

1-1-1989

Man overboard maneuvers

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Recommended Citation

Shirley H. M. Reekie. "Man overboard maneuvers" *Sail* (1989): 23-25.

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Man-overboard maneuvers

Good sailing is a continuous process of building basic skills. Shirley Reekie discusses the fundamentals and describes what to do if a crewmember falls overboard

A good skipper should be a good boathandler. If a crewmember ends up in the water, those on the boat must take decisive steps to retrieve that person. Knowing what to do in that situation is a fundamental part of good seamanship for all sailors on all bodies of water—not just those who sail offshore. Fortunately, a man-overboard situation is not an everyday occurrence. Practicing a recovery, using partially filled plastic milk jugs tied together as trial “victims,” can enable those on board to get a crewmember aboard safely and quickly, should the need ever arise. This is particularly important because every man-overboard is a potentially dangerous event. Hypothermia, a weakening condition caused by exposure to cold water over time, is the greatest threat when someone falls overboard.

■ Inspection for prevention

Several simple precautions can reduce the chance of one of your crew's falling into the water. If you have guardrails, pulpit, and lifelines, check to see that they are secure and in place. In dinghies, a common cause of falling overboard is a breaking hiking strap, tiller extension, or sheet. Check yours periodically for signs of wear, especially at all the attachment points. If you're sailing on a larger boat in heavy weather, make sure all crewmembers wear safety harnesses.

■ Recovery procedures

Several rescue maneuvers are widely accepted, and the one that is best for you depends on sea and weather conditions. Just remember that getting the boat back to the victim as quickly as possible is most important. We are assuming here that the person in the water is conscious and not seriously injured.

Whenever a person falls off a boat, whoever notices the event should shout “man overboard” and immediately throw an inflatable cushion (or

man-overboard pole on a larger boat) to mark the site and give the person something buoyant to hold on to.

Stopping the boat next to the victim requires practice, too. Whether you stop to windward or leeward depends on sea and wind conditions, boat type,

into the wind after seeing someone fall overboard. This stops the boat's forward progress and enables the crew to proceed back to the victim. After passing head-to-wind, leave the jib cleated to windward so that it helps push the boat around on the new tack, and you can bear off and return to the victim.



Tom Linsley

Rough seas call for reliable safety equipment. Practice your man-overboard maneuvers, but don't forget prevention: Check your equipment ahead of time

and the reboarding technique you choose.

The “quick-stop” method has become a generally accepted procedure for recovering a crewmember who has fallen overboard. The idea of the quick-stop maneuver is to stay close to and maintain sight of the victim. The procedure is to quickly turn the boat

This method also works with the spinnaker up. Simply head the boat into the wind, ease the spinnaker pole forward to the

headstay, and tighten the pole downhaul. When the spinnaker begins to come aback and reaches the spreaders, let the spinnaker down with the halyard. It should fall mainly on the deck (Fig. 1).

Drifting method. After shouting “man overboard” and throwing a flotation device, sail onto a beat, keeping

