

Introduction

Many people in yachts drown in rather predictable ways, so, I have written this precautionary tale. It is worth considering some of the observations made by individuals that have suffered near disasters, so that drownings can be mitigated. Not included in this, was the tale told by my old mate Graham Hume (of Bachelor's Wife) who observed a couple rowing through a passage after their boat dragged its anchor, in a gale in Fiji. Neither they nor their yacht were ever seen again. What would you have done?

Drownings

No kidding, here I was, a strong and former champion swimmer, nearly drowning. Drink had made it seem a good idea to swim to the wharf. Sinking, I managed to seize hold of a ladder. The worst part of the experience, was the insouciance. To go under did not seem such a tragedy in my inebriated state. Swimming required a co-ordination that was lacking and the insouciance was similar to the lack of concern exhibited by drunk drivers.

My experience brings to mind recent publicised dinghy drownings. I ask myself why the following happened:

"AN 81-YEAR OLD man died yesterday morning after falling out of a boat on Lake Macquarie.

The Sunshine Coast man and his wife, aged in her mid-50s, had been climbing from a dinghy to their 35-foot yacht moored in Lake Macquarie about 2am yesterday, police said.

"They were trying to climb on to the yacht and both fell in the water," Newcastle Water Police Sergeant Justin Harrison said. "The weather was perfect."

The woman lost sight of her husband, clung to the hull of the dinghy and remained in the water for some time, police said."



Would This more stable Tender have helped.

And then Harry Driftwood a writer with Afloat magazine reported on a boating death as follows

“ ‘Yes, Man!’

‘Hans is dead!’

Jeezuz wept! Like a blow to the solar plexus: Hans is dead! But shite he canna be dead?

Sadly shockingly TRUE. A lovely bloke; kindly, humorous, helpful. Gone just like that. One of our small group of watermen found his boat aground and Hans in the water. Details sketchy to date. The price of liberté is internal vigilance to paraphrase a bit and also the price of life itself is the same. A momentary carelessness for an excess of Hubris and you are snatched by the Hag and you are rummaging you kick to find the fare for the Ferryman over the Styx.

A week later Harry himself was dead, drowned from a dinghy as described in the following report.

It turns out that 'arry's carking was somewhat fitting for an old sea coot. After a morning of shopping, eating, socialising at nearby Birkenhead Point 'arry was last seen in his dinghy headed back across the water to Driftwood (*his yacht*). He never made it. What happened is unclear but the dinghy has still not been found (it must have sunk). 'arry's backpack was seen floating by one of his mooring field neighbours and his body was found a short time later. An apt way to go but sad nonetheless.

Disgracefully, Actress Natalie Wood was drowned in a dinghy incident after drinking with Christopher

Walken and Robert Wagner. She apparently fell into the water while moving noisy dinghies at night and was heard but could not be seen in the fog so nobody searched for her. By contrast my friend Warren Mills was able to hear an embarrassed overboard Englishman calling: "I say, I say....." in heavy fog in Poole harbor. He and his friend found him, hearing is directional after all, giving lie to the excuses for not rescuing that lovely actress.

How this kind of thing happens is explained below:

That coulda been fatal ... it coulda

I've just arrived home after a near-death experience on the water which I would like to share with you in the hope that someone may learn from it and perhaps modify some part of their practice to prevent a similar occurrence. I am pretty fit and have owned yachts for over 25 years with a lot of ocean-going experience.

Today I rowed out on my own to my moored boat; once alongside I tied the painter to a stanchion and stupidly used the gunwale of the yacht to help me stand up – something I've done hundreds of times. This time something went wrong with my balance and the dinghy shot out from under me leaving me hanging from the gunwale with my feet in the bow of the dinghy.



A better way of standing up.

I tried to inch the dinghy towards me with my feet but that didn't work. There was nothing for it but to let go. I swam forward to where I knew a line was hanging overboard, attached to a rope ladder designed to cater for just such an occasion. Problem was that the line wasn't there!

I swam back to the dinghy with great difficulty – fully clad with a heavy jumper and wearing shoes. The marina was only 200m away. I thought that if I flipped onto my back and swam slowly it should not be a problem – nor would it have been but for my negative buoyancy and the 10kts wind blowing! Luckily I had enough sense to abandon the idea.

I tried climbing back into the dinghy again but that proved impossible. I thought of going up the mooring line but realised that in my waterlogged state that also would be beyond me. So I just hung on, sort of vaguely hoping that someone would see me; really, no other plan came to mind! And someone did and hauled me into their tender and took me ashore. Lucky!

I must admit that I had always been slightly sceptical to the suggestion that one should always wear a life jacket while on the water. I've changed my mind!

There is no way of overcoming the fact that swimming while fully clothed is almost impossible; the other two lessons I have learned are: To absolutely ensure that a means of climbing aboard is always to hand; and, to install some device in the dinghy (eg a line attached to the transom) to help one stand up without having to use any part of the yacht.

These may seem elementary but the regrettable fact is that I hadn't implemented them!

Peter Lublin

Wombi II



Climbing into a suitable dinghy from a stern rope loop might be simpler than climbing onto a yacht.

