

A Delivery Skipper Sees His Lifetime in 16 Minutes

ON OCTOBER 8 LAST YEAR, MY DELIVERY crew of two and I were 100 miles south of Block Island, Rhode Island, aboard a 53-foot cruising sloop headed southwest into 20- to 30-knot winds and six- to eight-foot seas. It was our first full day on the second of three consecutive deliveries from New England to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

While I was off watch and resting below, a loud crack—followed immediately by the sound of flailing lines and sails—woke me and brought me into the

My open air glide didn't last long. When the boom smashed into the starboard shrouds, my body continued its outward trajectory, and I was flicked into the sea.

Electrified with adrenaline, I came sputtering to the surface. In an effort to save my wristwatch—the band was loose—I noted the time: 2:24 p.m. From that point on, I maintained a steady, very salty, stream of commands to keep the crew active and to regain control.

"Duck!" I yelled. "Don't let the boom

horseshoe to me. It had no line, but a strobe light was attached to it.

During my short time in the water, the genoa remained full and pulled the boat farther away. In the cockpit, the seriousness of the situation hit the guys, and precious minutes were lost to panic. All I could do was wait. After 10 minutes, cold and true fear set in. My teeth began to chatter. Finally, my crew managed to jibe the genoa and sail back toward me. With the boat's considerable windage, however, they soon sailed passed me. "Turn on the engine," I pleaded. "Come back!" After frantically pawing at the console, the mate managed to preheat and start the engine—exhaust and steaming water from the waterline conveyed the good news. Instead of risking another jibe, he jammed the engine in reverse. Working against the flailing genoa, they back-paddled the boat toward me to complete the unorthodox rescue.

I reached one arm up toward them, some four feet above me, and was plucked out of the cold October seas. Smiles broke across our tear- and worry-streaked faces, and quick, warm embraces were shared in one big jumble. It was 2:40 p.m.

The entire rescue took about 16 minutes in rough, daylight conditions. I was extremely fortunate, and I owe my life to the actions and dedication of my crew. At 4 p.m. that day, we informed Herb Hilgenberg, via his Southbound II SSB net, that our strobe and horseshoe had been lost.

We found the sheet intact. The entire ordeal had begun when a tooth-sized stainless-steel pin that held the mainsheet block to the deck broke. Had we briefly inspected our equipment before leaving, we might have noticed the worn metal at the base of the block and the frayed lines of our man-overboard module. Our next delivery, I decided, wouldn't be taken so hastily. In a lot of ways, I'm lucky there'll be a next one.

Eric Troels Wiberg



To maximize its effectiveness, the familiar white or yellow Lifesling pouch—shown here aboard a Tayana 45—must be properly mounted and lashed.

cockpit dressed in only a pair of boxer shorts. The mainsheet had parted, and the boom swung wildly across the deck. After heading into the wind, we roller-furled the main. I reefed the genoa for stability, then began securing the boom, mainsheet, and tackle. In hindsight, this would have been an ideal time to suit up and clip in with a harness.

I grabbed the errant mainsheet with my left hand and a metal dorade guard with my right. Moments later, the weight of the boom pried my right hand free; I was lifted and swung over the lifelines.

hit-you! Throw me the Lifesling!"

The mate made it aft of the boom and struggled with our man-overboard equipment. He wasn't successful. The cloth release handle of the white Lifesling disintegrated in his hands, its fibers degraded by sunlight. The port-side horseshoe, with 100 feet or more of floating line, was lashed too tightly for him to release quickly. Anyone who carries this equipment must inspect the setup on his or her boat and address these lashings before heading offshore. After what seemed like an eternity, the mate threw the starboard-side

The Cold, Hard Facts

Here are some things to consider about taking leave of your deck:

- **Muscles of the limbs—particularly the arms—become critically weakened while swimming in cold water.**
- **In a real-world situation, 20 percent of all swimmers will drown in an hour or less in water that is 65 F, and 50 percent will drown in an hour or less in water that is 50 F. Treading water and swimming induce fatigue and lower the body's core temperature.**
- **Wearing flotation is crucial. Until help arrives, the victim should be as still as the seas allow and assume a position with arms crossed, elbows close to the torso, and legs crossed.**

Robert Croke, M.D.