



SKIP NOVAK

I'M JUST GOING TO COME OUT AND SAY IT: TOO MANY YACHTSMEN ARE BEING RESCUED AT SEA FROM SEAWORTHY HULLS

It is the situation that most, if not all, sailors who roam the oceans dream about. Finding an abandoned yacht drifting around is booty, matey. Well at least to some extent, before insurers get involved and take their slice. The

scenario might go something like this: the vessel is sighted by chance, drifting, apparently not under command, possibly down by her waterline. No contact is made by radio. You come in close to hailing distance and still nothing heard. Then the heroic decision is made to board, which will involve some risks and certainly gymnastics. Heart rates go up. In a seaway it is a challenge and hopefully after sliding the companionway hatch open you will not find a mummified skipper and crew in their bunks. The bilges are awash but obviously the hull seems sound otherwise. You pump her out, throw up over the side several times then tidy up and take her in tow. At some point you notify the authorities and when in port

stake your claim officially.

Although this is a hypothetical scenario it does happen and if news reports during the last few years are anything to go by the chance of getting lucky

out there in the briny is increasing not decreasing.

The old adage that you get in the liferaft when the boat is sinking underneath you seems to have gone by the board. "Stand by the boat" is another old favourite – when the boat was your life blood, your home, your all. Now it seems boats can be cast aside for very debatable reasons, becoming almost an expendable item.

Taking the easy way out?

Mast failures, rudder failures, engine failures and just worn out crew have been the reasons that otherwise seaworthy hulls have been abandoned after the rescue is made. And with EPIRBs connected to MRCCs worldwide, satellite phones to hand and AIS recommended if not required, the rescue is easier than ever to put in motion – maybe too easy.

Easy for me to say, right? I have never been rescued – if you ignore *Drum* capsizing when the keel spectacularly fell off in the Fastnet race in 1985 – then we had no choice or it was a long cold swim ashore. So it might seem arrogant of me (not the first time) to criticise a decision to ask for a bail-out. Whatever the failure might be it happens more often than not in heavy weather. A mast falling over the side or drifting around rudderless is disconcerting at the very least, more likely a panic will already have set in. Dealing with the aftermath to stay afloat, save the hull and keep the crew safe will be exhausting. It will take some willpower and clear thinking to realise that all is not lost if the hull, no matter how uncomfortable she is riding, is not going down any time soon. This is the time when a Mayday should have been a Pan Pan.

Pressure from rescuers

Granted, complicating factors could be injuries on board or drifting close to a lee shore rudderless and rigless with no power. Once the decision is made to call out the rescue services or take help from a re-routed passing ship, there is usually no turning back. The pressure from the rescuers to leave the vessel, having come all that way, will be enormous and 'no second chances' will be made clear. The onus on the skipper to take the safest course of action is paramount. So in the interests of ultimate safety of the crew the boat is abandoned and left to its fate – or worse, with the hull rammed or shot through with military ordnance to remove a 'hazard to navigation.'

Of course, every abandonment has its particular story so it is difficult or impossible to suggest a different course of action that could have been taken in order to save the boat. This cannot be done from any armchair. It just happens and it is all accepted, with no guilt or embarrassment attached. When these stories hit the press it is simply reported and no one seems to wonder about the 'what ifs?'

Collect the insurance money and start again? Or best to contemplate another activity? There are a few things that we who go to sea should never forget – the weather will always change for the better and with adequate sea room there is always hope. ■

'ONCE THE DECISION IS MADE THERE IS USUALLY NO TURNING BACK'