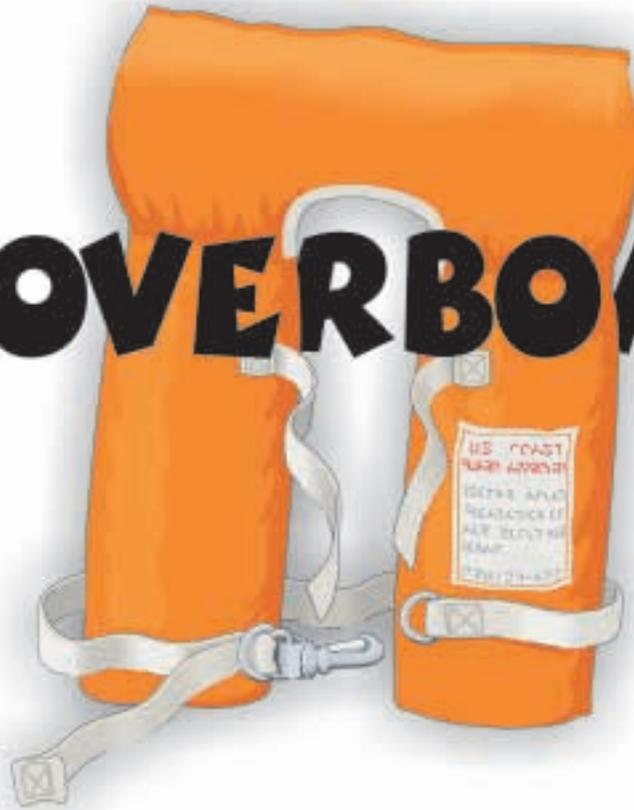


# MAN OVERBOARD

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When I took survival training with the Royal Navy, the chief petty officer who instructed us was adamant that anybody who fell off a boat was guilty of self-inflicted wounds. In his opinion, the act of going overboard from a perfectly serviceable vessel should be left entirely to divers. I agree, but I'm not as rude about it as he was.

The lesson from that training was simple: Don't go overboard. But if you do, stay with the boat, preferably by wearing a harness. Why? Because even being dragged across the water is better than spending a half-hour or more in the water while a novice helmsman makes multiple passes trying to rescue you in fading light. To make sure you stay hitched to the boat, the ideal combination to wear is a floatation jacket, with a strong point and "D" ring, clipped onto the railing.

Since my days with the Royal Navy, it has become second nature to brief my crew every time I go out. I don't mean the finger-wagging, doom-and-gloom type of briefing. I'm talking about a light, informative boat acquaint, with an explanation of the safety equipment and how it works. It is essential your crew know your intentions before something goes wrong. I strongly advise all the people I teach that they should practice at least one man-overboard drill every time they go on the water. Once someone falls in, you've lost your chance to practice.

The following items are what an average sports

boat, in reasonable condition, a couple of miles off shore, should have in order to recover someone if they fall overboard:

- Throwable, Coast-Guard-approved seat cushion or horseshoe ring.
- Crew-overboard pole with red-and-yellow flag indicating a man overboard. Some come with strobe lights.
- Life sling (helps the person stay afloat and is used to hoist the person out of the water)
- Flashlight
- Heaving line
- Suitable first-aid kit with space blanket
- VHF radio
- Flares
- Spare clothing
- Paddle
- Boat hook
- Boarding ladder

If you do lose somebody over the side, there are three things you must do immediately: First, **shout**, "Man overboard!" This gets the attention of the whole crew, especially the helmsman. Second, **point** and keep pointing. A head bobbing about in fading light offshore will be lost in seconds. I know this because of my survival training—I lost sight of a very expensive practice body. We finally found it, but not before the chief had to get rude again. Third, **throw**.

Get the life preserver into the water as soon as possible.

Most sailing courses teach you that as soon as someone goes over, no matter what side of the boat, you should turn toward the man overboard. This will kick the stern and the prop away from him. Then, depending on the type of water you're in, you have to know how to come about to pick up the person in the water. There isn't any single method to recover a man overboard for all waters and weather conditions. So let's look at a number of scenarios.

In all these cases, we're going to assume you are in a 25-foot boat with a single screw, with three or more people aboard. Later, we will look at what you have to do with a crew of two or if you're alone.

