



The Weakest Link

by Ben Rayner



The May 2021 issue of the RISAA news magazine published an article (page 7) with some great insights concerning boating knowledge and operations. **Rick Black's** recollection of an incident on Block Island highlights a real problem on the water.

Many of us have witnessed close calls, fender bumps, and flung curses while boating. Though these are sometimes humorous or annoying, this anecdote draws focus to a true problem: most vessels on the water only have one person on board with the knowledge to operate it. What would the outcome have been if this had occurred with these individuals on the open water on the way back to Boston-how would that small inexperienced mate have dealt with that situation if the captain had become incapacitated or went overboard.

Sadly, for most boaters this is never a concern until and emergency arises. Smart water safety always stresses that the best way to survive a water emergency is to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

- Can your spouse/guest/child operate your vessel?
- Do they know how to pull an anchor?
- Do they know how to cut an anchor? And when an emergency is dire enough to do so?
- Do they know how to use the radio? Or even what channel to broadcast an emergency?
- Do those on board your vessel even know where they are, if an emergency developed?

There was a drowning incident in the Race several years ago that highlights how quickly sole repository of knowledge can manifest into a fatal incident.

After anchoring, the captain of a recreational vessel jumped overboard to cool off and was immediately taken by the current. His spouse not only didn't know how to operate the boat, she couldn't start it, couldn't raise the anchor, and couldn't even explain to the US Coast Guard where the emergency was when she called 911. Sadly, the man lost his life for reasons that were totally preventable.

Educate those on your vessel. Explain where fire extinguishers are. Explain how the marine radio works and what channel they should be on; these are simple, quick lessons that could save a life.

For those who are frequent guests, family or are so inclined, consider explaining how your vessel starts and operates. Let



them navigate out of the channel to give them some precious experience at the helm. They don't need docking, trolling, or thruster use skills, but simply knowing how to start and get a vessel underway could save an overboard victim or get a vessel to safety or medical care much more quickly.

My opinion on boating licenses is a topic for another article, but they are required to operate a boat in our region. However, there is a lot more to safe boating than red, right, return.

While conducting a safety seminar several years ago a student related an example that brings focus to how quickly and how dire water emergencies can be.

The student explained that while several miles off shore, touring Long Island Sound with his wife, this gentleman had a panic attack. He was convinced he was having a major heart attack. Either way, this incident incapacitated him. He couldn't speak or move and the panic in his wife's eyes resolved him to survive and learn from his experience.

Fortunately, his situation had a positive outcome. He and his wife was able to eventually get the vessel underway and make it safely to port and a hospital. But that incident compelled he and his wife to commit to getting her experience and provide the knowledge to deal

with an incident of this type in the future.

I can't tell you the number of times during the teaching of a safety class when this topic arises, the looks wives will give to husbands. That look is the realization that they are one medical or water incident way from a tragedy.

Can your 14 year daughter or her friends operate and/or call in an emergency if you suffer a medical episode or you're the one who is pitched overboard after being hit by a ferry wake?

Can your spouse do the same?

Do guests know where the fire extinguisher is?

And how to actually use it?

Do guests/family know where and how to even place an emergency call?

A few minutes of shared knowledge can answer these questions and keep everyone safe on the water.

Ben Rayner is a former survival instructor and award-winning journalist. He is Exec. Dir. of Water Emergency Training, Inc., a non-profit dedicated to drowning prevention. www.wateremergencytraining.org/