

Single-Handed and An Unplanned Swim

By Tim Reid, Shrimper 845 (*Fairmaid*), (August 2010)

The incident

The Shrimper fleet had departed Bucklers Hard on the Beaulieu River at approximately 09:30 on 12 August 2010 and I was one of the last to leave having been moored on the inside. The weather was sunny and bright with a light north westerly forecast to increase steadily to around a force 4, gusting 5 by the afternoon. A lovely day for a sail.

Sailing single-handed as usual I use an autopilot to provide me with that extra pair of hands when necessary and it was on as usual that morning. The wind was light at approximately 2-3 knots and just starting to fill steadily, I had raised a full main and was motorsailing out of the river heading for Bembridge with the fleet.

I had left the river and was in the Solent enjoying the lovely morning having picked-up the east going tide and on a dead run I had just unfurled the jib and was about to switch the engine off. However, before I did this I noticed ahead of me the glorious sight of about nine or so Shrimpers nicely spaced out across the horizon, the sun glinting on the water, many of the boats goose-winged and I thought it warranted a photograph or two. So, there I was clicking away, I had taken a couple of shots from under the boom to starboard and thought I might get a clearer view from the port side. I stepped across and stood on the port seat, knees braced against the bulkhead. One moment I was concentrating through the viewfinder to frame the shot, the next, all I remember is flying through the air and then bubbles!

I was in the water.

Fortunately I wasn't hurt and, as I surfaced, was amazed to find that I had hold of the port jibsheet and so was not actually seperated from *Fairmaid*. My mind raced but didn't panic, thank goodness. Rather perversly, I remember thinking "oh well the camera has gone but at least I'm still with the boat". *Fairmaid* was continuing oblivious to my predicament thanks to the autopilot, the engine and the filling wind. I estimate that she was doing 3 to 4 knots through the water and it was this that subsequently proved to be my biggest problem. I was able to hand myself down the port side to the stern where I could reach and lower the transom ladder, all the time thinking "I must not let go". *Fairmaid's* progress through the water simply streamed me out the back of the boat, making it extremely difficult and very tiring to get my legs anywhere near the ladder. Only once in what seemed like an eternity was I able to get a knee onto the bottom rung, but with my strength weakening by this time, I was simply not able to get a foot on either the ladder or the rudder step to make any progress upwards. Even just hanging on was becoming more and more difficult and I could foresee a point at which I would just have to let go.

Although I had no idea how long I had been in the water, I soon concluded that I was not going to get back in the boat without some external help. I knew that Julian Biggs in *Bybyn-Bubyn* had been the nearest Shrimper to me before I went into the water but I could not see him from my position hanging off the ladder. Anyway, I shouted and although he was in front of me he was also downwind. Rather spookily, Julian later confirmed that he had spotted my predicament an instant before my shout, but to my great relief, he promptly lowered his sails and motored over to be my saviour. His crew Joanna jumped into *Fairmaid's* cockpit and immediately took the engine out of gear before grabbing me by the scruff of my neck and helping me up the ladder, somewhat bedraggled, very out of breath and very much shaken and stirred!

Needless to say I was impressed by Julian and Joanna's superb response, so after a brief discussion and profuse gratitude on my part, I was able to allay their concerns and waived them farewell to set about getting underway once more before stripping off and getting into some dry clothes.

Once back in the cockpit I was amazed to see the camera that I had been convinced would be lying on the seabed just sitting there on the port seat. On seeing it I had mixed emotions. On the one hand pleased that it was not lost, but on the other cursing it because of what it had led to. As for that great picture I was after? Well it seems that I never got as far as pressing the button before the boom so inconsiderately intervened!

Lessons Learned

First though some background about me. I'm sixty years old and have been sailing since I was fourteen. I regard myself as "very experienced" when it comes to sailing and with all my boats, I've always worked on the principle that I should be as self sufficient and as safe as possible when on the water. That said, we are blessed with very effective search and rescue services in this country and it is comforting to know that they are there as a last resort.

