DON FLEMING YACHT SERVICES, INC.

SEAMANSHIP

By Capt. Don Fleming

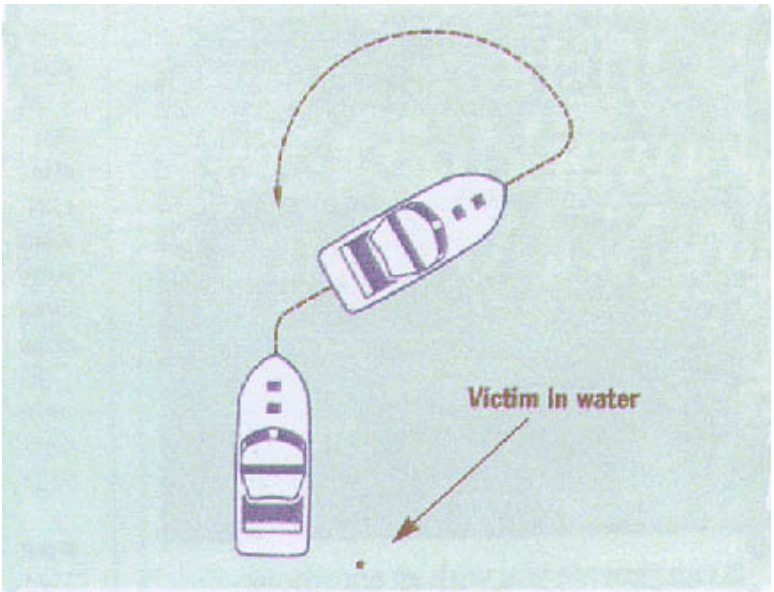
"Man Overboard"

The cry "Man Overboard!" is one of the most frightening sounds in boating. Here's what you can do to improve the odds of a safe recovery.

Although a man overboard can happen at any time, day or night, conditions are likely to be rough. Someone could be drunk, simply lose his footing or worse yet, fall over unbeknownst to anyone else aboard. In the event of a man overboard, the skipper is suddenly confronted with wide-ranging concerns: losing sight of the victim, controlling vessel stability, broaching, losing a second crew member, and running over the victim, to name a few. The situation demands proper, split-second decisions.

I once had a real scare while running a large motoryacht in perfectly flat seas. The owner's wife slipped off the forward sunning area when the boat rolled from a small wake. Luckily, she got caught in the railing and was okay, but I realized there was not enough reaction time to throttle down, shift to neutral, and turn before the boat would have passed her. Not surprising, since a boat doing 12 knots moves 20 feet per second.

And consider the victim. Kelsey Burr of Survival Technologies Group explains, "Going into the water unexpectedly causes disorientation, irrational thought, and exhaustion in less than a minute ....Sea spray and the ingestion of salt water is far more debilitating than you would think. It can be a real killer."



When no one has immediately realized someone has fallen overboard, the Williamson Turn is the best maneuver for finding and recovering the victim.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Even though sea conditions, handling characteristics, and number of crew vary on a case-by-case basis, here are some guidelines to follow when handling a man overboard situation.

1) The first person to see the incident yells "man overboard." The captain should immediately assign a spotter who never takes his or her eyes off the victim. This is the spotter's only job.

2) Throw or drop a marker package. The package should consist of at least a personal flotation device (PFD), marking pole, automatic strobe light, and sea anchor. Optional signaling equipment can include handheld and aerial flares, a smoke signaler, dye marker, horn, whistle, and mirror all in packs connected to the PFD. Because it is critical to get flotation to the victim quickly (in 15 seconds a boat travels 150 yards at 18 knots), the location of the packages) is also critical. Outboard but in close proximity to the helmsman is the obvious choice.

3) Hit the "MOB" (man overboard button) on your loran or GPS, but only after deploying the package.

4) Maneuver the boat back to the victim following directions from the spotter while the crew prepares for the rescue. There are three ways to accomplish this depending on conditions. In relatively calm conditions, it's best to simply throttle down and stop. When driving through choppy head seas, it may be better to turn sharply toward the side of the incident ("point the bow toward the victim") and continue circling around to approach from downwind. In heavy following seas, a maneuver called the "Williamson Turn" may be best because it will quickly bring you around on the reciprocal course, back toward the victim.

To make a Williamson Turn, start with a full-rudder turn toward the victim and continue until you are 60 degrees off your original course. Then swing the rudder hard over to the opposite side and hold it there until the full turn is complete. According to Capt. James Fitzpatrick, director of maritime education operations at Seamen's Church Institute in New York City, this maneuver leaves you one fuming diameter away from the point at which you began the turn and on the return course. He says it is best to keep your speed up throughout the turn, backing down only at the end of the straight run to the victim. The Navy does Williamson Turns with destroyers at over 30 knots!

The Williamson Turn is definitely the choice when no one immediately realizes that a victim has fallen overboard, but this desperate situation calls for some additional actions. An immediate fro should be taken, and a best estimate of the time of the occurrence should be determined. Plotting the course and estimated time of arrival (ETA) to the return area should allow for set and drift due to current, wind, and seas.

Once you return to a position slightly upwind of the approximate area of the incident, you should commence a systematic search pattern by working downwind in a series of courses, a few hundred yards apart, parallel to your original course.

Whenever a victim drops out of sight, you should contact the Coast Guard and nearby boats with the "Pan-Pan" urgent communications signal, not with "MAYDAY," as your boat is not in distress.

RESCUE APPROACHES

Approach the victim from downwind for the best control. Maneuver so that he is slightly off the bow about 20 to 40 feet away and heave a line from a secure area on the boat.

My advice is to forget about approaching from upwind and picking up the victim in the protection of your lee side. This technique is better suited for ships. In all but the calmest situations, where there are no seas to protect him from anyway, the danger of a relatively high windage, low-draft powerboat injuring the victim is too great a risk.

The victim may never have reached the flotation on the marker package so it is best to have a ring buoy or at least a fixed loop on the heaving line. The ring buoy will give some weight to the line, making it easier to throw in high winds.

Once the victim gets the line, the engines) should be put in neutral and the victim should be pulled to the area of lowest freeboard or the swim platform. Hauling the victim aboard is much more difficult than you'd imagine.

Harnesses and lifting tackles are best, but short of these, get your strongest crew to grab the victim by the belt and pull him aboard the boat. Kelsey Burr advises, "Get him aboard any way you can: comfort, bruises, scratches, cuts, and the like are a small price to pay to have him aboard."

If the victim is unconscious, a rescue swimmer may be necessary as a last resort. He or she should always wear a PFD and always be attached to the boat.

PREVENTIVE STEPS

Two items to be seriously considered for offshore, nighttime, heavy weather, and children are safety harnesses and jacklines, both long in use among ocean passagemakers. The best are made of strong nylon webbing and stainless steel hardware. With safety harnesses I recommend the use of double rather than single tethers for better freedom of movement and continuous attachment to the boat.

Jacklines are clipped to a strong fitting on the bow, run taught down the side decks, and cleated securely at the stem, so you can clip on before venturing out. Care must be taken to see that they run clear with no obstructions aft, so that if someone attached with tether and harness does fall overboard, he is not caught by a deck obstruction in the props) area. lacklines can also be run vertically to the flying bridge. Run a single line on the centerline of the boat, rather than follow an off-center ladder as this will better hold you in the boat during a fall. Obviously, different boat designs need varying configurations.

Final points include: Be aware of the possibility of a man overboard at all times. Slow down, especially when sending crew on deck. Develop clear, simple procedures that allow for the unexpected. Make sure that some of the drills include the captain as the man overboard.