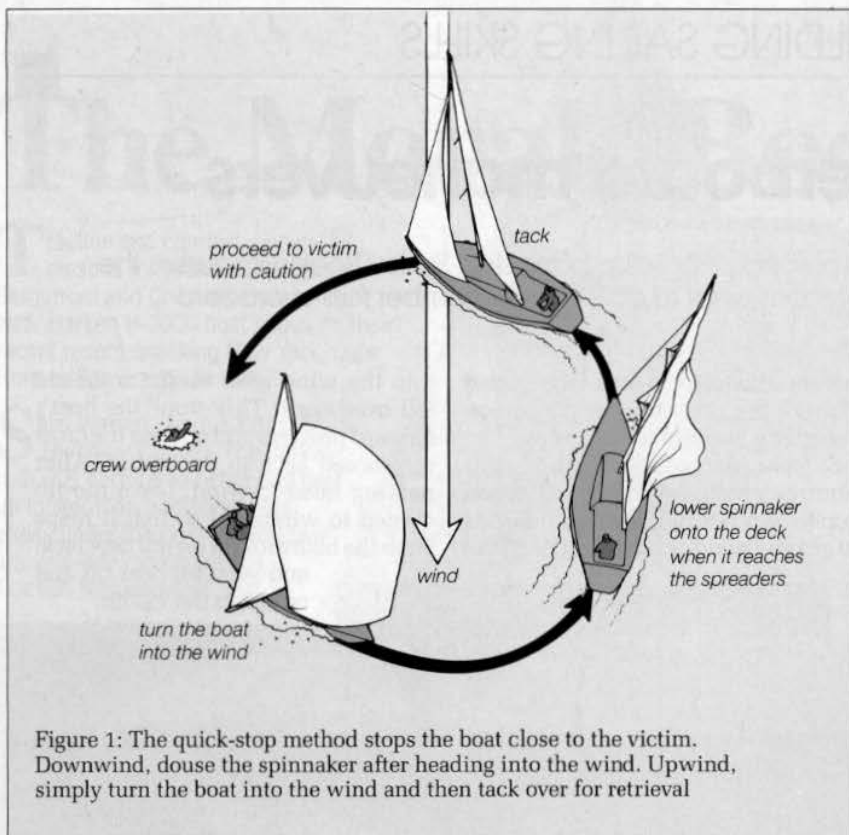


Figure 1: The quick-stop method stops the boat close to the victim. Downwind, douse the spinnaker after heading into the wind. Upwind, simply turn the boat into the wind and then tack over for retrieval

reach. Head into the wind a little, and ease the sheets to stop the boat close enough to the victim that you can come alongside.

Come-about method. Whenever a gybe is too risky, especially on a sailing dinghy, this method is a good alternative.

First shout "man overboard" and throw a flotation device. Without either coming about or gybing, sail on a broad reach for about 5 boatlengths. Keep close watch on the victim because it may be hard to relocate the person once you lose sight of him. Head up to a beat briefly, and then come about and return on a reach (Fig. 2). The victim may have floated downwind, so he should be directly ahead of your boat now. Slow the boat and fine-tune your approach by adjusting the sheet and heading up slightly.

If you misjudge your approach, try the sequence again. Fall off onto a broad reach on the opposite tack from the first; then repeat the procedure, approaching the victim from the opposite side.

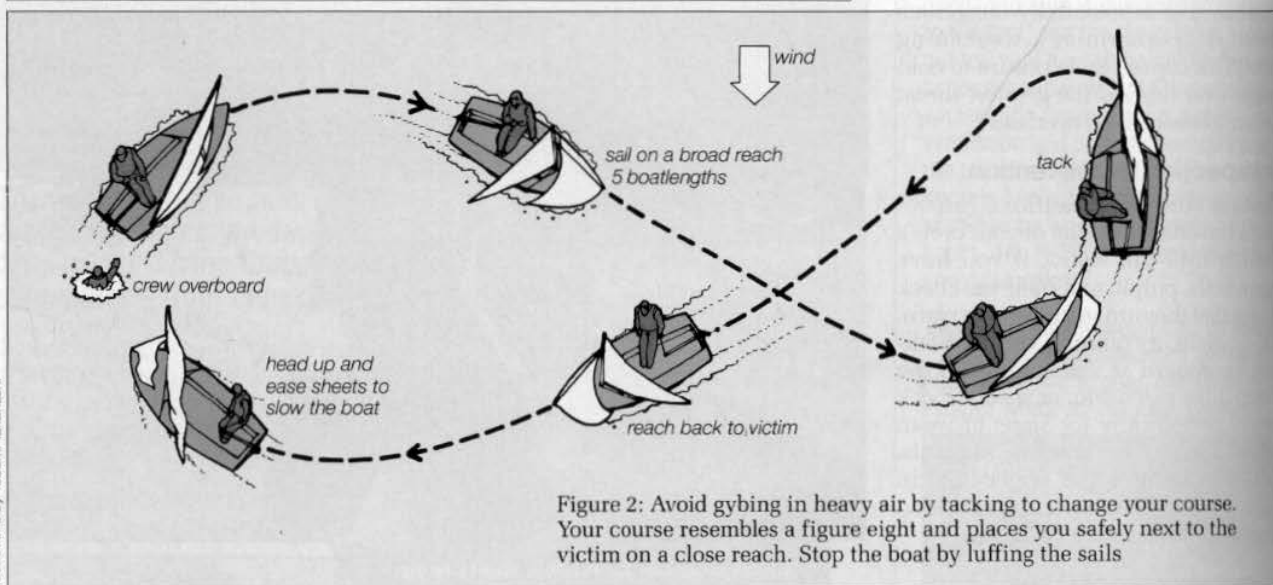


Figure 2: Avoid gybing in heavy air by tacking to change your course. Your course resembles a figure eight and places you safely next to the victim on a close reach. Stop the boat by luffing the sails