I have made some conscious decisions about sailing single-handed in my Shrimper: I always wear a life-jacket but it (intentionally) has manual inflation; I have life-lines on board but would only wear one in "extreme" conditions, e.g. force 6 or above (and generally, I would not leave port if a F6 was forecast); I carry distress flares and a VHF hand-held radio. Whilst I am clearly no super-fit athlete, neither am I overweight or inactive. My lung capacity is impaired because of asthma but I think my upper body strength is reasonable for my height and weight.

What actually happened

Well, having gone over it countless times in my head, the truth is, I don't know for certain. I have said that I was taking photographs, and, at that particular moment, that was what I was concentrating on, not the boat. The boat was on a dead-run, with the boom fully out to starboard. What I think happened is that when I moved my weight from the starboard side and stood up to port, this caused the boat to veer slightly to starboard and simultaneously lean over to port, in turn initiating an involuntary gybe. Although others later confirmed that the wind was still quite fickle at that time and that they were gybing frequently, sometimes involuntarily. I think the gybe must have happened quite slowly but either way, I was standing up looking through the camera viewfinder and didn't see or feel it coming. As the boom came across it must have struck me at about waist level and pitched me into the water.

Once in the water I guess I will never know how I came to be holding onto the jib sheet. But for this I would certainly have parted company with *Fairmaid* there and then. Also, had my life-jacket inflated automatically, with the boat's speed through the water and the increased resistance an inflated jacket would have created, there is no way I would have been able to maintain a hold on the boat for as long as I did, if at all.

When I was back in the cockpit and as I removed my wet clothes I was astounded by their (wet) weight. I had been wearing cotton jeans and a cotton rugby style shirt plus a Musto fleece jacket with outer windproof surface. All these clothes are fairly light when dry but, the jacket especially, were really heavy when wet. I'm sure this factor contributed to my difficulties in trying to get up the ladder.

What did I learn

There was nothing to blame other than my own stupidity and complacency. Stupidity because I was standing up in the cockpit of a sailing boat with a heavy boom on a dead run and without a hand-hold. I simply wasn't paying attention to the possibility of a gybe, something I'm normally very focussed upon. Complacency because of the benign conditions. It was a lovely sunny, calm morning and the boat was under control! I guess that the most valuable lesson for me is that the experience will stay with me, hopefully, forever there to tap me on the shoulder to say "remember what happened before" should I try something similar in future. I've been sailing for some forty-five years and this is the first unplanned ducking I've had (dinghies excepted). I hope that it is at least another forty-five years before the next!

What will I change

During this incident, and in my opinion, the most significant factor in causing me not to be able get back on board was the boat's speed through the water. It made just holding on much more tiring much more quickly, it severely impeded even getting my legs close to the ladder, let alone getting onto it. The autopilot did its job and kept the boat on its intended course when normally, without a steady hand on the tiller, a sailing boat will round-up into the wind and at least slow down if not stop. Consequently, these are the two areas where I am focussing my attention, although clearly, there are others.

This is mostly work-in-progress at the moment as I have not yet made any final decisions. The following is what I'm considering:

- I will pursue a means to stop the engine "remotely" although I don't yet know how to achieve this.
- I will consider how to "trip" the autopilot. Options include a new autopilot with remote control but ideally, a more simple means to detach the arm from the tiller would be preferable. (And all whilst hanging off the back of the boat!)
- I will investigate the feasibility of wearing my (waterproof) handheld VHF at all times and the practicalities of using whilst in the water.
- I will investigate PLBs (Personal Locator Beacon) so that if I did become detached from the boat I would have a greater chance of being picked-up.
- To wear a life-line or not? Even though this is the only foolproof way of staying with the boat in any emergency I am still undecided because of the practical restrictions it imposes, particularly when trying to move about the boat. Having said that however, I will be wearing one over the next few outings to re-assess my views.
- Clothing – I'm looking at the catalogues!

Any thoughts, comments, ideas will be most welcome.

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