

ABANDON SHIP

THE THOUGHT OF ABANDONING SHIP STRIKES THE DEEPEST FEAR INTO A SEAFARER'S HEART. READ ON TO LEARN HOW TO PREPARE FOR AND AVOID THE WORST.

By Hugh Ferrar and Pacific Sailing School

Photography: Rolex/Daniel Forster

"Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground – long heath, brown furze, anything. The wills above be done, but I would fain die a dry death."

– *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare

When a skipper makes the call "abandon ship", he is preparing to entrust his life to people and situations completely out of his control, and even if he survives, he has lost his ship – the ultimate embarrassment for any skipper. However, history tells us that sometimes there is no alternative course of action, in fact probably everyone who reads this knows at least one person who has had to abandon his ship, although generally skippers are a little reluctant to talk about these traumatic events. This is unfortunate, as in every case there are lessons to be learned.

During the 1998 Sydney Hobart race five yachts were lost; a sixth was abandoned and later salvaged. These yachts were well prepared for offshore racing, with experienced sailors on board. What went wrong and what went through the skippers' minds leading up to the order to abandon ship?

1998 SYDNEY HOBART DISASTER

Most of the Coroner's recommendations following the 1998 Sydney Hobart related to the quality of safety equipment and training in its use. There are times when disasters are unavoidable, and we should therefore take every precaution possible to be able to cope with them when they do. This has meant some changes to the equipment, and also the requirement that at least 50 per cent of the crew and the sailing master or skipper must have completed a Safety & Sea Survival Course within the previous five years. This is really just common sense – if you are planning on any offshore voyage of more than a few hours then not having the knowledge and skills that come from a Safety & Sea Survival Course is somewhere between foolish and downright stupid.

Prepare for the worst. Every time you get on a boat, go through that check list, make sure you know where all the gear is, that you know how to use it and that it is all in good condition and ready for use. Go through some scenarios of when you might use this equipment, and think of what could possibly go wrong – when did you last lay out your anchor cable? Check all the shackles and check for wear and corrosion.

Next, how well prepared is your crew? If you ever have to use your emergency gear, it will most likely be in the middle of the night, in uncomfortable weather. Half the crew will be seasick and the other half haven't slept for two days, nerves are frayed, decision making is impaired (all of which may have contributed to getting into this situation in the first place). This is no time to be learning where equipment is stored and how to use it, do a few drills in good weather, and find out what you don't know. Then, when the proverbial hits, you will be far better placed to make life saving decisions.

PREVENTION

"Swimming is a sign of failure in a yachtsman." – Anonymous

Abandoning ship is never good – so can you avoid it? What causes a disaster at sea? Usually the combination of several factors. Consider these extracts from a log from a delivery:

Day 9: Prop shaft leaking more than usual, electric bilge pump failed and may have been the cause of constant blown fuses in the main switch board, fault with bilge pump bare connection in bilge water. Disconnected and used whale pumps.

Day 10: Saloon whale pump failed, split rubber where handle slots in.

Day 11: Whale pump in cockpit failed, same as saloon pump. Now down to buckets.

Skandia crew scrambling for the liferaft in the Rolex Sydney Hobart 2004 after her canting keel snapped off mid-race.

After that the situation deteriorated steadily until the yacht was abandoned on a reef. If a serious problem occurs, if you keep calm, remember your drills, and act decisively then you may save the ship. If you don't know what to do, or if panic sets in, then all is lost.

In Bass Strait in 1959 the *Winston Churchill* crashed off a wave and suffered hull damage. On that occasion the crew were able to stem the flow of water through the hull and beach the vessel, action that must have required the highest level of clear thinking and decisive action. In an emergency situation, or in a liferaft, the best leader may not be the officially designated skipper.

BOAT PREPARATION

So how well prepared is your boat for the passage? Delivery skippers often find themselves in the situation of sitting on a second hand yacht that someone has let run down for a few years, holding a survey report by an inspector who is friends with the broker selling the yacht, and who hasn't looked underneath it. He now finds that the electrics are flaky, the pumps are dodgy (or in the boot of the owner's car, from personal experience), the engine overheats when it runs, which is never for long because the fuel tanks are full of the black death. The anchor cable is rusty and the anchor is far too small. There is vibration in the propeller which will damage the sterntube gland and the engine mountings; and the survey won't tell you where the water is going to come in when it does get rough. Sometimes a previous attempt to deliver the boat has failed, for reasons which are now up to the new skipper to find out for himself.

Well, none of that would happen on your boat, would it? Think of all the different things that can go wrong, how you might prevent them, how you can detect the problem and solve it before it becomes a disaster. A small leak might short out the high water alarm, so you only discover that the bilge pump is blocked when your feet get wet; or you find a split hose and then you find out that the seacock connected to it is seized open? Prepare your boat so that nothing should go wrong, have action plans to deal with the things that do go wrong, and then try out the plans, you will then be far better placed to make those life saving decisions.

