



by Austin Davis

A STROKE OF LUCK IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

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On March 20, 1994, I was on the third day of a planned five-day solo sail to Corpus Christi, Texas, headed for home on my 26-foot sailboat. Having logged many solo miles offshore with the boat in the 18 months I had owned it, I felt comfortable sailing the boat alone. The weather was as moderate as the sea state. I was really into the solo rhythm of the boat and, except for running aground earlier that day when I went ashore to get ice, all seemed right with the world.

About 8:00 p.m. I was on the bow of the boat writing a poem in the red glow of the port running light. The self-steering mechanism was guiding the boat quietly about ten miles off the coast of Galveston Island. My float coat kept me warm in the evening breeze. Then the running lights blinked off. Grum-

bling at having to leave my comfortable perch, I went below to figure out what I assumed was a minor glitch. I stepped down into the dark cabin into knee-deep water and a nightmare. In the fading light I could see that water covered everything—my boat was dying. Reflexively, I ran up on deck and, with my trusty knife, I cut the halyards, dropping the sails. Then I cut the safety line on the anchor, setting it to hold the boat until I could sort everything out.

When I returned to the cabin, the water seemed to be even deeper. I searched for the source of the rising water. The batteries were submerged, so there was no power, and no option to use the radio. I felt too shocked and alone to be really scared, *yet*. While I searched in the dark for a leak in a boat filled with

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water, the thought crossed my mind that if I did not do something fast, I would soon be on the bottom of the Gulf with the boat.

On deck was my only hope, my 16-foot plastic kayak. I had always used the kayak as my dinghy and, with the sponsons deployed, it made a great tender. Now it would have to do duty as a life raft. When the boat was underway, the kayak was carried on the cabin top tied to the starboard handrails with three-quarter-inch deck lines. My knife again came to the rescue, making short work of the lines holding the kayak.

Placing the kayak in the water on the starboard side of the boat and getting in was aided by the ever-decreasing freeboard of the dying boat. I hung onto the swamped sailboat as it rocked wildly in the three-foot waves. I thought my arm was going to be ripped out of its socket as I held on. I figured the boat would stay afloat till someone saw us in this jam. (I was thankful the kayak was plastic and tough enough to take a gorilla beating.)

Within moments, the bow of my sailboat lifted and the boat began the last leg of this trip—straight down. Suddenly, I remembered the harness I always wear to secure me to the boat when I sail offshore was still tethered to the base of the mast. The movement of my knife seemed fluid, but very slow. The line cut cleanly just as it was taking on tension. The boat slipped into the blackness with the strangest silence. I paddled over to the place it used to be, trying to awaken from the nightmare.

With the sailboat gone, the task of paddling home began. I turned the kayak toward the glow of the horizon. I clearly remember thinking, within moments of losing the boat, "This is as bad as it could get." I was wrong.

I had the rudder in the "down" position while I steered with my feet, running with the waves. As I tried to secure the spray skirt, a wave suddenly broke over me. It slapped my face onto the deck and rolled me over and out of the kayak into the Gulf of Mexico. Stunned, I lost both my grip on the paddle and the boat. Losing two boats in less than five minutes is a record I hope nobody will ever have to beat. Sputtering in disbelief, I swam to where I thought the kayak should be. After a while, it occurred to me it could be just past any wave in the dark night.

A pull on the pocket of my float coat activated the CO₂ cartridge, which made a loud noise as it lifted me up high. The float coat kept me afloat and warm—as warm as my short pants and the 55-degree water would allow. Then I realized the mistake I had made, and felt as if I had signed my own death warrant. My wetsuit had gone down with my sailboat. The wetsuit and the rest of my safety gear were stowed all over the boat and, in my haste to leave, I had not grabbed any of the survival gear I carried for just this kind of situation.

Floating in the dark of night, I first thought about the movie *Jaws*, then about freezing. Then I got the giggles at the thought of being a frozen snack treat. The cold was already getting to me, as all I really wanted to do was go to sleep. I had to make a choice: either float in the heat-escape lessening position and wait to be found, or swim to find the kayak

and die sooner due to hypothermia. Boy, the choices seemed so good.

I decided to swim, and dumped the air from the float coat. I swam in the direction of the waves in a desperate hope of finding the kayak in the three-to-four-foot waves of the very dark night. As I swam, I counted my strokes and lied to myself. A hundred strokes and I will give up, I told myself. OK, two hundred and I will give up. Swim and lie, swim and lie. This went on until I realized there would be no stopping the search, as the kayak was the only way home. That night I planned my new life if I survived this experience, while I swam and swam.

Then I felt it! My hand touched the bow line, and I jumped at the shock of finding it. There was my kayak, swamped, but floating upright. Reaching behind the seat, I could feel that the sponsons were still there. I carefully clipped them to the boat. (In cold, dark, open water it is very difficult to sort out webbing and buckles.) When I finally inflated them, it was the first time since the loss of the kayak that I felt real hope.

My problems were not over yet. My cold hands would not cooperate to help untie the spare paddle from the tight, small knots of the parachute cord that held it. No paddle, no ride home. I cursed the knots as I struggled to free the paddle.

