When It All Goes Wrong
By Sean Morley

Having to call for help from the Coast Guard is perhaps every sea kayaker’s worst nightmare. During more than thirty-five years and several thousands of miles of traveling on the sea I have only once had to initiate that call. I knew it had all gone horribly wrong long before I found myself separated from my kayak, swimming desperately through the six foot surf for my paddle which I could just see thirty yards away.

I was supposed to be teaching a sea kayak surfing class on the Oregon Coast. It was day one of the 2011 Lumpy Waters Kayak Symposium and this debacle was definitely not what I’d had in mind when I suggested launching from Happy Camp and surfing the waves in the entrance to Netarts Bay. But now we were dealing with a life-threatening scenario that could have and should have been avoided.

It began with a basic error of judgment, so obvious and significant that in hindsight it seems ridiculous. The decision to launch two large groups of eight students each with two instructors and attempt to surf the narrow entrance to Netart’s Bay during an ebbing tide was not mine alone but it was quickly followed and compounded by a series of bad decisions and poor leadership that was all mine. I didn’t explain my plan clearly enough to my assistant instructor, Jamie, which left him unclear about his role. I assisted everyone in my group to get afloat which immediately put me at the back of the group instead of up front where I needed to be. I stopped to assist one of my students who had an issue with a foot peg. By the time I had finished dealing with that I looked up and saw that the situation was already well out of hand. Students had forgotten or were ignoring my instructions and paddling directly into the surf break, without waiting for me to join the group and make the final assessment of the conditions from the deepwater channel.

The rapid domino effect of bad decisions and ineffective leadership immediately led to multiple capsizes. I should have immediately blown my whistle and directed those that were still in their kayaks to paddle back to shore but instead I immediately went into rescue mode, trying to reunite swimmers with their own kayaks or any kayak that was nearby. And now my kayak, along with my spare paddle had gone, swept shorewards by the same set of waves that had log-rolled Donna and me multiple times as I had
attempted to put her into Shay’s kayak, a kayak that was obviously far too small for her. I reached my paddle and then chased down Shay’s kayak that was miraculously still nearby. I cowboy scrambled into it only to realize it was badly damaged and sinking fast. Never mind – it would have to do. I tried to tow Donna toward the spit of sand now exposed on the southern shore. She gamely held onto my stern toggle, still cheerful but clearly anxious without her kayak.

At this point in time Donna was relatively safe as we were being pushed by the soup zone into the beach but I had no idea where Shay or the rest of the students were. Richard, one of my co-instructors appeared and took over towing Donna to shore. This allowed me to go back across the entrance to the lagoon that was now ebbing at an alarming rate and get re-united with my own kayak which Mark, another co-instructor had in tow. Scrambling out of Shay’s kayak into my own, I let go of her boat and it was never seen again. Relieved to be back in my own boat and now able to contribute to resolving the on-going incident it was apparent that the situation was still deteriorating with several folk swimming and getting beaten down by the unrelenting surf. I might well have called the Coast Guard at that point had I had a marine radio in my possession. Yet another bad decision meant that my radio was located uselessly in my truck on-shore.

For perhaps another 10 minutes I worked with Mark, Richard and Jamie to try and resolve the situation directing those that were still in their boats to paddle to shore, performing numerous rescues and then shepherding those kayakers toward the shore. Jamie had been carrying Shay on his back deck for what must have seemed like a lifetime to both of them. Jamie was unable to reach shore because of the strong ebb. I had been told that the along-shore drift would likely be northward and despite evidence to the contrary I continued to give Jamie bad advice on which direction he should paddle. Shay was becoming hypothermic and was clearly struggling to hang on, making Jamie’s job even more challenging.

Fred, a professional photographer and superb boater was supposed to be shooting fun pictures of us surfing but was instead helping to get everyone to safety. In a moment of clarity I asked him to paddle to shore and make the 911 emergency call. I knew we needed outside help and I told Fred to request jet skis as I doubted a regular motor lifeboat from the Coast Guard could operate effectively in the shallow waters of the Bay entrance. He
didn’t need to be told twice and used his prodigious paddling skills to race to shore.

In what seemed like no time at all there were flashing lights on the beach shortly followed by jet skis in the surf, lifeboats offshore and a helicopter overhead. They were all such a welcome sight despite my deep embarrassment and anger at myself for allowing things to go so badly wrong. I was grateful that after a truly exhausting two hours everyone was safe, no one was seriously injured and the only casualties were my ego and Shay’s kayak which remains lost-at-sea.

