

## **DAM ACCIDENTS**

### *The Story*

Many needless deaths are still occurring on waters above and below dams, in spite of attempts to make boatmen aware of the dangers. For the purpose of this article, a study was made of six reports of accidents that resulted from boating or fishing too close to dams last year.

One incident above a dam involved two men who went canoeing late one afternoon, after work. It was dark when they neared their destination; however, not knowing the precise location of a particular dam, the two men drifted into the rushing waters and lost control of the canoe. One of the men was killed as the craft was swept over the spillway. A contributing factor in this accident was the lack of lighted signs and safety cables in the area of the dam.

In another case, a twenty-year-old college student took a 26 foot, single operator's scull into the turbulent waters of a river to practice rowing. She drifted too close to a dam, and, probably recognizing her predicament, dived from the boat in an attempt to swim to shore, a distance of 15 yards. The force of the water was too much for the girl, however; her body was recovered sometime later below the dam.

Subsequent investigation revealed that a "safety wire" which normally stretched across the river above the dam, had been partially carried away at the point where the young student went over. Nevertheless, she was guilty of an error in judgment by failing to assess the prevailing water conditions and by disregarding her proximity to the dam.

In the third case, a party of four aboard a fifteen-foot, thirty-five horse power motorboat approached a dam at about fifteen miles per hour. When they were within fifty feet of the dam, the operator attempted to alter his course, but the boat did not respond. The craft crashed through the "flash boards" atop the dam, and one of the four persons was killed as the boat plummeted to the waters below.

Not all accidents occur above a dam, however. In fact, there is a higher rate of drownings in the ever more dangerous waters below a dam where sportsmen are lured by an abundance of fish.

In one incident last year, a fourteen foot, ten horsepower motorboat with two people aboard capsized when hydroelectric turbines automatically began to operate. One occupant survived by clinging to a nearby rock; the other occupant (reportedly a good swimmer) was less fortunate.

Cause of this casualty? Negligent operation by deliberately entering a clearly advertised dangerous area.

The second case occurring below a dam involved three persons aboard a fifteen foot, sixty-five horsepower motorboat. The party were fishing in the spillway area when they drifted too close to a discharge and were caught in the heavy turbulence. The small boat crashed into the dam and capsized. All three occupants drowned. There was no safety chair or wire to grasp; however, large signs on the dam and below the dam warned boats to stay clear. Again, the casualties could be attributed to negligence on the part of the operator.

The final example involved pontoon boat twenty feet in length and propelled by a twenty-five horsepower motor. The boat was equipped with remote steering, but lacked a remote engine starter. The three men aboard the boat had been fishing in one spot for some time before they moved to a point immediately below, an island on one side of the spillway, beyond the sign area. As they approached their anchor point, the engine was cut and the anchor (a tractor flywheel and 100 feet of steel cable) was dropped; but, the river bottom was hard and smooth, the anchor did not hold, and the boat kept moving! They were being swept stem first toward the dam's spillway. The men tried to restart the engine, but it was not powerful enough to act against the current and the craft kept moving toward the dam. The stern struck the buoyed cable, and in the jostling that occurred, the boat capsized. Two of the men on board who were thrown from the craft clung to the cable and were rescued; the third, who remained within the boat, was drowned.

In this last case, signs were posted at each end of the buoyed cable. The primary cause of this casualty was operating in turbulent waters where the current was opposite in direction to that expected (i.e., toward the dam, rather than down river). A contributing cause was an insufficient anchor for conditions encountered. Also revealed by subsequent investigation was the fact that the drowning victim, a man in poor health, who could not swim, was not wearing a PFD.

## **Lesson Learned**

*From these six cases, we learn of the need for safety cables or wires both above and below dams. In addition, we see the possible need for more visible warning signs (at least one at the dam, two in the area of the safety cable, and two beyond). Of course, better education of the boatman is also imperative, as is the need to develop some new and innovative methods of warning those persons who venture into these hazardous waters. It is a task (and a problem) to be shared mutually by those agencies involved in dam safety and boating safety, and by the*

*boatman as well.*

***Prevention Through People***



[\*Section Index\*](#)

[\*Main Index\*](#)

[\*Next Lesson Learned\*](#)

---

[\*Marine Safety and Environmental Protection\*](#)

[\*USCG Homepage\*](#)

[\*Webmaster\*](#)

[\*Disclaimer\*](#)

[\*Created 6/3/96\*](#)

[\*Updated 7/7/98\*](#)