Finally, my frozen brain screamed, "Knife!!!" For the fifth time, the knife saved me. I carefully unclipped it from my pants and cut the knots. In my haste to get back into the kayak, I started to ditch the knife into the Gulf, but I realized I might need it again. I was not out of trouble yet. With the knife stored back on my waistband, I got ready to re-enter the kayak. The sponsons were the only thing that would allow me to get back into the kayak. With the bow line tied into a hasty stirrup, I climbed, pulled and crawled onto the boat face down. With the sponsons keeping the boat barely upright and my cold hands keeping a death grip on the back-up paddle, I hugged the boat and finally twisted into the cockpit after several tries. The bailer tied to the seat helped me get most of the water out while I again tried to steer with just the rudder. With the sponsons providing stability and the back-up paddle splashing out a rhythm, I made my way to the glowing horizon. Never mind the lack of a spray skirt; nothing was going to separate me from my kayak this time.

Navigation was simple after the faint glow on the horizon took form and I saw some detail. With the boat moving and the land growing near, the sea state seemed to calm somewhat, but all the paddling did not seem to make me any warmer. The cold was like a passenger in the boat with me. It made this otherwise simple trip home a real mental challenge.

I guess it was about one o'clock in the morning when I first heard the waves striking the beach. I do not remember crossing the surf zone, as I was in a dazed, detached state, paddling at a serious, yet automatic, pace. The feeling of my kayak's hull grinding on sand was glorious. A wet exit was the best I could do to get out of the kayak, as my legs seemed to have their own agenda. I dragged

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the kayak and myself up the beach.

A zip-lock bag in the aft compartment held three flares. The first two brought no help, and the thought of all I had been through, only to freeze alone on the beach was too much. So I used the only survival strategy I had left. I got mad. I got mad at the boat, the kayak and the Gulf. I mean, *really* mad. I was storming and staggering. Anger sometimes is the only fuel that can run the engine of life. I stumbled angrily down the beach to a distant light.

That light was Galveston Island State Park. The camper who came out of the bathroom door as I was entering looked shocked at the sight of me—the cut harness over the spray skirt over the float coat, soaked and frozen to the bone. “Where am I?!!,” I growled at the poor man. He just looked at me, stunned. Pushing him out of my way, I

staggered to the showers. Now, in my 30 years of life, I have taken a bunch of showers. They all paled in comparison. The hot water stung, yet felt like velvet. The heat from the water slowly started my brain, and for the first time I felt safe. I don’t know how long I was in the shower, but when I got out there was a small crowd. Someone told me about the pay phone, and in a few minutes I had the Galveston County Sheriff’s Department coming to file a report. When my mom answered the collect call from me, I told her I had lost the boat, but was safe and needed some dry clothes. Half in shock and half asleep, she asked if I needed her to come pick me up. “No, mom, I just called to share!” My making a joke told us both that, yes, I really was finally OK. My parents were soon on the way to give me a ride home.

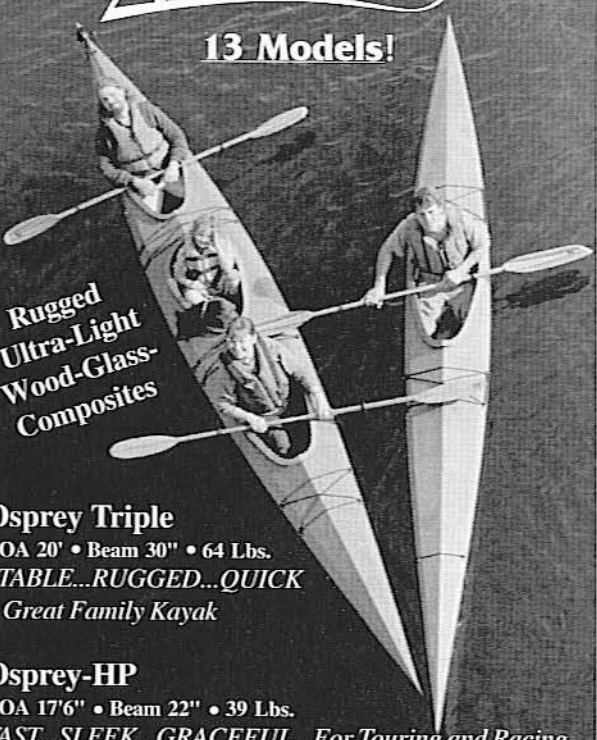
To this day I still don’t know what caused the loss of the boat. Seacock failure, keel-hull separation, I don’t know. What I do know is this: all emergency gear should be kept together in a floating container in an easy-to-reach place in case all does not go well. Play hard and hope for the best; just prepare carefully for the worst. **OK**

Equipment Used: SeaYak kayak by Prijon; Endura knife by Spyderco; float coat by Stormy Seas; Sea Wing sponsons by Georgian Bay Kayaks

Austin Davis is a professional comedian, police trainer and former policeman living in Houston, Texas.

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