life energy in a crewmember is not enough for the final effort required by the rescue attempt.
20. If a crewmember is seriously injured or develops a serious medical condition, it is of the utmost importance to keep him/her in good spirits and to make available extra supplies, as long as this does not endanger the rest of the crew. For instance, he/she may be allowed to drink more water than the rest but with a mind to the needs of other crewmembers.
21. If there is a fatality before rescue the corps must not remain in the raft. The responsibility of the skipper is to maintain the morale of the rest of the crew because negative psychology can be detrimental to the survival of all.
22. The skipper will be the last person to be rescued. He/she will be exhausted by the efforts of the rescue operation and his attempts to inspire and lead his crew.