Being involved in this incident certainly gave me cause to take a long hard look at myself, my attitude to risk and the way I go about making decisions. It also forced me to take another look at the equipment I carry, how I carry it and to practice skills that I thought I had either mastered or had written off as gimmicks.

The incident caused me to focus my mind on what I needed to know, what I needed to do and what I needed to have when it all goes wrong. Clearly avoiding getting involved in an emergency incident in the first place is the best approach and, without a doubt, good judgment is the most important attribute a sea kayaker can have. I don’t ever intend to leave home without it again!

However, we must accept that while it is possible to avoid becoming involved in an emergency incident during our paddling life, the more time we spend exposed to the undeniable risks that are present any time we venture out to sea, the more likely something unforeseen will happen. And the more we seek to push the limits, both personal and of our equipment, the more likely something will go wrong.

There are a handful of excellent books and more recently some great DVD’s on the subject of sea kayak safety and rescues. These add to our knowledge of what we need to know when it all goes wrong and we support this knowledge by cultivating skills and gaining experience with professional coaching either through a club, kayak school or a symposium. This article does not seek to replace any of the above but rather address a perceived gap in the training that I’ve received in respect to the worst-case scenario, specifically when to ‘make that call’. Knowing when to request outside help from the Coast Guard and what is likely to happen when you do receive help
could be critical in keeping an unfortunate incident from escalating into a tragedy.

In Michael Pardy and Doug Alderson’s *Handbook of Safety and Rescue* (published by Ragged Mountain Press, 2003) they describe our four lines of defense in sea kayak safety as:

- Planning
- Physical and mental skills
- Self rescue and assisted rescue
- Outside rescue

With proper training the first three can be adequately addressed and thus significantly reduce the likelihood that we will ever need outside help. But things can and do go wrong. Errors of judgment can be made and medical emergencies can occur that can compromise the most watertight of plans and the most skilful of paddlers. So we need to know when to make that call and what to do when the circumstances arise that overwhelm the resources we have. Some key principles can be applied to every situation.

Gordon Brown, in his most excellent *Sea Kayak, A Manual for Intermediate and Advanced Sea Kayakers* (published by Pesda Press, 2006) gives us a useful mnemonic **CAMERA** to guide us through an incident:

C Collect your thoughts  
A Assess the complete situation and formulate a plan  
M Manage yourself first, then the rest of the group, then any casualty who requires assistance  
E Execute plan A  
R Review the effectiveness of Plan A  
A Assess Plan A’s and modify (go to Plan B) as necessary given the evolving situation

Following this process will likely help speed up your decision-making and dissuade you from leaping in before having considered all the risks. Remember it is better to do something rather than nothing. By doing something you will gain more information upon which to make future decisions. Sometimes doing something might mean making the decision to remain *in situ* because you need to wait for the tide, weather or energy levels to become more favorable.
You may cycle through the CAMERA mnemonic several times before the situation is resolved. But the key point here is that before making the decision to request outside help it is not necessary to have attempted every other avenue but merely to have considered and precluded it. Speed may be of the essence and a decision to call for help should not be delayed by inaction or indecision. Too often individuals involved in incidents are slow to request outside help either through embarrassment, ego, ignorance or sheer panic.

Reflecting on the Netart’s Bay incident, I believe there was very little panic on my part but without a doubt I was deeply frustrated and embarrassed. My ego and belief that my own personal skills and those of my fellow instructors would allow us to resolve the situation almost certainly caused me to delay making that call for outside help.

A timely request will likely make any rescue much more likely to succeed and easier to execute, ultimately saving time and resources and possibly lives, reducing the risk to kayakers and the rescuers. An early call to the Coastguard asking them to stand by while you deal with the situation may give them the opportunity to locate appropriate resources and give them a ‘heads up’. You should follow up this early call with either a ‘stand down’ or ‘May Day’ call as necessary.

The challenge is to recognize the point at which we need to make the call for help. For me it was seeing the rapid deterioration in Shay’s condition and her demeanor, where grim determination had transitioned through mild panic to a quiet whimper. We needed to get her out of the cold water fast and we were not able to accomplish that without help. My concern for Shay’s well being is what overrode protecting my ego. In sea kayaking it will not always be obvious when we have lost control to the point of needing outside help. The point of recognition might be obvious: a sailor whose yacht is sinking has a clear indication of that point. All I will say is that if you are asking yourself the question, it is likely that the best moment at which you should have called for help might well have already passed.

