



# Survival at sea

One of the most sobering TV programmes of recent years reminded us of the events of the Fastnet Race in 1979 when 15 sailors died during a race in August of that year. **Words: Paul Glatzel**

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Any boater watching that programme would have felt a chill passing down their spine as they watched reconstructions of the predicted force 6 rise to force 9, shift direction, then climb to force 11 as it ripped into the fleet of 306 yachts. The UK's largest peacetime rescue followed, involving the entire fleet of the Irish navy, numerous vessels from the Royal Navy and Dutch navy, various rescue helicopters and aircraft, and inevitably plenty of lifeboats from the RNLI alongside a multitude of commercial craft.

The Fastnet Race covers some 600 miles from Plymouth to the Fastnet Rock off southern Ireland

and back again. 125 yachtsmen were rescued; most of the 15 that died did so after they had taken to their life rafts feeling that their yachts were soon to sink. Most of the yachts they left behind survived the storm, while those in the rafts endured a torrid time, and of course, sadly, not all made it.

The subsequent inquiry concluded that yacht-crews would benefit from a course helping them improve their chances of survival by understanding the issues surrounding surviving at sea, using life-saving equipment and deploying and surviving in a life raft.

You may be wondering how this affects us in our powerboats and RIBs ... The course that the RYA

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treated to address this need was the one-day Sea Survival course, and it is such a beneficial, thought-provoking and enjoyable course that every boater, young and old, powerboater or sailor should consider going on it – irrespective of whether you will ever have a life raft.

From time to time things go wrong in every type of boat. As skipper, whether it is just you on board or whether you are responsible for others, being able to deal with an emergency is a really essential skill. It all starts with you, the skipper. It is your job to keep people safe, and doing so involves understanding what equipment you have on board, how to use it and how to look after people.

Let's look closely at some of the subjects covered on the course and how understanding a bit more about them may save a life.

Have you ever looked closely at your flares? Do you know each of the types you have and how to set them off?

There are three main suppliers of flares in the UK and sadly there is no common agreement relating to firing mechanisms, so it is essential you familiarise yourself with the flares present on any vessel you are on – after all, with a vessel on fire it's not the time to read the instructions!

Life jackets, the pros and cons of each type, and particularly the checks to make and the things to keep an eye on, form a key

**YOU SHOULD TYPICALLY HAVE:**



**Inshore**

(Craft operating in daylight near a safe harbour)

**Coastal**

(Craft operating within 10 miles of the coast)

**Offshore**

(Craft making offshore passages)

**To compare the qualification you hold with the boating you might be doing, this would be:**

RYA Powerboat Level 2

RYA Intermediate (or Day Cruising) Powerboat

RYA Advanced Powerboat

**Recommendation:**

2 x orange smoke flares + 2 x red hand flares

**Recommendation:**

An inshore + 2 x red parachute flares

**Recommendation:**

2 x orange smoke flares + 4 x red hand flares + 4 x red parachute flares

part of this course. For the past couple of years the RNLI have been running 'Life Jacket Check' days at marinas, yacht clubs and on slipways, and the percentage of life jackets looked at that would not have worked is staggering. The range of issues is wide, from slightly unscrewed gas cylinders that would have leaked gas when fired, to cylinders that are totally unscrewed and simply 'hanging

around' inside the jacket. On one course that we did recently, of the four life jackets on board three would never have fired and the remaining one was in need of new parts.

There are various ways of issuing a distress call, and rapid progress in the field of electronics means that new systems come on to the market every few years. Some of the obvious ones are VHF DSC



(Digital Selective Calling) and voice distress calls, mobile phones and EPIRBs.

**Why use a VHF rather than a mobile phone for a distress call?**

VHF is a broadcast mechanism and every craft near you (tuned in/switched on) will hear and may be able to assist. Using a mobile means you are just speaking to the coastguard, and others close to you (who could help) will be unaware.

The coastguard/lifeboats and helicopters may be able to get a rough position fix on your craft.

VHF reception afloat will often be better along coastlines than mobile coverage will be.

VHF sets are optimised for marine environments – mobile phones are not. That said, do carry them and use as a backup

**Why use the red button on your VHF before you issue a voice distress call?**

There are many Maydays and Pan-Pans each year on power-driven craft, but MCA statistics show that very few calls are made via the DSC system. Boaters must use this system more!

