



MultiMedia

April 2005

The Newsletter of the Florida Offshore Multihull Association



Unretouched photograph of two "alleged" FOMA members. Their names will not be revealed to protect small children

The Editor's Soapbox

by Colin Povey

I wrote this piece to 'get it off my chest', because it infuriates me so.

As most of you are probably aware, a recent trip around the Suwanee river for a bunch of school kids from Georgia turned into a tragedy when two of them died. This was one of the most easily preventable marine 'accidents' in years. Read on to learn why and how.

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The FOMA Frolic

The FOMA Frolic for 2005 is scheduled to take place on Saturday, April 16th, 2005.

The race will run from the Clearwater Pass up to Anclotte, and back, about 11 miles each way.

After the race, we will have a party at the Clearwater Community sailing Center on Sand Key.

They will provide a grill, the rest is up to FOMA. FOMA is providing the hot dogs and hamburgers, In other words, the party is BYOB (Bring Your Own Beverage) and BYOSD (Bring Your Own Side Dishes)!

The start time is a generously late 10:30 AM.

Per Uncle Sid, we already have quite a few boats registered for the race. Call Sid at (727)736-9462 or (727)422-0116 for more details, or to sign yourself or your boat up for the race.

Also on April 16th will be the annual JSI Flea market. From 8:00 AM-Noon, explore a variety of nautical treasures, or rent a table for a nominal fee and sell some of your no longer needed items. JSI is at 3000 Gandy Blvd.

Our Next Meeting

Our March meeting will take place on April 19th, our usual Third Tuesday. We will meet at the Steak and Ale Restaurant located at the corner of US 19 and Druid Street, one block South of US 60.

Our speaker will be Randy Deering, author of "A Sailors Guide to Life: 12 timeless principles based on lessons from the world of sailing". The book has a five star rating on Amazon.com, their highest rating.

As usual, we will meet at 6:00 PM for drinks and have dinner about 7:00 PM.

Hope to see you there!

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The Editor's Soapbox

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This was a typical 'accident', in which **many** things had to go wrong for the disaster to happen. Other typical accidents include the sinking of the *Titanic*, the Three Mile Island meltdown, the Bhopal disaster, and many, others.

Here is what happened, according to the St. Petersburg *Times*, the US Coast Guard, and a couple of other sources.

The classmates and two chaperones set off early Saturday afternoon from a public boat ramp in Suwannee, said Capt. John Burton of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. In three kayaks, three canoes and a motorized catamaran raft, they headed north into the Gulf of Mexico from the mouth of the Suwannee River. They planned to skirt the coastline for 4 1/2 miles until arriving at Coon Island, their overnight destination.

Northeasterly winds quickly turned the shallow seas into a choppy mess. As darkness fell, one of the canoes got separated and the catamaran's motor conked out. They were less than 1/4 mile from their destination when the single-engine craft became powerless. The other boats tied up to the catamaran as waves built to three feet. Rain began to fall and the winds freshened.

Steve Hall, 48, a Darlington teacher and experienced outdoor leader, lit a propane lantern to use as a beacon. The missing boat, carrying McKemie and Wilkinson, was nowhere in sight, said Burton. Hall and another of the stronger paddlers set off in a canoe to search for the missing boat, aiming for what they believed was a flashlight in the distance. The light went off and they became lost, paddling for hours until they drew near some lights onshore.

Suddenly, they got a cellular phone signal. Hall called his wife in Georgia sometime between 11 p.m. and midnight, and she called Coast Guard, Burton said. About 3 A.M., a Coast Guard helicopter located the group tied up to the raft. A boat rescued the six people. An hour later, a helicopter located Hall and the other searcher, hoisting them out of the water. The deceased students were not found until mid-day on Monday, one near the overturned canoe and one about a half-mile away.

Now that the basic facts have been presented, let's take a look at what really caused the accident and what simple steps could have prevented this tragedy.

Both kayaks and canoes were used. As anyone with experience knows, kayaks are faster and more agile than canoes. Combined with inexperienced youths, this would tend to break the group apart. George Stovall, a St. Petersburg-based chiropractor and **certified** outdoor guide with more than 40 years of experience said it was a very bad idea to mix kayaks and canoes. "Whenever you mix kayaks and canoes people are going to get spread out," he said.

