

A Simple Plan

by Ben Rayner



In terms of water safety, there may be no better resource than **Bill Thompson**. Thompson spent twenty-two years as an Aviation Survival Technician (AST) with the US Coast Guard. He was also among the original USCG personnel designated as a Rescue Swimmer. Having been stationed from Cape Cod, to Florida, to Hawaii, making countless rescues and recoveries, Thompson is in a unique position to provide advice for those on the water.

According to Thompson, “Whenever an accident occurs, someone always asks, ‘How did it happen?’ But accident investigators know that accidents don’t just ‘happen’; they are created. These events can usually be traced to a combination of three things; conditions, judgments, and acts.”



Thompson recalled a case from Florida in the 1990s in which three boaters drowned while on a fishing trip in the Gulf of Mexico. It was later determined that the men jumped into the ocean to cool off and lost their lives when they were unable to get back

on the boat. Investigators determined that this was likely nothing more than a quick, leisurely, cool-down swim that turned tragic.

Thompson said, “So when you look at the tragedy in its entirety, being 20 miles offshore were the “conditions.” The decision to jump into the ocean, that far offshore without a PFD, was poor “judgement.” The “act” of actually doing so, was the final straw.”

Though this type of incident is not typical, according to Thompson, it demonstrates the how lack of planning leads to emergencies.

Sadly, in this particular case, the men did leave a float plan with loved ones, but it wasn’t enough.

“They told people that they would be home by dark, which was a good thing,” Thompson recalled. “But it’s a huge ocean out there and in this case the search area was too big. The smaller the search area, the more condensed it is, the better the results. Time is a luxury you don’t have in an emergency especially in colder waters like New England.”

So what is a proper float plan?

According to Thompson, letting people know when you’ll be back is only part of a float plan, where is even more vital. Thompson has witnessed numerous missing person incidents where assets lost valuable search time looking in the wrong area.

Thompson has several recommendations for “Proper Prior Planning”.

“A large percentage of people don’t even file a float plan, what I would do if I was going out-I would circle a spot on a map so that people know where I’ll be,” said Thompson. “But

the key to any plan is be specific. Show someone an area on a map or give as precise a location as possible.”

Thompson also said any water recreationist or shore angler should provide a plan to someone on shore.

He also cautions that a float plan and any general safety knowledge shouldn’t be kept by a sole individual on board a vessel. If that one person who knows the plan, knows the emergency equipment; radio, starting the boat, etc, goes overboard, or is the one who becomes incapacitated, prior planning is of little use.

“We do the same thing before very flight. As part of the pilot’s checklist he gathers everyone on board and gives us the details on where and what, we will be doing. It just makes sense to provide info to those on board,” said Thompson.

Thompson further recommends that any changes to your plan be communicated to people on land as well. Any fisherman will tell you that angling has to be fluid and mid-trip changes often occur. Even in this day of electronics, folks in the midst of the chase may forget to alert those on land of changes.

“Let someone know if you alter your plan. With the availability of electronics and gadgets these days it’s not hard to do,” said Thompson.

According to Thompson, he has found numerous “lost” boaters at a local dockside watering hole or back at the marina because of poor planning and lack of communication. An unnecessary search not only endangers responders, it can take assets away from where they may actually be needed.

When asked to encapsulate what boaters need to do to stay safe, Thompson reflected, “What I began to notice over the course of my career is that many of the Search and Rescue cases I was dispatched on, tended to have two things in common; lack of preparedness and poor decision-making.

Never get so focused on fishing, or getting there, or doing one task that you forget about safety. Simply file a plan of the day’s activities with someone before you leave.”

A Good Float Plan:

- Includes not only when, but where you will be.
- Update your on-shore contact if plans change while underway.
- Establish a check in time with someone on shore-after which contact should be made between you and them.
- If that contact fails to be established-have a second time where your on-shore contact, then contacts the USCG if you cannot be reached.

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.

Bill Thompson was a member of the USCG for twenty-two years. He now works as the Training Safety Manager at the U.S. Coast Guard’s - Underwater Egress Trainer in Elizabeth City, NC.