And another way of drowning was related to me while I was in the West Indies. An Australian, on hearing I had been to St. Helena asked me:

“Do you remember a bloke called Fernandez that used to paddle around the boats?”

Indeed I did, he was a nice helpful chap that used to paddle and sweep a small barge to tend boats in the anchorage.

“ A funny thing happened, we got him on the pis and next morning he was found floating in the water. I suppose it wasn’t really funny, he had his fly undone and we reckon he must have been taking a pis and fell over.”

They say many drownings are caused in this manner and that the proof is the open fly.

Incidentally, I gained access to the archives in St. Helena and amongst the dreary minutiae there was a tale of an English antislavery frigate overwhelmed by a French slaver in about 1742 if my memory is correct. The French captain demanded to know where the English captain had hidden his gold (which must have been used for trading). The Englishman insisted there was none, so, the demand was made of the first mate. When he gave the same answer, the captain and he, were strapped back to back and thrown over the side. That is another way of drowning that we don’t have to deal with today.

A more generalized account summarizing the problem appears below:

“ What occurs in Britain is, old codgers have a few beers then row out to their yacht. The accident occurs as they try to embark, either drift off in the current or cannot climb into the dinghy or up the side of the yacht. Hypothermia accounts for most deaths in this case. Wearing life jackets does make recovering the bodies easier.”

I guess we might conclude that these yachting drownings are often related to the use of their dinghies. The cause of death in descending order would be as follows:

1. Alcohol
2. Old age
3. Carelessness
4. Illness
5. Tiredness or exhaustion.
6. Inappropriate tender.
7. Overweight and unfit

Well, the tenderness of my liver has told me I cannot drink anymore so one element of danger is eliminated, but the tenderness of most dinghies does make me wonder. After designing, building and using the mudskipper I decided it might be time to design and build its big brother. The story of this is told in the article on the Kiss dinghy.

The official version of drownings, courtesy of Ash Breeze magazine.

The Instinctive Drowning Response – so named by Francesco A. Pia, Ph.D., is what people do to avoid actual or perceived suffocation in the water. And it does not look like most people expect. There is very little splashing, no waving, and no yelling or calls for help of any kind. To get an idea of just how quiet and undramatic from the surface drowning can be, consider this: It is the number two cause of accidental death in children, age 15 and under (just behind vehicle accidents) – of the approximately 750 children who will drown next year, about 375 of them will do so within 25 yards of a parent or

other adult. **In ten percent of those drownings, the adult will actually watch them do it, having no idea it is happening** (source: CDC). Drowning does not look like drowning – Dr. Pia, in an article in the Coast Guard’s On Scene Magazine, described the instinctive drowning response like this:

1. Except in rare circumstances, drowning people are physiologically unable to call out for help. The respiratory system was designed for breathing. Speech is the secondary or overlaid function. Breathing must be fulfilled, before speech occurs.
2. Drowning people’s mouths alternately sink below and reappear above the surface of the water (I have seen this happen in my own five year old child when he fell overboard before I could rescue him). The mouths of drowning people are not above the surface of the water long enough for them to exhale, inhale, and call out for help. When the drowning people’s mouths are above the surface, they exhale and inhale quickly as their mouths start to sink below the surface of the water.
3. Drowning people cannot wave for help. Nature instinctively forces them to extend their arms laterally and press down on the water’s surface. Pressing down on the surface of the water, permits drowning people to leverage their bodies so they can lift their mouths out of the water to breathe.
4. Throughout the Instinctive Drowning Response, drowning people cannot voluntarily control their arm movements. **Physiologically, drowning people who are struggling on the surface of the water cannot stop drowning and perform voluntary movements such as waving for help, moving toward a rescuer, or reaching out for a piece of rescue equipment.**
5. From beginning to end of the Instinctive Drowning Response people’s bodies remain upright in the water, with no evidence of a supporting kick. Unless rescued by a trained lifeguard, these drowning people can only struggle on the surface of the water from 20 to 60 seconds before submersion occurs.

(Source: On Scene Magazine: Fall 2006)

This doesn’t mean that a person that is yelling for help and thrashing isn’t in real trouble – they are experience aquatic distress. Not always present before the instinctive drowning response, aquatic distress doesn’t last long – but unlike true drowning, these victims can still assist in there own rescue. They can grab lifelines, throw rings, etc.

Look for these other signs of drowning when persons are n the water:

- Head low in the water, mouth at water level
- Head tilted back with mouth open
- Eyes glassy and empty, unable to focus
- Eyes closed
- Hair over forehead or eyes
- Not using legs – Vertical
- Hyperventilating or gasping
- Trying to swim in a particular direction but not making headway
- Trying to roll over on the back
- Ladder climb, rarely out of the water.

So if a crew member falls overboard and every looks O.K. – don’t be too sure. Sometimes the most common indication that someone is drowning is that they don’t look like they’re drowning. They may just look like they are treading water and looking up at the deck. One way to be sure? Ask them: “Are you alright?” If they can answer at all – they probably are. If they return a blank stare – you may have less than 30 seconds to get to them. And parents: children playing in the water make noise. When they get quiet, you get to them and find out why.