Next, note that canoes, an invention of Native Americans primarily for use on rivers and lakes. A study issued by the Coast Guard indicates the expected uses of canoes: "... casual recreation, touring, wilderness trips, white water, competition cruising, down river, sport, and other specialties." Note is that the words 'offshore, sea, and ocean' do **not** appear in the above uses. In the same report, the Coast Guard lists 'sea touring' as an appropriate activity for kayaks, indicating that open ocean use is appropriate for kayaks. The Coast

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Guard report continues to say that **“Canoes and kayaks, because of their high length to beam ratio, are fundamentally less stable by design than other types of watercraft and consequently more likely to swamp or capsize. This is especially true in the hands of less skillful or casual users. Inexperienced boaters who capsize may not have the skills or strength to re-enter these boats. Fatigue may occur for capsized paddlers with hypothermia and drowning being a possible result.”**

None of the sources indicates that the canoeists or leaders had any training in how to right and drain a capsized canoe. It can be done, but it's not easy or intuitive.

Then there is no mention that anyone bothered to check the weather forecast for the area. If they had done so, they might have changed their plans and prevented the accident, either by using the catamaran (and not the canoes and kayaks) for this day's trip or by at least being sure to stick closer to shore and together. Given the lack of equipment mentioned later, I doubt that the group had a radio to receive a marine weather forecast.

Now we come to the failure of communications. Note that apparently the only method of communications the group had was a cell phone. The Coast Guard specifically says in all their safety publications that cell phones are **not** to be relied upon for emergency communications, especially in the open ocean, as cell phone coverage is limited offshore. The canoe carrying the soon-to-be-deceased students became separated near darkness, around 6:00-6:30 PM. Hall did not get a cell phone signal until after 11:00 PM. This meant that search and rescue operations were delayed

for five hours, hours that probably meant the difference between life and death. Note that the group did **not** have a VHF radio, the Coast Guard preferred method of emergency communications. Even if Hall had been too far away to raise the Coast Guard directly, it is likely that a 'Mayday' signal would have been heard by someone else, who could have contacted the Coast Guard.

Now, we turn to other equipment shortages. It appears that the group did not have the basic safety equipment that should be carried in all boats at sea: No compasses, no GPS, no EPIRB, no whistles or horns, no anchor, no flares. Any of these devices could have prevented the disaster. The compass could have been used by the canoeists to direct themselves East, towards land, or by Hall to more accurately paddle towards the separated canoeists. Hall could have used a compass to find land, rather than paddling around hoping to find the kids or a cell phone signal. As an experienced outdoors man, Hall could have easily determined East from the North Star, if it had been visible. It was not, as it was raining (there's that nagging lack of checking the weather forecast again...) Thus a \$6 waterproof compass could have gained precious hours for a Coast Guard search. Obviously, an \$85 GPS would have provided much more detailed information for the rescuers, while an EPIRB could have called for help as well as providing location information. While expensive, they are also available for rent.

The 'catacraft', which was their primary 'safety system', was not equipped with an anchor, as the boat was drifting in the Gulf. Not only is this stupid, it is a clear violation of Coast Guard regulations requiring an anchor. When Hall called his wife (and why call her and not the Coast Guard? Or the local Police) he could only report an ap-

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proximate position, as the cataraft was drifting with the winds and current. With a GPS location, rescue time would have been reduced. As to the drifting, no one apparently knew enough to try and fashion a sea anchor to prevent drifting, which would obviously be much greater for a high-out-of-the-water catamaran than a swamped canoe. The drifting apart of the catamaran and the lost canoeists obviously increased the difficulty of the Coast Guard search. Not being able to anchor the support boat to make a 'permanent base' in an emergency compounded all of the problems the group was facing. If the catamaran had been able to anchor itself in one place, only ¼ mile from shore, whistles or other signaling devices like flares or strobes could have been employed by the group on the cat and/or the now missing canoeists to attract and locate each other, and possibly people on the mainland or an island. And oh yeah, did the cataraft have the required set of flares? They might have been useless in the rain, but they are required.

Note that Hall valiantly tried to use a light to try and locate the other canoe. Unfortunately, trying to use a flashlight from a canoe provides a very limited field of view, as you are so low in the water. A \$0.79 whistle would probably have been more useful than the most powerful light in this case. But whistles appear to be one more item not considered important. In addition, it appears that the canoes did not have reflectors on them to make them easier to see. I can see it now, someone saying to themselves, 'we don't need whistles, strobes, flares, or reflectors in the boats, as we won't be traveling at night'. But the seas came up, the weather came down, and darkness settled over the group, with deadly results.

