Rescue Me A rescue swimmer's life hangs on your preparedness at sea
By Mario Vittone

Freezing and alone in the dark, 300 miles at sea, rescue swimmer Mike Odom lashes his arms to his life raft. He knows he'll be dead soon and wants us to find his body. Meanwhile, up in the chopper, the three sailors that he put in the back with me don't know that we don't have enough gas to get back. Not in this headwind. Pilot Jay Balda is thinking that his crew might be dead soon and it's all his fault. Mark, our flight mechanic, is silently staring at the broken hoist cable thinking it's his. I'm crying now, afraid for my friend and terrified for myself. I just want to live.

Ironically, the two people with the best chance of making it are on the 40-foot sailing yacht *Mirage*, the one we flew out to "rescue." They're on their way to St. Thomas, making six knots under sail in a watertight boat.

On that night in January of 1995 I had been a Coast Guard rescue swimmer for less than a year. Since I'm still here to write about it, obviously I survived. My friends and I—and the three men who jumped from their seaworthy boat—got lucky 12 years ago. A miraculous 180-degree shift in wind direction just when we needed it most allowed us to land the chopper in Wilmington, North Carolina, instead of in the ocean. Thanks to the heroics of our C-130 crew—who shut down two engines so they could stay on-scene—Mike wasn't lost. He was recovered, albeit unconscious from hypothermia, five and a half hours later by a second helicopter. He was back in the water on another rescue just a few days later.

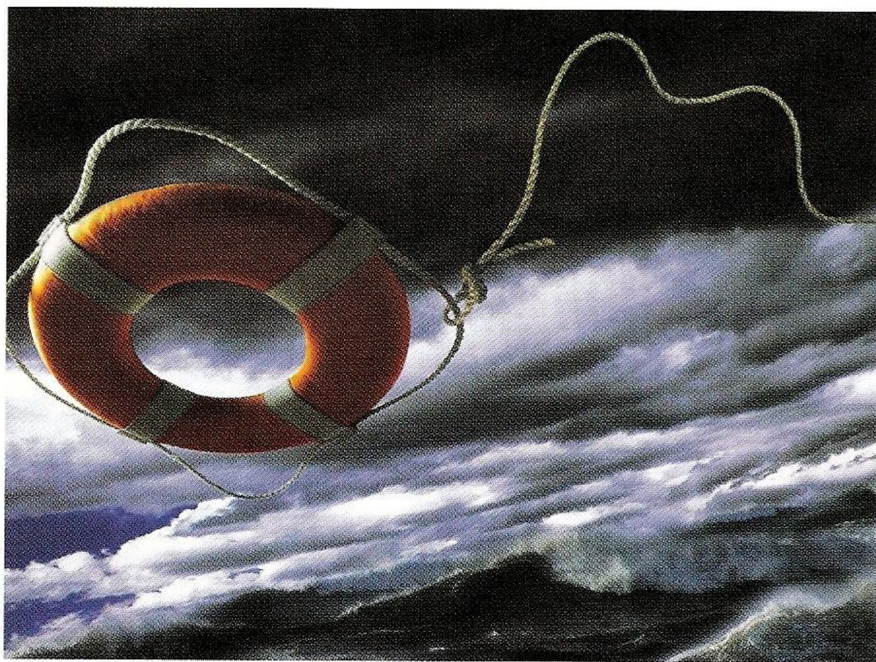
But for a long time I was angry about the circumstances that brought us to the brink. Today, however, I can say that the *Mirage* crew did the best they could with the information they had. Their experience had led them to believe that being offshore was easy and fun and nothing really goes wrong. When a late winter storm churned up an angry sea and they took a hard knockdown, they weren't emotionally or physically ready for it.

My point here isn't about fault, but saving lives—the lives of those of you who go to sea, and the lives of those of us who are called on to rescue you when heavy weather comes into play. How to be ready for it? When I interviewed the experts, it became clear: Success in foul weather is about spending some time playing and practicing in it—on purpose.

"Heavy weather is a relative term: 35 knots—a gale—can seem like a survival storm if you have no experience," says Steve Dashew, veteran cruiser, yacht designer, and co-author (with his wife Linda) of *Surviving the Storm: Coastal & Offshore Tactics*. "Given the ease of summoning help now, you get people frightened of moderate conditions, who then stop working the boat, and just want to get off."

Dashew's point: "If the goal is successful offshore voyaging, then the most important thing any potential cruiser can do is learn how to handle his boat in general and in adverse weather. By going out in increasingly unpleasant situations—however that is defined—you gain experience and equally important, increase your anxiety threshold."

TEST YOURSELF: Personal skill sets are far more important than the hardware on a boat. If you only go out on sunny days, you aren't going to be ready for a blow.



