

Accident, Rescue, Survival, and Humility

By Chris Collins

On Sunday, December 15, 2013, I slipped, broke through 2-3 inches of ice, and disappeared below the surface. I found myself helpless and totally at the mercy of two other adults. I share this story in hopes that others can learn from my mistakes.

For the last twelve or so years I have organized and lead friends on over a hundred kayak and camping trips on both flat water and whitewater, mostly in colder weather. I have been called “Mr Safety” with a negative tone and I have had various people refuse to participate because my safety requirements that included proper equipment, clothing, and a personal floatation device (PFD or life jacket) were “a bit excessive”. I have taught basic kayaking to many new people, attended several swift water rescue classes, performed and helped with a few real river rescues, survived several unintentional swims in whitewater, and once became hypothermic in a swimming pool while teaching the Eskimo roll. During my adventures, I have met several people who would say or imply, “It won’t happen to me.” I failed to invite them again. My philosophy has always been prepare to get wet, prepare to capsize, and then try not to do so. I think I am the only one who has been injured on one of my trips, and I am pleased with that thought.

The point I am trying to make is that any of us can have an accident, no matter how careful or how prepared we are. All accidents could be prevented if we could see them coming, but then they would not be accidents. Bad behavior can increase the chances of an accident, and I am all about improving behavior to reduce the chance of an accident. I will be modifying some of my behaviors right away.

Our sailboat is parked in a slip at the lake. On Sunday, it was totally iced in with about two to three inches of ice. I know how thick the ice was because I had to break some of it to make a hole so I could lower a bubbler to remove the ice. The surface of our floating dock is 24 inches above the water. The deck of the boat is another 19 inches above the dock. We have a plastic step stool anchored to the top of the dock to aid with climbing in and out of the boat. There is of course a space between the boat and the dock with room for fenders to prevent direct contact and damage. One must climb two steps on the step stool and then one step up and over to the deck of the boat. I have a bad habit of transiting to and from with both hands loaded. I have done this a few hundred times, and, of course, I think I am being careful and have great balance. After all, I can always catch myself if I start to fall.

Sunday, I had a five-gallon container with two gallons of fuel in my right hand and a gallon container of acetone in my left hand as I climbed up the step stool and over to the deck of the boat. I obviously missed a step or my foot slipped. I will never know exactly what happened. The one-gallon container found home in the cockpit and I fell feet first in the narrow space between the dock and the boat. I felt a slight delay as I broke through the two or three inches of ice. Breaking through the ice was a new and unpleasant experience for me. I was conscious of, and grateful for the three gallons of air in the

plastic fuel jug I was grasping with my right hand. Honestly, without that floatation, I am not sure I would have surfaced. Had I tried to swim, I could have easily missed the hole in the ice and been trapped.

Judikay watched me disappear below the surface and then float to the surface. I am sure that was very disturbing for her to watch. Surprisingly, I did not panic. I knew I had to get out of the water quickly. We have a swim ladder on the back of the boat but getting to it would require breaking about ten feet of ice, and therefore that ladder was not an option. Actually, I did not even think about the swim ladder while I was in the ice water but knew there was nothing to climb. Judikay gave me her hand from the dock and I grabbed a stanchion on the boat with the other hand. Combined, we did not have the strength to get me out of the water. I don't think it would have worked even if the water was warm and I was in better shape.

We had been alone most of the day with the exception of only a couple members who came to check on their boat or retrieve something. Fortunately, Matt Nicks came to work on his boat just a few minutes before I got wet. Judikay yelled for help and he was there very quickly. Thank you Matt!! The two of them pulled me out of the water and onto the dock. I don't believe I was able to contribute to the rescue other than hanging on with a good grip. I do remember being concerned about Judikay hurting herself by lifting me, and I wanted to do it myself to protect her. I just could not. All this happened in less than two minutes, I would guess.

Victims usually don't think straight or make good decisions. When hypothermia is a risk, you should always take charge, get the victim out of the wet clothes, and stop the heat loss. I know this, have taught this and have rescued others. Actually, I have been rescued on cold whitewater several times so I know the drill. Fortunately, Judikay has also had the training, knows what to do, and has been a victim herself.