**Required Equipment**

The fact that at some point in our future we may have to request outside help brings us to what we need to have with us when it all goes wrong. Boating
laws vary State by State but here in California any sea kayaker venturing onto *coastal waters* is required to have the following:

- **Life jacket** (Types III and V are best suited to paddling)

  Spend time swimming in your life jacket. Does it ride up hindering your mobility and vision. Does it orientate you onto your back or do you feel unbalanced? If you become separated from your kayak do you have what you need in your lifejacket to summon help and survive? Do you have so much stuff on you that it makes it harder or impossible to do a self rescue in realistic conditions?

- **Whistle**

  Louder the better! Practice using it while swimming in waves in a place where you’re sure that you won’t inadvertently trigger a rescue operation. It takes work and can be quite exhausting! The requirements allow other audible signalling devices, but a whistle is the most compact, easiest to carry and perhaps least susceptible to malfunction.

- **Flashlight** (between hours of sunset and sunrise)

  A chemical lightstick does not satisfy the regulations and is almost invisible in low visibility. It may be helpful for keeping track of others in your group, but it shouldn’t be considered the equivalent of a running light as carried by a larger vessel. A head lamp may be useful ashore but not quite so afloat. On open water there’s not much to see and the white light will interfere with your night vision. A powerful LED (50+ Lumens) handheld flashlight that can be pointed directly at the approaching vessel is most effective. Regs state for vessel under oars that the white light be shown “in sufficient time to avoid a collision.” Most of the time it is best to be navigating without lights and to keep well clear of other vessels so you don’t have to use your flashlight.

- **Visual Distress Signals** (devices suitable for night use, between sunset and sunrise)

  I carry mini rockets in my lifejacket, plus parachute flares and red handheld flares in my day hatch. When I was separated from my kayak, only the flares I had in my PFD were available to me. To meet legal
requirements the signals must be USCG approved, readily accessible, the required number and not yet expired. Know how to use them without having to read the instructions!

Just imagine being in need of help and not having the required equipment with you. Not only are your chances of being rescued significantly reduced, the potential for embarrassment afterwards is greatly increased! In the Netarts Bay incident, (marine radios aside) our rescuers recognized that we were appropriately equipped and that we appreciated the nature of the work they do.

**Recommended Equipment**

While they are not required equipment, orange smoke flares are extremely effective for daytime use. Conditions of reduced visibility or darkness will certainly make it more difficult for rescue personnel to see us. A strobe light fitted to the shoulder of your life jacket may not impede your night vision but will surely affect others in your group. It should not be used routinely but rather activated should you become in need of rescue. Reflective tape on your PFD and on the blades of your paddle is a remarkably effective way to stand out if a searchlight beam sweeps past you.

Helicopters and lifeboats are fitted with radio direction finder (RDF) receivers that will lock onto your signal when you transmit using your VHF radio or pick up the signal transmitted by an EPIRB or Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) fitted with a beacon.

There is no requirement for a portable VHF Marine Radio but depending upon the location, such a device might be the most effective way to call for help and is a highly recommended piece of equipment. For general guidance on the use of a VHF Marine Radio in an emergency you should consult the website: [http://www.boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/radio.htm#emergency](http://www.boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/radio.htm#emergency)

Some high-end handheld Marine Radios have a DSC (Digital Selective Calling) function. This allows the user to send a digital help message along with your GPS coordinates to the Coastguard and any vessels nearby equipped with a DSC radio. For more information on DSC Marine Radios see the excellent article by Joel McNamara in the December 2010 issue of Sea Kayaker Magazine: [http://www.seakayakermag.com/2010/Dec10/rescueme.htm](http://www.seakayakermag.com/2010/Dec10/rescueme.htm)
The law does not require us to have a licence to own and operate a portable VHF Marine Radio and that is a good thing. But something for us sea kayakers to consider is that as a result we do not have a designated call sign or registered boat name. Therefore in an emergency how should we clearly and succinctly explain who and what we are?

I put this question to Paul Newman, Recreational Boating Safety Program Manager for the Eleventh Coast Guard District based in Alameda, CA.

“Best practice is to help rescuers identify you and your kayak should you lose communication during the search. You could use your name and then describe your kayak: “This is Sean Morley, last name spelled: M-O-R-L-E-Y, in an 18-foot kayak with a red deck and white hull off Fort Point.”

That way if your radio fails we know we’re looking for a red kayak with the characteristics you told us. If we find you we know we’ve found the Sean Morley we were searching for. With your position we’ll calculate the set and drift so we can plot an accurate search plan.*

(*Footnote by Sean: During the Netarts Bay incident it was apparent to me that jet skis would be the ideal craft to operate within the rescue theater. Whilst the call taker will have protocol to follow and the incident commander will have the final say, there is no harm making a specific suggestion since at the time of your distress call you may be in the best position to know what rescue resources will be the most helpful. If you are in a group you should also give a clear and unambiguous head count and the number of craft involved. Double kayaks can create confusion as to the numbers involved.)