a careful watch on the victim. Come about and keep the jib cleated on the new windward side. Get under way briefly, and then let out the mainsheet, at the same time pushing the tiller to leeward. The boat is now "hove-to" and drifts sideways toward the victim. You control its forward motion by easing out or trimming in on the mainsheet.

The gybing method can work well because the skipper can turn the boat around quickly without getting too far

from the victim. Do not try it unless you are certain you and the boat can gybe easily.

Shout "man overboard" and throw a flotation device. Have someone keep close watch on the victim (if you have crew, always detail one of them to do this job only), and sail back to windward for about 5 boatlengths. This gives you the upwind distance that you lose on the gybe.

Now bear away from the wind and gybe, and approach the victim from a

■ From water to deck

While maneuvering the boat back to the victim requires skill, so does hauling the victim aboard. Again, assess the situation to determine what is best for you and your boat.

On dinghies with little freeboard, pull the victim in to windward over the gunwale, forward of amidships, to keep the boat luffing up. Hauling over the transom with the wind abeam and the sails luffing increases the chance that the boat will fall off and start sail-

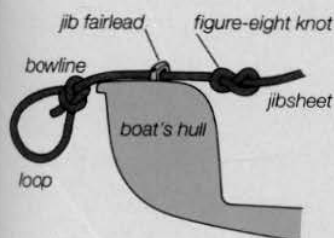


Figure 3: To get a conscious crew-member aboard, make a stirrup by leading a sheet with a loop in it through a jib fairlead. Secure the bitter end with a stopper knot so that the loop acts as a step

ing with weight at the stern. Here's where you might consider taking down the sails.

To pull someone aboard, grasp under the armpits from the rear on the windward side of the boat. Keeping the boom and sails to leeward helps balance the boat. You might find it easier to roll the victim aboard horizontally over the gunwale.

On larger boats with more freeboard, you can help the victim get aboard with a swim ladder. Or you can make a stirrup by tying a bowline in the jibsheet and knotting the sheet on the inboard side of the block or fairlead (Fig. 3).

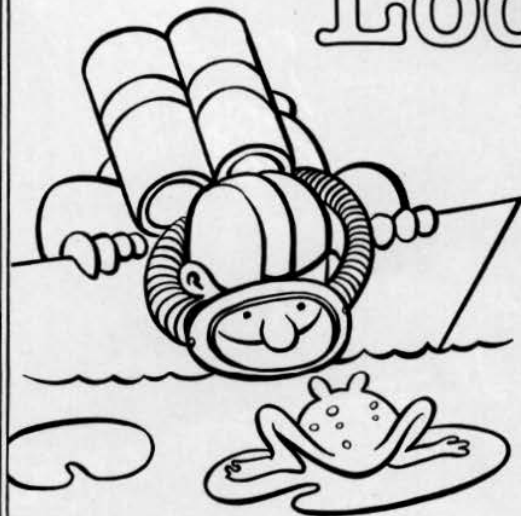
On larger boats, a purchase system, such as a boomvang and the support of the boom over the water, can help you lift someone from the water. One end of the tackle is attached to the boom, which has been eased out over the water, and the other end attaches to a sling holding the victim. This gives you greater lifting power, and the boom enables you to swing the victim aboard. In these cases, you want to approach the victim to windward to put the boom lower and closer to the victim. You might have another crew-member, wearing a personal flotation device (PFD), go into the water to assist. Be certain this person has a lifeline attached to the boat.

Practice all these methods and learn which are most effective for you and your boat. Have your crew practice, too, in case you, as skipper, fall overboard. Practice always makes your crew more confident in their abilities, and they will be better prepared for any type of sailing.



Shirley H.M. Reekie is the author of *Sailing Made Simple*, published by Leisure Press, Champaign, Illinois.

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