

By: Wilbur B. Scott

FIRST MATE

Every skipper should have a First Mate! No, I am not talking about your wife/husband, girlfriend/boyfriend, although they could, and often times are one in the same. I am talking about the one who will take over for you if you, as skipper of your boat should become disabled while on the water. Imagine yourself out there enjoying the day at the wheel of your pride and joy vessel when a personal mishap disables you. What do you do now skipper? Who is there with you that is ready and able to carry on? No one can tell when or where such an emergency might occur. Suppose you were knocked unconscious or dumped overboard in an unconscious state. You could stumble on deck and break an arm or leg, suffer a heart attack or become disabled in a number of other ways. The important thing is, are you prepared for such an emergency? If you are one of those who boat alone you really need to give this practice some serious consideration. When there is someone else onboard who is capable of assuming the skipper's duties, the situation becomes less critical.

Whether your first mate is your wife, husband, son, daughter, or maybe a neighbor or fishing buddy, someone onboard should be prepared to handle your boat safely in case you become incapacitated. In any event, before starting out your passengers should be thoroughly briefed on your vessel's characteristics and the emergency equipment. This briefing should begin at the dock where everyone is shown the location of personal flotation devices, fire extinguishers, first aid kit, emergency signaling devices and tool box as well as the anchor and lines.

Then, before casting off, at least one member of the crew, the designated first mate, should be fully instructed on operation of the engine, starting and stopping it, clutch operation, determining fuel supply, use of the lighting system AND the proper operation of the marine radio in an emergency situation, (see the "MAY DAY" article for more information on this important topic).

All passengers aboard the vessel should be familiar with rough weather procedures and how to deal with grounding. "Man overboard" is a very serious situation, especially when it happens to befall the skipper! The first mate should be capable of maneuvering the vessel for a safe recovery. Crew members should know the location of life rings, poles, lines and similar equipment. Be sure one person keeps their eyes on the person in the water at all times so as to keep the boat operator advised of the exact location of the person in the water. It is often easy to lose sight of a person in the water especially in foul weather and rough seas.

Accidents aboard a boat are not uncommon. Mostly they occur when someone becomes careless. Regardless of the circumstances that might disable the skipper, he/she should make certain in advance, that someone else is sufficiently familiarized to insure that the vessel and injured party reach shore safely and quickly.

You can become a better skipper, first mate, crew member or passenger by attending a "Boating Skills and Seamanship" course offered by Homosassa Flotilla 15-4 of your U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary. Please refer to the "Public Boating Courses" tab on this website for information regarding course description, time and place where the courses are being offered.

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