



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH SA 26-14



Off-Duty Boating Mishaps



File photo, not associated with mishap

The 101 Critical Days of Summer will soon be upon us, which means a surge in water-related activities including power and sail boating where people spend time in the sun, surrounded by tranquil water.

Soaking up the sun on a warm day while cruising around in a boat is a relaxing activity. Understanding your limits and your vessel's limits, identifying potential hazards and following essential water safety guidelines can mean the difference between a carefree experience and a dangerous, potentially fatal, situation. Let's dive into a few real-life boating scenarios where things didn't go as planned and discover key lessons to keep our anchors tight and our minds right!

Pontoon Ride Goes Awry

During a recreational boating trip, a service member lost their balance and fell from the bow of a pontoon boat as the boat operator slowed to enter a no-wake zone. The propeller struck the unfortunate passenger, causing a concussion, multiple lacerations to the head and shoulder and other less severe injuries. — *Whether on a boat as a passenger or the operator, all personnel must be mindful of the potential hazards for whatever the recreational activity they're involved in. Your situational awareness must change as the situation evolves. Anticipating what's about to happen is part of maintaining situational awareness. When on a boat in motion, ensure you're secure in case of unexpected speed and course changes, waves, etc. As the operator, you're in charge of passenger safety. Be aware of their position; communicate your intentions ahead of time and ensure acknowledgment.*

Fishing Trip Cut Short

When 12 service members set out for a deep-sea fishing trip the weather was favorable. The boat encountered rough seas roughly three hours into the trip (*no, Gilligan and the Skipper were not aboard*). One Marine was thrown from his seat and landed on his back, causing immense pain and cutting the fishing day short. Upon arrival back at the port, he was transported to the ER, where he was diagnosed with two fractured vertebrae. — *Given that seas and weather can change rapidly, it's critical to be acutely aware of a vessel's rocking motion during rough conditions. When encountering rough seas, passengers are advised to firmly hold on to secure handholds, keep their arms, legs, and heads safely inside the boat, and sit on the floor or as low and near the centerline as possible. This crucial positioning effectively lowers the boat's center of gravity, which in turn significantly reduces the risk of capsizing, increases overall stability, and ensures a less jarring ride for everyone onboard.*

Don't get Pulled by the Pulley

While sailing in a race, a service member grabbed the mainsheet (a rope used to control the mainsail) not realizing the potential danger if his hand were to contact the pulley it routed through. As the line slid through his hand, his hand moved into the pulley, partially severing his pinky fingertip. Medical personnel had to finish what the pulley started, amputating the fingertip to properly treat the injury. — *Never place fingers in, on or near pulleys (blocks) while the mainsheet is under load, as this is a common source of serious hand injuries associated with sailing. Although there are inherent risks in sailing, additional familiarization, training and experience with the intended sailing vessel before entering a fast-paced scrimmage/racing environment is crucial to mitigating those risks.*

Jawbreaker

During a sail-coaching exercise on a 51-foot sailboat, a Dog-Bone connector (small, high-strength aluminum or titanium fittings used to connect lines to sails) failed and was lost inside the mast, causing the main halyard to release. This sudden release of tension sent the starboard forward mainsheet block (a pulley located at the

gooseneck boom-to-mast connection point) swinging violently. The block assembly struck the service member in the face, resulting in a broken jaw, broken teeth and over two months recuperating. —*These connectors, frequently used in high-performance sailboat rigging to create soft shackle connections, are prone to failure if subjected to incorrect loading, sharp edges or improper installation. Equipment failures rarely give advance warning, so know your sails and loads involved; keep your eyes on the moving parts and be ready for the unexpected.*

No Wake Zone!

A Sailor anchored his boat, beaching it on a sandy shoal (one-quarter of the boat on land, three quarters in the waterway). To string a sunshade on his boat, he stood on the gunwale (the top edge of the boat's side, serving as the main structural reinforcer connecting the deck to the hull) and held on to the outrigger mount, maintaining two points of contact. Another boat unexpectedly passed through the 'narrows' waterway at high speed despite being a no-wake zone. The resulting wake rocked the Sailor's boat, causing him to lose his grip and footing, ending with a fall into the sand next to the boat. He stood up and realized he had pain and swelling in his right wrist. X-rays later revealed a broken wrist and fractured hand. — *Situational awareness is critical whether on or off duty. As with defensive driving, practice defensive boating. Assume other boaters may break rules or make unexpected moves. Stay alert and ready to react.*

Life Jackets—Not Just for Kids

A service member was operating a small boat alone in the evening while on vacation in the Caribbean. While en route to his destination, the boat hit a submerged stump in the channel. The service member, who was not wearing a life jacket or vest, suffered blunt force trauma to the head, fell overboard and drowned. — *This tragedy calls attention to the fact life jackets are crucial for adults and children, providing the primary defense against drowning during water activities. Life jackets provide necessary buoyancy; some types are designed to keep a person's head above water even if the person is unconscious, injured or exhausted. Choose the type based on your activity and expected environment. Each type has limitations, so read the label to determine the protection it offers.*

Key Takeaways

It's a reality of boating that you cannot control the actions of others, making defensive boating essential for safety. When navigating crowded waters or dealing with inexperienced boaters, you must prioritize your own safety through constant awareness, preparedness and proactive defensive measures.

- 1. Always wear a life jacket when boating.** This includes canoes, kayaks, paddleboards and the like, even if you're a great swimmer or don't intend on getting in the water. Decide to wear your life jacket now, so it's not the last important decision you make.
- 2. Have a risk-aware mindset.** Take time to stop and think through the activity. Tune into what could go wrong. Most importantly, never consume alcohol while operating a boat. Boating Under the Influence (BUI) is illegal and a significant cause of mishaps.
- 3. Know the navigation "rules of the road".** Knowing and following basic rules are critical to avoiding collisions, maintaining a proper lookout and operating at safe speeds. Key rules include passing on the left (port-to-port), yielding to the right (starboard) in crossings, maintaining safety gear (life jackets, fire extinguishers, etc.) and identifying and respecting no-wake zones.
- 4. Check forecasts early and often.** Before heading out, check the weather forecast for wind, waves and tides. While on the water, continuously monitor for changing conditions. If thunderstorms develop, seek shelter ashore immediately. If you can't make it back to shore, secure your vessel, lower antennas and keep a low profile. Rely on dedicated marine weather apps (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for the wind) over standard weather applications for the most accurate and current information.

And remember, "Let's be careful out there"