

A sad ending

Some lessons from a search and recovery

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Early in August, *Pemandia* was returning from a short cruise in South Brittany. In order to work our way around the old chestnut of time, tides and weather, we came across from Douarnenez to St Mary on the Scilly Isles and then back towards Plymouth. As well as Emily and I, our friends Malcolm and Judy Luthman were on board. They had spent a week with us in Scotland last year and fit in very well, although they have limited experience. There had been quite a lot of wind out in the Atlantic, so there was a significant swell running and we had a rather gusty SW4-5 helping us along although were crossing Mount's Bay with a foul tide. Visibility was very good.

At 1500 while still west of the Lizard, we heard a Mayday Relay call from Falmouth Coastguard. An abandoned yacht had been seen near Coverack Bay. The alarm had been raised at 1345 although we did not hear it until 1500. Once the yacht had been boarded, a single passport had been found. Next of kin informed the Coastguard that the skipper was single handed and a very experienced yachtsman, with multiple, mostly single-handed, Atlantic crossings under his belt. He was bound for Falmouth from Nova Scotia via the Azores.

Our initial thought was that we were too far away to help with the search and that anyway, yachts joining in might be a nuisance. However not long after, a helicopter flew low overhead and it was obvious from the VHF that the search was still being escalated, so we motor sailed to round the Lizard close inshore with our eyes skinned. At 1640, just south of the Lizard, I radioed the Coastguard to offer to join the search. After a 5 minute 'Wait Out' we were asked about our capability – four adults including two doctors. We were asked to search inshore of a line between Black Head and the Manacles Buoy.

We made our way to a point close off Black Head and began a zig-zag that took us towards Porthbeer Cove, just south of Chynhalls Point and the Guthens rocks. A fishing dory informed us that they had already searched the bay, so we turned to make our way out and around the point. Suddenly Malcolm yelled, 'Over there on Port side!' He had spotted something in the water, perhaps 100 yards away. At first none of the rest of us could see it. Malcolm was up on deck while the rest of us were in the cockpit where

it was hidden behind the swell.

Very gingerly we made our way towards Malcolm's sighting. At first I thought it was a rock or some seaweed, and the last thing we wanted was to become a second casualty. It was horribly close to the rocks – we estimated our distance off at $1\frac{1}{2}$ heartbeats, and the wind and tide were both taking us closer.

Sadly it became clear that the sighting was indeed the casualty, at best unconscious, but more likely dead. I brought the boat alongside the body, which was just afloat, lying head down in the water. He was not wearing a lifejacket or harness that we could get hold of and



we were unable to lift him or get a rope around him or even turn him head upwards. All we could do was to lie on the side deck holding onto him while Emily motored slowly away from the rocks to at least give us room to manoeuvre. We then called Mayday on VHF. Fortunately, in probably less than two minutes, the helicopter was overhead with a lifeboat shortly behind. The casualty was quickly winched up and airlifted to Truro Hospital, where, very sadly he was declared dead on arrival. We meanwhile thought better of our plan to spend a couple of days in the Helford River and made our way with heavy hearts on to Plymouth instead.

Some lessons learnt:

1. Wear a lifejacket. The RNLI slogan 'Useless unless worn' is powerful, but seemingly not powerful enough. Not only does a lifejacket do what the name says, but also the bright colour helps search operations and the straps enable rescue. If you really don't want to wear a lifejacket, at least wear bright clothing. Our casualty was darkly dressed and even when we had seen him it was hard to keep him in sight. At first we thought he was a rock or seaweed.
2. To spot a casualty in any significant swell, you must be as high as possible. When Malcolm spotted ours he was invisible from the cockpit and it is likely that the Dory that had searched the bay had been within 50 yards without seeing him.
3. Teach all your crew to use VHF properly, not just a Mayday call, and teach them how to read and report position, to change channels, to switch to and from dual watch and so on. I had not done this.
4. I felt I wanted to take the helm when we were searching so close to the rocks as the most experienced person to get us alongside the casualty first go. Malcolm and I, however, were the largest and strongest to reach into the water, so I had too many tasks. One of the oldest mistakes in leadership.
5. Have a plan to recover the casualty. They are not like a fenders! If we had not had the helicopter above us so quickly, we would probably have launched the life raft as the dinghy would have taken much longer to inflate. I do not know how easily we could have recovered him into the raft.

Postscript: *About two weeks later, we read the obituary notice of this very experienced yachtsman. The same day, Cornwall Police kindly phoned to thank us for our help and to inform me that a post mortem examination had shown the casualty died of a heart attack. Whether this caused him to fall overboard or the stress of falling caused the heart attack is something we will never know. We can only hope he was unaware of his plight. What a sad ending.*