### Scenario 1:

#### A lake with no tide and a moderate wind

As the person goes over, shout, "Man overboard." Turn the boat toward him to kick the prop away. Point, then throw. With no tide, the main thing you have to deal with is the wind. Turn off well downwind, make a turn back, and position yourself downwind of the person. The wave direction will give you the wind direction. Head directly into the waves; the wind will act as your brakes. As you get to within 30 yards of the person, slow to idle and select which side you wish to recover him from. Shift to neutral and drift up to the person. Cut off the engine before you make contact. The legs of the person in the water will tend to fly up under the hull as contact is made. A careless knock of the engine controls could result in serious injury from the prop.

A point I have to emphasize time and time again when I'm teaching these drills, is you must be stationary alongside the person. Passing at two or three knots and making a grab for a soaking wet, 220-pound guy is an invitation to have two people overboard instead of one. If you can't get close enough to the person, throw a line and paddle to him. Bring him aboard at the most convenient point of the boat, often the transom or a boarding ladder.

### Scenario 2:

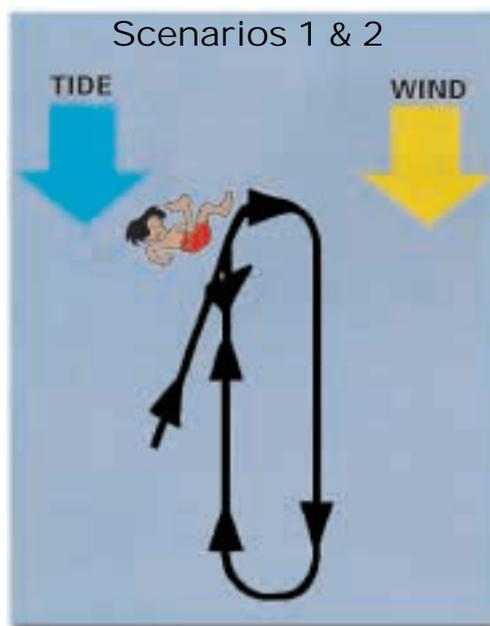
#### A fast-flowing river

In the middle reaches of a tidal river, tides can be up to four or five knots. As a rule of thumb, the effect of a tide will have three times the effect of wind of the same speed on a vessel. Tides are usually either going in or out, other than the short period at the bottom and top of the tide when it stands. Use the same procedures as in the lake.

Only now, use the tides as the brakes instead of the wind. This requires practice and boat-handling skill, especially if the river is making three or four knots.

Bridge buttresses and moored vessels get in the way. The river can be busy with commercial traffic. Rivers don't conveniently run in straight lines. They follow the bends, thunder into embankments, carom off to mid-stream, swirl around moorings and through jetty piles, and can carry the person overboard on the journey of a lifetime.

As soon as it is practical, make a Mayday call. You don't have to chop to channel 16 on your radio; make the call directly on the working channel. This way, any other traffic (leisure or commercial) monitoring the frequency will pick it up and may be able to help.



A man overboard at night, in a tidal river, an hour or two after high water on a spring tide, is a scary scenario. Don't let it happen.

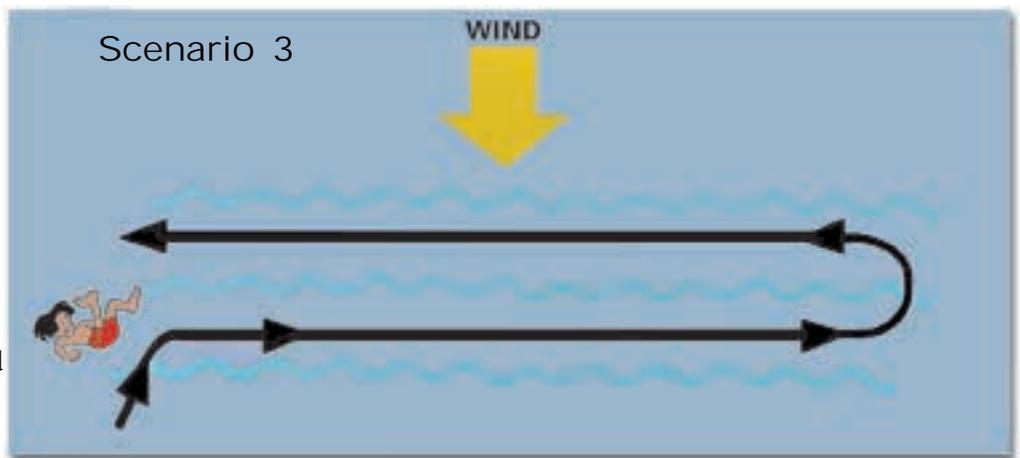
### Scenario 3:

