

Can You Spell “Lucky”?

Story by LCDR Dale Folsom, Chief of Response, Sector St. Petersburg, Fla.

Have you ever been “waked out” by another boat zooming by too fast? At best, it’s just as annoying as being cut off by another driver on the roadway. You immediately gripe about the offender’s boating skills and rudeness, but you continue to fish. At worst, it can be a very dangerous occurrence.

Speed limits on the water exist for a number of important reasons: boater safety, preservation of shoreline structures or boat slips, sensitive animal habitats, and more. Most of these limits are near shore. Offshore, there are typically no speed limits and many mariners assume if you’re out there, you’re taking precautions by being defensive.

This offshore breed of mariner might perhaps read those pesky waterway Rules of the Road, but they might not always feel compelled to comply. Rather, they sometimes adhere to the “Law of Gross Tonnage.” Although its origins aren’t quite as scientific as the Law of Gravity, Gross Tonnage suggests that the person who has the bigger boat generally gets the right of way.

Coincidentally, this law applies to driving situations too. As the comedian Gallagher might say: even though your truck says “Dodge” and “Ram” on the side, when a dump truck begins to move into your lane, you get the heck out of the way.

Recently, a hapless boater discovered all of this the hard way. He was alone and anchored in a 16-foot wooden boat at 10 p.m. just outside the channel six-miles off Cedar Key, Fla. A 40-foot fishing boat cruised by at a high speed and the resultant wake flipped the man’s boat and dumped him into the 63-degree water.

The fishing boat never stopped and the man was truly alone now. He had no flares, no radio, no light, and no other means of signaling for help. Fortunately, the boat didn’t sink completely and he was able to cling to it. He also had the presence of mind to don a life jacket when it floated free of the overturned boat. Unfortunately, this was not a well-traveled channel. To make matters worse, the air temperature was dipping into the 40’s and the wind was whipping. He was shivering from the cold within minutes.

So, he was destined to wait until someone read his float plan and reported him missing to the Coast Guard. Oops, wait a minute...he didn’t file a float plan. As a matter of fact, he didn’t even tell anyone he was going boating. I’m guessing that every minute of every hour was filled with dread. He realized, not only did no one know he was boating, no one knew he was missing.

To calculate a person’s chances of survival in cold water, the Coast Guard uses a sophisticated computer program based on Canadian research. Besides basics such as air and water temps, we input things like a person’s height, body weight, body composition (slender, obese, muscular, etc), clothing type, life jacket or no life jacket, and similar items.

The computer gives a calculation as to how long that person might be able to function: this means the ability move arms and legs to stay afloat and perform other functions to save themselves such as launch a flare. It also gives a calculation for the maximum time that person would be expected to live in such conditions. In 33-degree water, both times are measured in minutes. In tropical waters in warm weather, the measurement is in days.

Our boater falls somewhere in between but he's already feeling hypothermic by midnight. For a while, his shaking comes in intermittent fits. By 2 a.m., he shakes constantly and is rapidly depleting his body's fuel. By 6 a.m., he shakes uncontrollably and has great difficulty clinging to the boat. When the sun comes up, he feels some blessed warmth and gets a little reprieve. He's still losing body heat though.

At 11 a.m., he can no longer cling to the overturned boat and is floating motionless about 15 feet away. He can't move his arms and legs, and he cannot swim back to the boat. By this time, the life jacket is the only thing saving his life.

At noon, after being in the water 14 hours, a passing boat spots him. They haul him aboard and head for shore while they call 911. As the man is being transported to the hospital, the Levy County Sheriff's Office calls the Coast Guard to inform them of the case. We all agree the man is extraordinarily lucky, but of course, learning about this 14-hours ago would have been a lot more beneficial to him.

The man's body temperature had dropped to 95 degrees. Based on the facts, the computer would have predicted incapacitation and death hours earlier. Fortunately, such predictions are one of many things taken into consideration when we decide how long to search for a missing boater.

There are many lessons we could glean when we review this case: Every boater is responsible for their own wake and the damage it may cause. Life jackets save lives. Stay with the boat if it turns over or swamps. Try to get your body out of cold water. Don't be in a small boat far out to sea. Don't anchor where other boats might cause problems for you. Make a float plan and give it to someone that will notice if you don't return. Keep your cell phone in a plastic bag.

We could go on and on. Instead, I'll leave you with the only lesson the man learned as told to the Coast Guard after he was released from the hospital: "Next time I go out, I guess I'll anchor farther away from the channel." I hope you learn more from his misfortune than he did.

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