

An Emergency Plan, Do You Have One?

By Paul Nickerson

Editor Note: When something like this happens we just want to put it behind us as quickly as possible. Such events can be a learning experience. Hopefully you can learn from Paul's experience.

As some of you have heard, last summer I was involved in a collision with a power boat while sailing *Nicknack* at night. This not an article to talk about the actual incident but in hindsight I looked back and realized even with all the safety gear we carry, how unprepared I was if things would have been worse. Your odds may be better of winning the Lottery than 2 boats colliding in the middle of the night and there are a lot more things than boats floating through our lakes. In the 2012 Vendee 3 boats were involved in collisions of some sort that forced them to drop out in the first 2 weeks.

One lucky part in my story is that a 3rd boat was on scene and was able to oversee the 2 boats involved. The first thing after the collision was getting the boats stopped and checking for fatal damage to the boat and injuries.

Stopping a 37' sailboat with full sail at 5 plus knots on a beam reach takes time and distance so immediately the boats were separated beyond yelling distance and this is where the 3rd boat became vital. As the collision occurred at my bow I immediately went forward to see if there was any damage, in particular a hole or a busted forestay that would lead to sinking or dismasting.

During the whole ordeal, timing is totally lost. How long did it just take to luff the boat into the wind, run to the bow and check for damage away from the cockpit, radio, safety equipment, etc. Fortunately there were no holes and the rig was under no known threat. A quick check below showed no water in the bilge. Back up on deck I conveyed this information to the 3rd boat. How much time has now passed?

The sails are still up and luffing and the motor is on. I tell the 3rd boat all is fine... I just need to clean up the sails and lines. The Genoa won't roll up and won't drop. So I idle the boat into the wind and drop the main into the lazy jacks. How much time has passed? I don't know but the Coast Guard has made it 5 miles out to the scene from their station. I have not talked to the boat that I collided with between separation and activity on board. I can't recall hearing any radio activity. The Coast Guard is alongside as if they want to board but the Genoa is part way down and won't roll up and they don't want to get too close and I express to them that I'm OK. All of a sudden they take off towards shore chasing the boat that hit me. I later heard that they were severely holed and had at least one injury, probably a broken nose.

After another trip to the bow I realize the roller furler damage is a big kink in the furling tube and a smashed pulpit bent against it. All of my seamen like attempts to furl the sail now resort to putting it on the primary winch and grinding the furling line slowly and getting the sail rolled up and it wasn't easy. At this the 3rd boat left and I was alone. Total time was probably 15 -20 minutes.

As I start to motor in I start to wonder what just happened and how much worse things could have been if, if, if. As I sit here several months later I still wonder what should have been done differently and how would it apply to a different situation a solo sailor could be involved in.

We tend to worry about the lake freighters and weather but there are a lot more dangerous things out there. Ever seen a boat hit a buoy? Last summer a sailboat was abandoned during a storm and drifted for several days on Lake Erie from Mentor past Erie, about 70 miles. I've heard dreams of container ships coming on the Great

Lakes. Many of us prefer masthead tricolor lights and I have since had very mixed comments. I was under full sail with a masthead tricolor and was in a shipping lane. I had just been passed about 30 minutes earlier by a freighter which of course I was tracking on my AIS. A marine professional tells me he doesn't like masthead tricolors because he doesn't think many recreational power boats know what they are.

Looking at a lot of navigation lights they are actually quite a joke. Old plastic lens fade and cut down transmission. Voltage drops reduce brightness. That 1 mile rating is for perfect conditions when new. This year's Lake Erie Challenge found a lot of the fleet crossing tacks in a light air beat on the first night. I knew there were 7 other boats nearby and keeping track of navigation lights was very difficult when boats would split and then come back together.

We all carry radar reflectors and freighters report seeing them for many miles. But how many recreational boats carry radar and track other boats. How many recreational boats have AIS transmitters for us to track? And how about those floating or slightly submerged objects? In daylight I saw a submerged tree take off a rudder causing the boat to sink. When it comes to that 1 in a million emergency what are the priorities? There's a big bang! Did you hit something? What was it? In 5 seconds decide do I need to save the boat or save my life. Is water coming in? Do you have time to plug the hole or do you man the life raft and abandon ship gear. Was it the rig? Where was it? In 2 seconds decide is the rig coming down? Get out of the way or try to control it? Can you alter course to save it? Can you realistically expect nearby help? In how long? Can you get out a Mayday or do you hit the DSC emergency button on your VHF? What are the sea conditions? Is it safe to go on deck and inspect things? You've determined the boat is going down in 2 minutes. Do you radio again for help? Activate the EPRB / tracker? Is the life raft ready to deploy? Where's the ditch bag? You're ready to abandon but is there time for one last attempt to save the boat? You're losing the rig but the boat will survive. Where will the mast fall? What will you need to cut loose to get rid of it? How do you prevent other damage? Can you take time to call for help first? Every time you have to go below to get or do something you kill another 30 important seconds. As sailors we don't tend to have a lot of non-sailing gear in the cockpit but where is your spotlight or do you have flares available in the cockpit.

In the time you took to read this article all these decisions would have to be made. We tend to think in terms of freighters and weather being our greatest enemy on the water but those are a lot easier to be prepared for. Hopefully you can always say, "I know this sailor who..... ", and it won't involve you