HANGING ON: When things go wrong offshore, you need to be prepared, not rely on the Coast Guard.

Husband and wife team, Lin and Larry Pardey, are not likely to install a wine cooler, theater system, or even air conditioning on their boats—items many consider essential to comfort afloat. But they are experts at staying comfortable in extremely heavy weather. Authors of *The Self-Sufficient Sailor*, they were laying up recently in Ventura, California, working on an updated version of their acclaimed *Storm Tactics Handbook*. Lin Pardey advises gradually increasing your comfort in progressively harsher conditions before attempting an offshore voyage. "You need to get your sea legs first," Lin says. "What Larry and I suggest to people is that they find 15 knots of sustained breeze, run hard on the wind and carry something heavy—a bucket of water perhaps—from stern to bow and back again. Then do the same thing in 25 knots of wind, and 35. Then you'll have an idea how to move around in heavy weather."

You'll also have an idea of materials and décor suitable for going offshore. That marble floor in the dining area may be beautiful, but you'll want to find a different place to walk with your wet deck shoes in 10-foot seas. Hand rails inside and 6,000 pound test jack lines on deck may spoil an uncluttered appearance, but they are essential safety items that can cost you everything if absent.

Lin Pardey believes that the number one problem in offshore cruising is that when bad weather comes, people simply don't (or can't) rest enough. "Fatigue is the killer," she says. "When things get rough out there, the rule is half the crew head down below, half the time. Not just off the helm," she insists, "but truly resting."

That advice was impossible to take for one owner who had called the Coast Guard for rescue. There was absolutely nothing wrong with *Marine Flower II*, a 64-foot sloop 380 miles off the coast of Virginia. But the "crew" for the captain's crossing to Bermuda was his 13-year-old daughter, wife, and infant son. Once the wind picked up and the moderately heavy seas started rolling he was by himself; his wife could only hold the baby.

After a valiant 40-hour effort to single-hand his boat against 60-knot winds and 25-foot seas, he yielded to better judgment and called for rescue. Several high-risk helicopter hoists retrieved his family—including his 4-month old. Then he patted me on the knee and passed out, never to see his dream boat again.

Now, I should probably admit to my bias here: I search for boats more than I sail them. I'm not usually even on a boat unless it's sinking, on fire, or upside down. Though I've spent more time than I count in nasty weather—even hurricanes—hundreds of miles offshore, my purpose was always to get on and off a boat as quickly as possible. And I invariably had an expensive helicopter and extremely well-trained crew hovering nearby to help me. So I am in no position to argue about whether it's better to run before the storm or work your way to windward. I've read a lot about it, but I've never had to decide to heave-to or lay a-hull.

What I can tell you from experience is that I have never had to *rescue* someone that was hove-to with a para-anchor, or pulling a drogue. Like my state trooper friend who often quips, "I've never unbuckled a dead man," I'm a big fan of what (apparently) works.

The comfort and peace of mind necessary to keep you on your boat can be dramatically increased for a comparatively modest investment in training and equipment. Sea drogues and para-anchors have been successfully used by sailors, power-boaters, and commercial fisherman to ride out otherwise unmanageable heavy weather. Not long ago, the Pardeys set hove-to with a para-anchor off of South Africa in 85-knot winds and 65- foot seas. "The boat rode beautifully," Lin told me, "it was just beautiful out there." In the kind of seas and winds I have only heard about, the Pardeys managed to be relaxed enough to enjoy the view—while getting much needed rest and a hot meal.

"Personal skill sets are far more important than the hardware on the boat," warns Dashew. Along with offshore practice with different storm tactics, boaters should learn more about the cause of their anxiety. "Spend some time learning about weather and how to make your own onboard forecasts," Dashew says. Not being there when the weather turns hostile is always the best plan.

In his book *Deep Survival* Laurence Gonzales wrote, "The word 'experienced' often refers to someone who has gotten away with doing the wrong thing more frequently than you have." Getting on a boat and taking it to sea without being physically and emotionally ready for heavy weather is definitely a wrong thing that people frequently get away with, but not always.

Twelve years ago, the men who leapt into the ocean from the *Mirage* learned the hard way that they weren't ready to be out there. They got away with their lives, but so did the two who remained aboard—with much less risk—landing safely in St. Thomas 10 days later. The point isn't whether to abandon ship or not. I'd rather someone send a Mayday too early than too late; if you believe you need to get off your boat, then you should. Just don't let it be because you aren't ready for what your boat can handle. ❑

Mario Vittone's last flight as an active helicopter rescue swimmer was in August of 2007. He is now flying a desk and writing books for the Coast Guard.

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