Hall apparently relied upon the 'cataraft' (a

modified pontoon catamaran) as their safety system. Beyond the fact that pontoon boats are generally not well regarded for offshore work, it is a single-engine craft. An engine failure, prop loss, prop entanglement, fuel contamination, busted shear pin, or even a fuel line or pontoon leak renders their primary safety system null and void. This is exactly what happened. Add the lack of an anchor, signaling devices, navigation devices, appropriate communication devices, flares, training, and the like, and you have the recipe for a typical 'accident', where multiple simultaneous 'failures' occur. A power boat is required to have **all** these safety items aboard per Coast Guard regulations, especially one used for commercial purposes, which is what this boat was used for.

This brings up a question? What are Hall's qualifications for operating a boat in a commercial environment? Is he a licensed captain? Has he had any training in boating safety? Even the minimum Coast Guard or Power Squadron safe boating courses? Is he licensed to operate a boat for profit, which is what he was doing?

Hall's web site says the following in the Safety section: "Our safety record is not based on luck but on good planning, a highly skilled staff, state-of-the-art outdoor gear, and well-maintained transportation. All trips carry one trip leader for every 8 participants, ... and no student is ever allowed to wander off alone, in pairs or in groups unattended, even under the most innocent of circumstances - a major reason we have had no accidents." I would have to say that this statement is pure and total BS, as Hall has apparently used nothing but luck over the past years in prevent-

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ing accidents, at least at sea. He certainly did not have the proper, minimum required equipment, let alone 'state of the art' equipment. He also appears to have no proper nautical training, let alone licensing. And if the 'catacraft' was so well maintained, why did it fail when he needed it the most? Just bad luck?

The school's dean of students', said that "The motor quitting is probably the thing that allowed this to happen. Had the motor not quit, they would have been fine." This statement shows a complete and total lack of understanding of accidents on his part. In my opinion, the accident was caused by a callous and total disregard for safety that borders on the criminal, as demonstrated by a lack of even the most basic required safety equipment, an apparent total lack of navigation equipment, no appropriate communications or signaling devices, and an apparent complete lack of training, for both the students and their leader.

By comparison, the *Titanic* was a model of safety—at least she carried *some* lifeboats, a radio, and flares!

To summarize, the 'accident' wasn't caused by the failure of an outboard motor, or by bad weather, or by X, Y, or Z. It was caused by the typical things that cause marine accidents: Failure to check the weather, failure to have proper safety, navigation, communication, and signaling equipment, equipment failures, lack of training, lack of experience, and most importantly, a bad attitude towards safety. If any of the failures or omissions mentioned in this analysis had been corrected before the trip started, the two teenagers would probably be alive today.

Last Chance to Renew Your FOMA Membership!

This is the last time that a copy of MultiMedia will be sent to you unless you renew your FOMA membership.

At just \$30 per year for an entire family, FOMA membership is a bargain! On top of that, FOMA is an inflation fighter. FOMA membership has not increased in almost a decade, meaning that FOMA is doing its part to keep inflation in line!

If you do not renew your membership immediately, you will not receive the May issue, which will contain a membership directory, surely worth the \$30 fee by itself!

March Meeting Report

In March, we met at the Phu Thai restaurant and heard from Charlie Joswig and Dan Wallace, who attended the Miami Boat Show.

The best news is that the Phu Thai restaurant is under new ownership, and the food was much improved over the last visit. In fact, the food was so good that we are planning more meeting there in the future.

FOMA - Florida Offshore Multihull Association Membership Form

New Member: _____ Renewal: _____ Date: _____

Name: _____

Spouse/Significant Other: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone: _____ Alternate Phone: _____

E-mail Address (please print carefully!): _____

Boat Manufacturer _____ Boat Model: _____

Length: _____ feet Sail #: _____ Stock / Modified (circle one)

Boat Name: _____

PHRF Rating _____ Rating Source: WFPHRF / FOMA / Stock Boat Standard / Other _____

Are you Available For Crew? Yes / No

Sailing Experience _____ years

Primary Sailing Interests: Cruising / Racing / Other

Skills I have that could help FOMA: _____

I prefer to receive my newsletter via: The Web (recommended) Snail mail

Comments: _____

Annual Dues

Our annual dues are due every January.

\$30 Family

\$100 Sponsor (includes a logo in every newsletter and a link on the web page)

Make checks payable to FOMA and mail with this form to:

Lowell Dexter

4255 37th Street South

St. Petersburg, FL 33711

If you have any membership questions, Colin or Marie can be reached at: colin@povev.org or by phone at 727-536-0189, or you can speak to Lowell at 727-864-1418.

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