“Once we have radio communication with you we’ll ask for a few more pieces of info that we’ll ask for. The rescuers will be pulling people out of the water over the gunwales of a boat and/or hoisting them in a small basket to a helicopter. Both can be stressful situations so we need to know about any medical issues that would affect a rescue: heart condition, excessive weight or size, seizures, limb prosthetics, etc. Whether anyone is carrying medications for an acute medical condition, and where the medication is (top left pocket of the PFD, etc.). We might need to get to these medications if the person exhibits symptoms of their medical condition.
You may be asked for a land-based point of contact, spouse, relative, we can contact to get further info/keep informed. Whether or not we can recover your kayak will depend on the conditions and method of recovery. If you’re picked up by a boat in calm conditions and there’s enough room onboard then maybe the kayak will be picked up too. If the seas are rough and it would hazard the rescue crew to retrieve the kayak then we will try to mark it and leave it for the owner to arrange salvage. If you’re picked up by a helicopter the kayak will be left behind. It’s always up to the owner to arrange commercial or private salvage of the vessel.

A group of kayakers in need of help can facilitate a rescue by making sure everyone has their lifejacket on and snapped/zipped up and by staying together. Once you can see the rescue craft, wave paddles or arms to attract attention. They might not have seen you yet. When the rescuers approach, listen to them for directions. They are now the ones in charge so do as they ask. Sometimes you might think you’re being helpful by being proactive, but you could be complicating matters for the rescuers.

They’ll want to handle any injuries and life-threatening situations first. Don’t just race over and clamber onto the rescue boat. Sit back and allow rescuers time to maneuver their boat into the best position for the seas, and wind. If a helicopter arrives, tie down any loose gear, hats, etc., so they won’t fly up in the rotor wash and hit the helicopter. Make sure everyone has their lifejacket on and zipped up. The downdraft from a typical rescue helicopter can be as much as 80 mph and can create very choppy water, blow kayaks around and frighten people in the water. The spray will make it hard to see and the noise will make it almost impossible to communicate.

Anyone NOT needing to be rescued should paddle away from the rotor wash (choppy water) and stay together in a group, looking on from a distance. This will simplify the rescue and allow the pilot and crew to focus on the people in need of rescue. The rescuers can also keep a head-count easier if the rest of the group stays together, off to the side. In a Coast Guard helicopter rescue we will most likely have a Rescue Swimmer jump into the water to organize the rescue. He/she will tell you or motion to you what you need to do. You will need to get out of your kayak and into the water to be hoisted.
If the rescue basket comes down don’t touch it or any trailing line until it’s touched the water. It carries a strong charge of static electricity. The charge gets released when the basket hits the water.

Those kayakers who do not need to be evacuated may resume their journey unless the conditions are especially hazardous. In that case they’ll be asked to go ashore. You should comply quickly and land as soon as you can safely do so”.

The response to my 911 call brought a quick response from Tillamook County Sheriff’s Office deputies, two ambulances from Tillamook Fire and Netarts-Oceanside Fire Departments (who also provided the indispensable jet skis) as well as two Coast Guard Motor Lifeboats and a helicopter. I wouldn't begin to guess at the cost involved and I wouldn’t want to have to bring the expense of a rescue into the decision to call for one. Fortunately the USCG and local agencies are paid from by federal, state and local taxes.

To the best of my knowledge and at this point in time no other first responder organizations charge for their services either, but you should check your local jurisdictions. In some areas there are local (often volunteer) search and rescue organizations that might be utilized in a sea kayaking emergency incident [for my fact checking can you give me an example? Thinking back to the UK, I used to belong to Pentewan Beach Rescue Unit, a local volunteer based organization. But if this is confusing and such organizations don’t exist here we should delete this sentence]. I would encourage you to become familiar with the resources that might be available should you need them [Where would you begin to look? What search terms in Google? Check out: http://www.basarc.org/home But again if this is confusing, we can delete this sentence. I certainly think it is highly unlikely that they would be utilized in a first response and more likely in a protracted search for bodies/kayaks, etc].

For kayakers, the “What-if” game helps us prepare for unexpected emergencies. If you play the game to its extreme, the worst of the worst-case scenarios that you might imagine will involve making that call for outside help. Your practice of What-if should included making mayday or 911 calls so that you can more quickly and accurately identify the tipping point that puts you beyond the scope of your own resources and better prepare yourself for the rescue that you require.
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