



SAFETY ALERT 06-02

17th Coast Guard District
United States Coast Guard
P. O. Box 25517
Juneau, Alaska 99802
907-463-2810 or 800-478-7369 In Alaska
www.uscg.mil/d17/m/CFVS.shtml

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MSO Valdez	835-7223	MSD Ketchikan	225-4496
MSO Juneau	463-2450	MSD Kodiak	486-5918
MSD Dutch Harbor	581-3466	MSD Kenai	283-3292

THREE SAFE AFTER VESSEL LOSES POWER AND BREAKS UP ON THE ROCKS

Background: The Seventeenth Coast Guard District Safety Alert program provides “Lessons Learned” from marine casualties in support of the Coast Guard’s “Ready for Sea” safety program.

Incident: The three men had been long lining for halibut in the Aleutians and were transiting to Dutch Harbor when the engine died. For a 44 foot vessel, the weather conditions were not ideal—35 knot winds and 18 foot seas, nor was the location—just a mile from Cape Cheerful, where the rocky cliffs offered no soft, protected place to land. They broadcast a MAYDAY. While they waited for help to arrive, they put out their anchor in an effort to “catch on” to something, but it soon became clear that the deteriorating sea conditions were going to prevent that from happening. They deployed their survival craft, placing 2 of the 3 immersion suits inside along with the visual distress signals, and tied it off to the vessel. Suddenly the line to the survival craft broke and the survival craft drifted away, along with their survival equipment. As the vessel continued to drift toward the rocks two of the crew donned wet suits and the third donned his immersion suit. They made the decision to abandon the vessel and risk a beach landing in the 18 foot breaking seas just three minutes before their boat was picked up by a wave and smashed on the rocks. Several fishing vessels heard the distress calls on the radio and responded to the situation, some even getting underway from piers in Dutch Harbor. Unfortunately, the responding vessels were unable to get in close enough to pass a towline to the stricken vessel. Given the weather conditions there was little the fishing vessels could do except wait. Once it became apparent that the crew of the distressed boat had abandoned ship into the water, the master of a 151-foot crabber that had just arrived on scene decided he couldn’t wait any longer. He steamed in to the edge of the breaking surf, locating and rescuing the three survivors out of the breakers and transported them to Dutch Harbor.

Lessons Learned: There are “Ready for Sea” safety factors that are relevant to this incident and several “lessons learned”.

1. Conduct periodic engine maintenance. Be sure your engine is in top condition before you leave the dock.
2. Conduct drills as if there were an actual emergency. Establish procedures for abandoning ship before something happens.
3. Don immersion suits early. Although they are cumbersome, you can still work in them and if you end up in the water, your chances of surviving are dramatically increased.
4. If immersion suits aren’t available, wear whatever is on hand that will insulate you best in cold water. The wetsuits that two of the survivors donned prior to entering the water are a primary reason why they survived 20 minutes of swimming in the cold waters of the Bering Sea. Even rain gear will reduce the loss of body warmth due to cold water circulation when compared to regular street clothes.
5. Launch the survival craft only when you are ready to board the craft. Once it has been inflated it is exposed to the elements. Keep survival equipment close at hand and ready to use if you need it.
6. If you do have to go into the water, hold on to each other so that you make a bigger, more visible target for search and rescue units. You’ll also have someone to talk to, which keeps morale higher.
7. Wear flotation. If you are in the water long enough, exposure to the cold will prevent you from physically keeping your head above the water. An immersion suit, work vest, or inflatable PFD will help to keep your head above the water even when you are unable to do it yourself. The survivors in wet suits remarked they didn’t realize how cold they were until they were out of the water – and they were only in the water for 15-20 minutes.