



# SAFETY & SEA SURVIVAL

OFFSHORE YACHT RACING CAN BE A DANGEROUS SPORT, SO HOW DO SAILORS PREPARE THEMSELVES FOR THE RISKS OF GOING SEA? *OFFSHORE YACHTING* ATTENDED A SAFETY & SEA SURVIVAL COURSE AT PACIFIC SAILING SCHOOL TO SEE WHAT SKIPPERS AND CREWS LEARN ABOUT SAFETY.

By Matthew Henry

The 1998 Sydney Hobart will be long remembered for the colossal storm system which bore down on Bass Strait, whipping up mountainous seas and violent winds and, tragically, claiming six lives. At the peak of the storm's cruel strength, crews were subjected to tempests of truly unimaginable proportions. With yachts broken, many sailors were forced to abandon ship, taking their chances afloat in the raging ocean, a long way from land and many hours from rescue.

The remarkable tales of survival from the '98 disaster are both inspiring and frightening. Today, they serve to remind us of the real dangers inherent in the sport of ocean racing and should cause ocean racers to pause and ask: am I prepared? What would I do in the case of an emergency?

Yachting Australia's Safety & Sea Survival Course is designed to answer these questions for skippers and crews who intend to leave safety of protected waters for the thrill of offshore ocean racing.

For the yachting community, a decade later and the ill fated '98 race continues to resonate, not just in the memories of those touched by the events but in the sport's growing safety culture. The SSSC was developed in direct response to the 1998 Sydney Hobart and it's now mandatory for at least 50 per cent of crewmembers participating in a Category 1 ocean race (such as the Rolex Sydney Hobart) and 30 per cent for Category 2 races to have completed the course before a yacht qualifies to line up for the start.

I recently attended the course for *Offshore Yachting* courtesy of Pacific Sailing School, which operates out of the RANSA building a minute's walk

up the road from the CYCA in Ruschcutters Bay. The course was conducted over two consecutive Saturdays for a total of 16 hours face time, which includes theory and a multiple choice exam as well as practical components such as learning how to use flares and a the notorious "wet drill".

## THEORY AND THE EXAM

The theory component, held for the entire first day and for half of the second day of the course, is great for getting skippers and crews to think carefully about their own safety procedures, from pre-race preparations and planning through to responding effectively in emergency situations. Above all, the course serves as a reminder that there so much to consider before heading offshore and none of it can be taken for granted. Habits as simple as making lists of responsibilities so everyone is clear on their role, and briefing all crew on the location of essential safety gear can save lives.

Among the subjects studied are helicopter rescues, rough weather, boat handling, emergency communications, abandoning ship, fire prevention and an introduction to safety gear.

The instructors keep the course interactive, throwing out some 'what if' scenarios to get the group thinking. For example: "what would you do if you were racing offshore and your rudder broke off?" Most the class assumed that streaming sheets over the transom would restore some steerage; or removing a floorboard and strapping it to a spinnaker pole to create a rudder. But had anyone in the room actually tried or practiced these methods? Nope. Examples like this show the course is fantastic at

dispelling myths and encouraging crews to incorporate emergency drills into their regular training to see what works and what doesn't before it's a life threatening situation.

At the end of the practical course there's a multiple choice exam requiring an 80 per cent mark to pass with around 40 questions.

## FLARES AND THE WET DRILL

The practical aspect of the course firstly gets you accustomed to the variety of flares available and how and when to use them. The second part, the "wet drill", is conducted by Pacific Sailing School at the Sydney University pool.

If you've never been in the drink in full wet weather sailing gear, prepare to be shocked. The additional weight of wet gear, which can hold up to 20-30kgs of water, makes even the most simple tasks difficult. Swimming and even climbing the ladder out of the pool are immeasurably harder – it's difficult to imagine the effort of throwing raging seas, cold water and fear into the equation.

Apart from doing plenty of swimming and floating around for three hours, the wet drill gets crews to practice deploying and using the liferaft safely, strategies to keep together and stay warm in the absence of a liferaft and perhaps above all, clearly impresses on you how much you do not want to go overboard.

In fact, one of the lasting impressions of the course for me was this very point – prevention is the key to safety and preparing all crews members to avoid dangerous situations is paramount. When you consider that serious accidents are likely to happen in heavy seas and bad weather, where visibility and boat handling could be serious problems, one of the best



outcomes of this course is to impress just how critical situations can get while ocean racing.

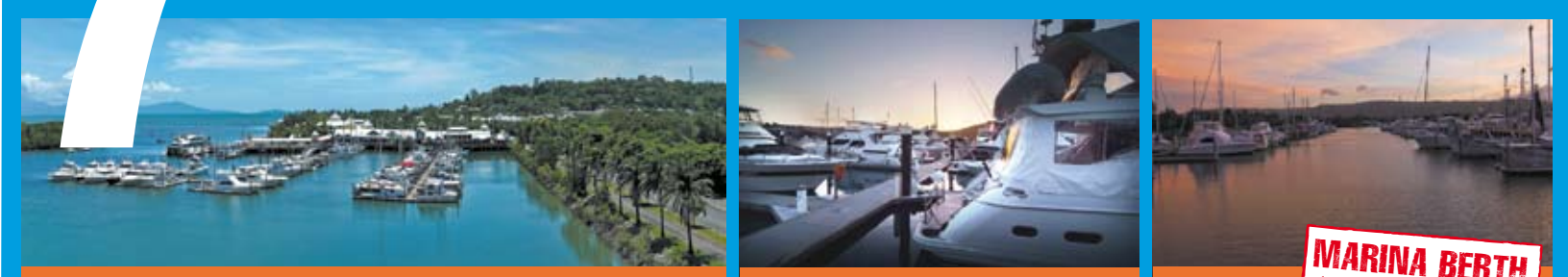
The key it would seem is to walk away not just with a head full of new ideas about safety and a certificate which lets you go ocean racing, but add to that a commitment to work together as a crew to implement and practice the skills. There's no question they could save lives if disaster ever strikes your boat. ○

## FAST FACTS

- The SSSC certificate is valid for five years
- Refresher courses are available for expired certificates
- Cost: \$535 (full course), \$390 (update)
- Dates for upcoming two-day courses are: 5-6 and 12-13 December, 23-24 January, April 17-18
- PSS will run an un-scheduled course for a group of six or more
- Contact: (02) 9326 2399

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