The danger of a fire on board cannot be exaggerated. Check that fire extinguishers are in good condition and all crew know how to use them, but prevention is infinitely better than cure.

Grant Wharington contemplating the upturned *Skandia*, adrift in the Tasman Sea.



Yendys to the rescue for *Skandia* crew.

PASSAGE PREPARATION

Delivery skipper: "You know why the *Titanic* sank, don't you?"

Owner: "She hit an iceberg."

Skipper: "No, she sank because the owner refused to listen to the master."

Many yacht losses are caused by a single major incident, generally hitting something else. Collisions with other vessels should be avoidable, don't allow your yacht to hit a bulk carrier for example, it doesn't matter whose fault it is, you will come off second best. Sailing single handed along shipping channels cannot be recommended.

Avoiding lumps of rock or mud is generally best achieved by careful passage planning. Remember that if things turn nasty, everyone will be tired, cold and/or seasick, decision making will be compromised, so the more comprehensive your planning the less you leave to chance. "Wide is good, deep is better"; if you keep a mile or so away from anything solid then you will have time to react when something breaks or the wind shifts at the worst possible time. This also means it won't matter if your GPS is set to the wrong datum (it might make a difference later though). Plan passage times, work out what currents to expect, when you expect to sight lights etc. Prepare some contingency plans and research your alternative safe havens. This applies especially for delivery trips or cruising, as you may be short handed, and too busy dealing with emergencies to check if the vessel is in danger. The best and most experienced skippers still make mistakes occasionally.

These are all basic Coastal Navigation & Passage Making skills – if you're going to take a yacht to sea, then learning how to do so safely might save your boat and yourself.

WHAT ABOUT THE WEATHER?

Garth: "This is the sort of weather that sorts the men out from the boys".

Ian: "Yes, the boys are out sailing, the men are in the bar."

What about the weather? A cruising skipper will say, "You meet enough bad weather without setting off in it." However, if you're preparing for a race you don't have that luxury – instead you are reminded of Fundamental Rule 4. Should some of the yachts in the 1998 Sydney Hobart Race have withdrawn? Even with the benefit of hindsight, this a very hard question to answer. Several skippers sought shelter, which may have saved them from a worse fate, once you're down to your storm jib there isn't much difference between racing and just keeping the boat pointed in one direction.

It might appear that modern lightweight, high performance racing yachts may be more likely to suffer serious damage in extreme weather, but



Stephen Ainsworth's former *Loki* was abandoned when her rudder snapped off in the 2007 Middle Sea Race.

the only vessel that sank before her crew could be rescued was the *Winston Churchill*, a 56-year-old traditional timber yacht that contested the first Sydney Hobart race. At the other extreme are multihulls, which tend to float almost as well upside down as the right way up – there are stories of abandoned catamarans floating round for months. If you are planning an ocean passage in a multihull you should have a capsize survival plan – all your emergency supplies and equipment must be accessible with the vessel inverted. You may want to activate your liferaft and use it for shelter, you will also need your EPIRB and water.

But as long as the vessel remains afloat, remember the first rule of abandoning ship: "don't". It remains an inescapable fact that, however well prepared you are, the forces of nature may still exceed your capabilities or that of your vessel. Prepare as thoroughly as you can, and you will give yourself the best chance of a safe passage.

Weather forecasts for more than a few days out are informed guesswork, so if you will be more than a day's voyage from a safe haven you need to be prepared for the worst. **O**

Hugh Ferrar is a Pacific Sailing School Instructor and Yachting Australia Yachtmaster Instructor. This article is the first instalment in a new series of safety articles by Pacific Sailing School for Offshore Yachting. For further information Tel: (02) 9326 2399, email info@pacificsailingschool.com.au or visit www.pacificsailingschool.com.au

The views expressed in this article do not represent the views of the CYCA and do not purport to be other than for general information. No reliance should be placed upon the views expressed with the article.

Are you the sort of person who gives the Salvos a few dollars on the grounds that sooner or later someone you know will need them? Well by the same logic, support the new amalgamated Marine Rescue whenever you can – sooner or later they may save you or your vessel. If you have spare time at weekends (what's that?) put in some volunteer time on the water, this will get you some useful training and may get you involved in a Search & Rescue operation without having to sink your boat first.

touch_{of} genius



Scrolling, panning, function selection and every-day navigation essentials are literally at your finger tips. Use the slick touch screen for quickness and ease in calm conditions or revert to hard keys when the rain starts pouring and the going gets rough.

New E Series Wide – enjoy the best of both worlds.



Available from over 100 authorised Raymarine dealers Australia wide. For your nearest dealer call 02 9479 4800.

Raymarine®