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Staying alive on the water

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EVERY YEAR we hear about folks who die while trying to have fun in a boat. Already this year we've had several fatalities, and the main boating season has yet to start. Last year in Virginia, 15 of the 105 reported boating accidents resulted in death. Most of those, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries reports, were due to drowning. Sadly, most could have been prevented.

Two recent incidents in our region — one on the Nottoway River near Franklin and the other on Currituck Sound — resulted in fatalities. In both cases, the boats capsized, throwing three occupants into water below 60 degrees.

In water that cold, hypothermia starts to set in within minutes, quickly incapacitating the strongest of swimmers. Without a life jacket, someone in such water will tire quickly trying to stay afloat. With a life jacket, the person wouldn't need to expend energy treading water. If the boater were knocked unconscious when the boat capsized, his life jacket would bring him to the surface with his head out of water.

Reportedly, the three men on the Nottoway were not wearing any type of life jacket. The drowning victim could not swim at all. Wearing a traditional life jacket might have allowed him to survive.

As boating safety classes teach, being on water that cold, regardless of the air temperature, requires a survival suit that insulates the body and acts as a life jacket. Such a suit can double or triple the amount of survival time in cold water — and can mean the difference between life and death.

The Currituck Sound drowning victim's survival suit was found floating the day after the boat capsized. Her body was recovered two weeks later in the sound. Her two boating companions were rescued after standing in chest-deep water on the hull of their submerged boat. They had turned blue, requiring a trip to the hospital for hypothermia. But they survived.

In boating safety class, you learn that if your boat capsizes, it's usually best to stay with the craft, even if it is partially submerged. Crawl on top of the overturned hull, if possible, to get out of the water and make yourself more visible to rescuers. Especially in cold water, swimming to shore is a bad idea if you can stay with the capsized boat.

Following these two tips probably made the difference between life and death for the two who stayed with their vessel in North Carolina and the unfortunate young mother of two who struck out for shore.

Virginia is phasing in an education requirement for boat operators.

Starting July 1, everyone 50 and younger who is operating a personal watercraft such as a Jet Ski — and everyone 20 and younger operating a motorboat with at least 10 horsepower — must take a boating safety course. By 2016, all operators of personal watercraft and motorboats with 10-plus horsepower will be required to carry a card showing they have completed a boating safety course.

Meeting Virginia's legal requirements isn't the only reason to take a boating safety class. The class teaches lessons that surprise even the most seasoned boater and could well save a life.

Even those who plan to be passengers on a boat should take the class. Early in my boating career, I went fishing with a friend on his 38-foot boat on the Chesapeake Bay. Late that afternoon, about halfway back across the Bay, the owner, who by then had consumed a few beers, turned to me and said, "I need a nap. You drive for a while. Just head for Waterside."

What I knew about "driving" was what I had learned watching him that day. On the way in, we crossed in front of the USS Enterprise as the carrier was being pushed into its berth by tugs. We were lucky.

The time to take a boating safety class is now, before the season starts. Details about USCG Auxiliary classes near

you can be found at [http:// a05405.uscgaux.info/pe.html](http://a05405.uscgaux.info/pe.html) — or email me.

And if you are looking for a great way to serve your community that involves boating, please consider becoming a member of the USCG Auxiliary. We need you.

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