

Question for the crew: Can you run the boat?

I was in South Harpswell, ME in June with representatives of the Maine Marine Patrol and the Coast Guard Marine Safety Office in Portland participating in one of the Maine Harbor Visits mentioned in my last column (CFN May 2006) when this question came up: "Does the crew know how to operate the controls of the boat and the radio?"

The answer to both questions was "no."

Boat controls come in different configurations. Some controls have two knobbed handles of equal height. But it is also possible to have two "T" handles that are either of equal or unequal height. Another option is a dual function, single lever control. In the dual lever model, one lever is the gear shift, with straight up being neutral, and the other is the throttle.

To further complicate things, the function of the two levers in the two-lever model can vary from boat to boat. For example, the throttle might be the right-hand lever on one boat, but the left-hand lever on another boat.

It is very important for the crew to know which is which.

What if?

What if a captain becomes incapacitated, or what if there is a man-overboard situation where the captain becomes occupied in another aspect of the rescue? In cases like this, it is critically important that the crew know how to operate the controls.

Some fishermen take their sons, wives, or daughters as crew. These folks – whether paid or not – should be instructed in the use of the controls on all the boats they crew for, and they should practice using the controls.

And crew, please note: If the captain does not volunteer this instruction and time to practice, ask for it.

Emergency shut-downs

In addition, the crew should know how to turn the boat's engine on and off and how to shut-off the fuel and electrical service in the boat in case of fire.

Vessel owners should consider placing labels on the controls and on various off/on switches. Coast Guard regulations require captains of larger boats to provide periodic emergency response drills.

Often, small-boat captains do not undertake these emergency response drills because they are not required. However, emergencies are not particular, and all captains should prepare their crew for the appropriate response.

Throwing ring buoys at a target, putting on PFDs or immersion suits, and picking up over-board articles in various weather conditions are some examples of valuable exercises.

Mayday calls

The crew is usually aware that the captain is monitoring a VHF channel, and there is often radio talk going on across boats. However, crewmembers don't always know the procedures for making a mayday call or what channel to use.

The mayday call consists of saying "mayday, mayday, mayday" and then the boat's identification (name, registration number), followed by statement of position, the problem, and the number of people on board. This basic information can then be followed by a few more words to make the situation clear for the rescuers.

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When I took sailboat cruising lessons in Long Island Sound, the instructors posted appropriate "mayday" text above the radio. We arranged with the harbor master to practice making the mayday call using a VHF channel other than 16. It was very instructive. Practice builds confidence and reduces self-consciousness.

For a good explanation of how to proceed with a mayday call, check out this web site, <www.boats.com/content/default_detail.jsp?contentid=1900> or search the web with keywords "mayday call."

Position

Now is a good time to be sure your crewmembers have the knowledge and skills to operate the boat and make distress calls.

Give them a chance to run the boat and get comfortable. Throw in some talk about the GPS, its position readouts in "lat/long," and what other on-board

electronics provide latitude and longitude positioning.

While you're at it, have them take a look at the radar screen, and point out the location of home.

FISH SAFE:

- Help crew become comfortable using the boat controls.
- Discuss how to make a mayday call on VHF channel 16.
- Provide opportunities for a mayday run-through and other simple drills.
- Label controls and switches to help those unfamiliar with the boat.
- Show the crew how to determine position by GPS or other on-board equipment.



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Crewmembers fishing on a day boat may pay little attention to what's going on forward of their work stations. But what if the captain gets injured or has to deal with an emergency in another part of the boat? It can be critically important for crew to know how to run the boat, including operating the controls, steering, and using the radio and navigation equipment.

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