On a busy summer's day, turn down the volume on your VHF set, change to channel 4 and drive at 20 knots with loads of engine noise – how many voice distress calls would you have heard? Precisely zero.

Now imagine that another craft sends a distress call using the DSC red button before the voice call and there is still that engine noise, the volume is down and you are on channel 4. Would you have heard it? Yes!

Using the DSC part of your VHF set ensures that even with the volume down, tuned to the wrong channel and with loads of engine noise, other craft will become aware of your predicament and change to channel 16 to hear your call. I know what I would do if faced with distress – DSC ... Simple!

Also, with DSC the coastguard and other vessels immediately get your position and craft ID, making the DSC call even more useful.

EPIRBs (Electronic Positioning Indicating Radio Beacons) are becoming an increasingly realistic option for many boaters – particularly for those undertaking coastal passages and those operating in locations where lifeboat/coastguard coverage is not as consistent.

The principle of an EPIRB is that to issue a distress you press a button which sends your position and a vessel ID to the coastguard in the country of registration. The newer versions include a GPS, ensuring great accuracy when reporting your position. In the UK, Falmouth coastguard initially receives these distress messages and alerts the

**LIFE JACKETS – WHAT TO CHECK**

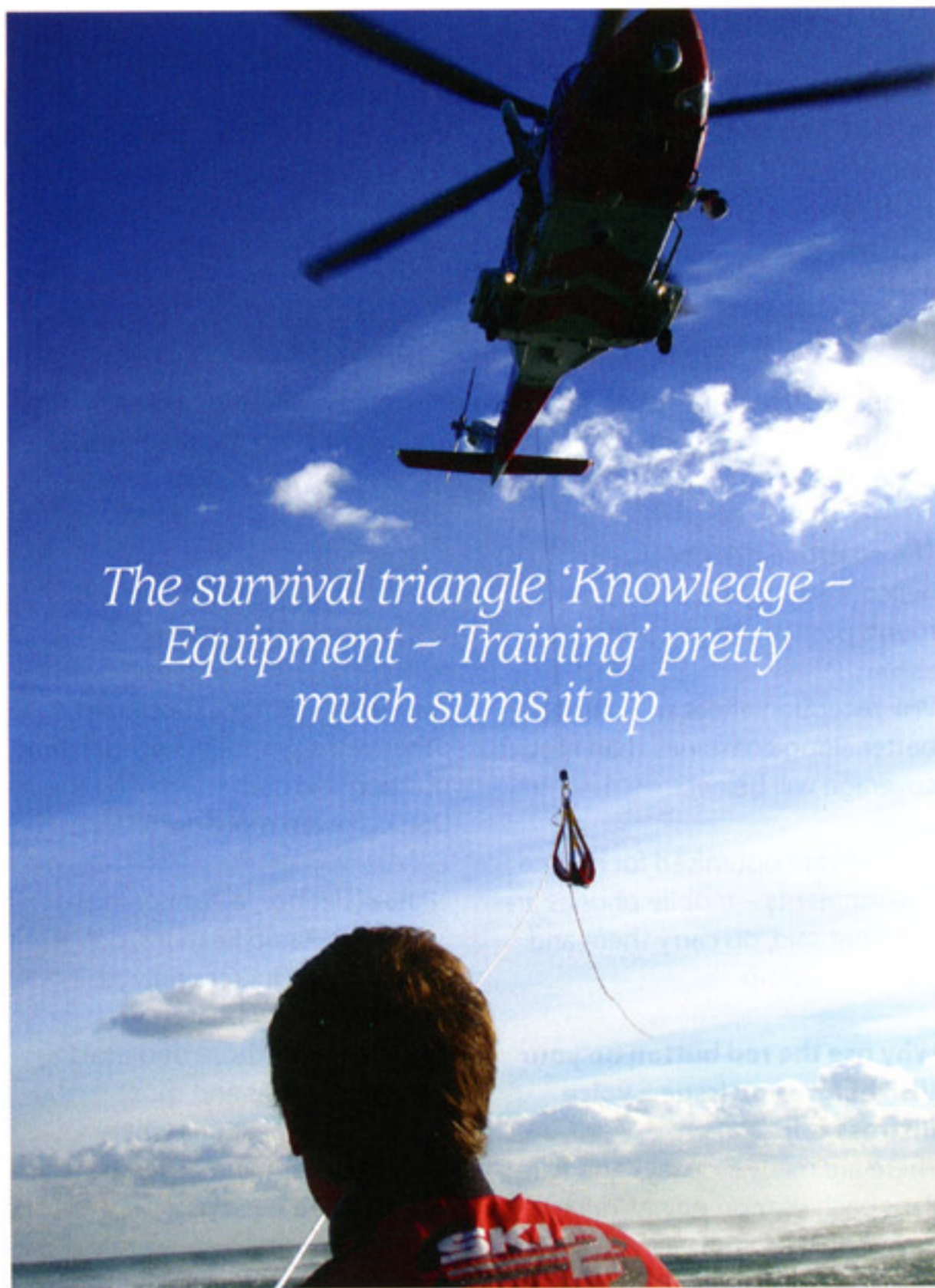


**Open the life jacket** at the position of the cylinder and check that it is tight every couple of weeks or whenever anyone else has used it. Check that the green 'tags' that indicate the life jacket has not been fired are still in place.

Every few months open the life jacket carefully (noting how it is packed/where the folds are) and undertake a visual check for tears or holes. Check the oral inflation tube mechanism is not jammed (use the tube cover not your finger). Remove the cylinder and check that it hasn't been fired if others have used your jacket(s); replace, tightening gently. If the cylinder is rusty or the auto fire mechanism is past its expiry date these need replacing – a full service would be sensible.

- If fitted with a light, check the date and also check that it still works and is switched to auto if available.
- Visually check all straps, reflective straps, buckles etc.
- An annual service arranged at a chandler's or with a service agent makes real sense and doesn't cost much per life jacket.

**Tip:** Carry a re-arm pack for the life jackets you use in case you accidentally set one off.



*The survival triangle 'Knowledge – Equipment – Training' pretty much sums it up*

local MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre) to your plight. An EPIRB with an inbuilt GPS will cost about £500 with a battery life of five years. Of great value is the fact that in the event of a distress the EPIRB will continue broadcasting for up to 72 hours, as opposed to flares which may last a few minutes in total.

A typical sea survival course will also look at the various personal distress beacons that are available. There are two broad categories: mini EPIRBs that you wear and homing beacons that allow vessels to locate you in the event of you going overboard.

An example of the latest technology here is the Kannad SafeLink R10. This uses the AIS (Automatic Identification System – like an aircraft's transponder identifying it) system found on many vessels to plot the position of an MOB onto any AIS-enabled chartplotter. All large commercial vessels, fishing vessels and many smaller craft use AIS so your position appears on the chartplotter screen of vessels up to 7 miles away – potentially a real

lifesaver.

The part of a sea survival course that lasts long in everyone's memory is the time spent learning about life rafts and spent in the pool trying to climb in and out of them (it's not easy!), righting them and snuggled up (by which I mean crammed in!) and a bit wet and chilly. In the pool you'll be



deploying and wearing your life jacket, so you get a great idea what it is like to wear these when in the water too.

One of the key messages that came out of the Fastnet inquiry was that generally a boat is a far safer place to be than a life raft, and that if you need to get into the raft it should be at the stage that the vessel is sinking (or on fire if that is the issue). This coined the phrase 'step up into the life raft'. Most people who have undertaken the sea survival course soon appreciate that a cold, very damp, very compact life raft is not an overly nice place to be – and that is in a swimming pool!

The real point of the RYA Sea Survival Course is to promote some thought for you as skipper or crew about safety on board your craft. Keeping your crew and boat safe starts with safety being at the forefront of your mind and continues with you ensuring that

you manage the craft and the crew assertively.

The survival triangle 'Knowledge – Equipment – Training' pretty much sums it up – keeping people safe is about having the right kit, knowing how to use it, and indeed how to prevent ever having to use it, and through training and practice ensuring you continue to be able to use it. Have fun afloat and be safe!

**Ocean Safety** – [www.oceansafety.com](http://www.oceansafety.com) For RYA Sea Survival Courses: visit [www.rya.org.uk](http://www.rya.org.uk) for details of centres running the course

**Contact your local RNLI Sea Safety team** to arrange a Life Jacket Check and if relevant a Sea Check for your boat too. [www.rnli.org.uk/seasafety](http://www.rnli.org.uk/seasafety)

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