#### A couple of miles offshore

Let's place this scenario on a northern Atlantic Coast with a westward, 2-knot tide. We now have a wind and tide problem to resolve. In a hypothetical, windless condition and a 2-knot tide, you can effectively forget the tide component. If the rescue boat is stopped in the water, both objects (the man overboard and the boat) are moving 2 knots westward, so their relative movement is the same. Therefore, in this case, all we have to resolve is the wind factor.

Do the same preliminaries—shout, kick the stern

position yourself 6 to 8 feet upwind of him, then wait. The freeboard of your boat will have far more wind resistance than a head in the water, so you will drift conveniently down onto the man overboard. Cut the engine as you make contact. This method also provides a lee for the man overboard. In other words, it gives him some protection from the wind and will flatten out the sea. Make your recovery in the manner already discussed.

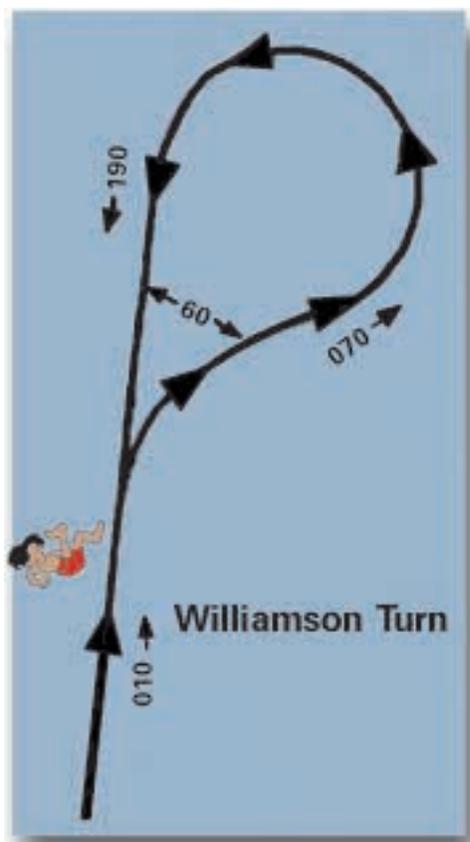


### Williamson Turn

If only two people are in the boat, the shout-point-and-throw is useless. The man overboard would be the one shouting, and the helmsman may be too busy to manage a throw. But don't worry, Mr. Williamson will come to your aid. He invented the Williamson Turn. Here's what is required for this.

Let's assume you are chugging away at 20 knots on a course of 010 and your one and only crew member decides to go for an unexpected swim. Kick the stern away from him, continue on

010 for a short run, and then turn the wheel hard to starboard. When you have reached 60 degrees off your heading (070 degrees), turn the wheel hard over to port until you reach the reciprocal. (In other words, a complete 180-degree reverse of your initial course of 010 would be 190 degrees.) You will then be running directly back to the man overboard. Believe me, it works. I've carried it out in fast patrol boats, inshore mine sweepers and cabin cruisers. The beauty of Mr. Williamson's turn is that it works at night as well—need I say any more?



Now that you've reached the victim, how do you get him out of the water? Time is crucial because of hypothermia. Most commercial, passenger pleasure craft have a lifting derrick and tackle—not for decoration; they're required. Getting a 220-pound guy out of the sea is no joke. The tragic death of Rob James, the famous British yachtsman, bears testament to that. His crew got him alongside, but they couldn't get him out of the water, and he died. Use swimming platforms, boarding ladders, a loop in a mooring line, anything you have to get him aboard. Practice using them. But do it using a realistic dummy—not a 5-gallon water bottle with a tire attached or a fender.

Once you have recovered the victim, his survival may depend on your first-aid skills. If you don't want the man overboard to come back to haunt you, practice the skills you need to keep him alive after he is back in the boat.

Now you may ask what would happen if you went boating solo and fell overboard. You must wear a cord attached to a kill switch on the throttle. If you go overboard, the switch will automatically kill the motor so the boat won't be out of your reach, and you may have to take only a short swim. ■