As soon as I was out of the ice water, I wanted to get in the car and get the heater going without changing clothes. Judikay did the correct thing, took charge, and insisted that I change. I actually remembered and thought about the fact that hypothermia victims often don't think straight or make good decisions, so I agreed.

I stripped in the parking lot and was fortunate to have a towel, dry underwear, thick wool socks, and fleece for my top and bottom. Those things just happened to be in a duffel bag we brought for another reason. The air temperature had warmed to about 60F and was a blessing. Had the air temperature been more like winter, the walk to the car with wet cotton clothing could have been disastrous. We should always have a emergency bag with a complete change of dry clothes.

Later, I thought much about the details of the incident and how lucky I was to be rescued. Thank you again Judikay and Matt. In fact, I had trouble sleeping that first night because I could not force myself to think about anything else. The U.S. Coast Guard tells us that fisherman who fall overboard in Alaskan waters will often gasp for a breath when shocked by the cold water. They drown before they have a chance to get hypothermia. I

suppose my previous training and kayaking experience conditioned me to hold my breath even though it was ice water. Whatever the reason, I was very lucky. There is no way to get from the water to the dock because we have no nearby ladder. I was very lucky to have help. I could not have gotten out of the water by myself. I once got hypothermic in a swimming pool and it messed up my on-board (in my brain) thermostat. I get cold very easily, and I pay close attention to my body. I have taught many people how to prevent, recognize, and treat hypothermia. Another minute or two in the water, and I could have become severely hypothermic. I survived the incident, including changing clothes in the parking lot without a shiver. I still don't know for sure if I suffered any hypothermia. I never experienced the shivering that normally accompanies mild hypothermia, and I warmed up nicely once I got changed and turned the car heater on.

This incident has both Judikay and I doing some serious thinking about how to enjoy our boat and safely sail when the water is cold and there is no one around to help. I will immediately modify my behavior when transiting to and from the boat. I will use only one hand to carry things and will use the other hand to grasp something on the boat for better stability. I will install a rescue ladder on the end of my slip and/or I will fix the folding ladder on the back of our boat so I can release it while swimming in the water. I also need to learn about and install jack lines to help prevent falling overboard when working on deck in rough seas.

When we sail over cold water and no others are around to help in an emergency, Judikay will be wearing her wetsuit, and wool socks. I will be wearing my dry suit, and wool socks. This will prepare us to survive an unintentional swim for at least a few minutes. We both will, of course, be wearing our PFD. One cannot rescue another if they are hiding below the surface. Most water sport related deaths involve people who are good swimmers and did not see the need to wear a PFD.

In addition, we will be practicing man overboard rescues with a jug or other floatation device, and we will develop a system whereby we can wench either one of us out of the water and into the boat. Cold water can zap a victim's strength to a point where they cannot climb a ladder. Both of us need to be capable of dropping the sails quickly, and starting the engine.

If you are not familiar with the symptoms of hypothermia, the different stages of hypothermia, and/or the first aid for hypothermia, please do some research and learn what you can to help yourself and others. To the surprise of many people, warming a person's flesh with a hot shower or giving them something hot or alcoholic to drink is not the proper first aid for hypothermia. Incorrectly warming a person with severe hypothermia can release toxins in the blood and cause death. The good news is that hypothermia can be prevented with proper clothing and good planning.

Those of us involved in water sports might also think about staying current with first aid and CPR. Imagine a heart attack or man overboard in the middle of our lake and perhaps a non-sailor left on board, but helpless in maneuvering the boat to perform a rescue.

A cell phone can be very helpful in an emergency if you have emergency numbers ready and the phone does not get wet. I learned of a sailor whose girlfriend was able to save his life at Cheney by using the marine radio to call for help. Monitor channel 16 on your VHF marine radio in case someone needs help. Be sure to show your guests where the radio is and instruct them how to call for help. If you are in the clubhouse, make sure the club VHF radio is turned on and set to monitor channel 16. It is in the closet above the hot water heater and often turned off.