A Human Skippin

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At my wife's convincing, I decided to buy a couple of personal watercraft for my family to enjoy during the spring and summer in Beaufort, S.C. A pair of Yamaha 1200 XLT WaveRunners, the family SUV version of watercraft, marked my entry into the world of recreational vehicles.

Being the new captain of a powered watercraft, I watched all the safety videos and learned as much as I could about federal, state and local boating regulations. I also bought all the recommended personal protective equipment and generally applied off-duty ORM to this new endeavor. I aimed to practice what I preach to my fellow Marines—after all, I am the squadron safety officer.

My family had been invited to attend a day of water activities with some friends who owned a house on a river. This setting would provide the perfect opportunity to launch the new personal watercraft and show my friends what I had learned from my first experience on the water a few weeks earlier. Every-

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thing was OK until I decided to up the stakes a little and try some of the more complicated maneuvers I had seen my friends perform earlier *[—so much for ORM].*

I know what you're probably thinking at this point: "He tried something far beyond his experience level and ended up crashing and hurting himself." Admittedly, you would be half correct. I successfully completed all the twists and turns and high-speed doughnuts and even kicked up some beautiful rooster tails. Having enjoyed myself enough for the moment, I decided to return to the dock a few hundred yards away where my family and friends had been watching my exploits.

En route, I got the personal watercraft going about 40 mph and was doing some gentle S-turns when the rear end skidded out from under me. The WaveRunner then veered sharply to the left, catching me off guard and launching me like a stone from a slingshot across the water. Family and friends who saw this spectacle said I skipped across the water end-over-end, with legs flailing, three or four times before coming to rest.

When I finally came up for a breath, my back was sore, and I was afraid I seriously had injured myself. "Smacking the water at 40 mph really does feel like hitting a wall," I thought. I looked around to find that my WaveRunner had beached itself on a sandbar that was appearing with the low tide. The "kill" switch on the engine had functioned as designed.

Here are some of the lessons I learned that day. First, things happen when you least expect them. I had been pushing the personal watercraft to new limits of my experience, and everything had gone well. Then, out of nowhere, I found myself flying through the air during what would be considered a routine part of the mission. In aviation, we always say the flight isn't over until you're shut down in the chocks. The same holds true on the water; the ride isn't over until you're tied up at the pier. **Always be prepared for the unexpected—don't let down your guard.**

Second, throughout the day, light rain showers had been moving past, and, each time, we had hurried inside, where I stripped out of the protective gear (booties, gloves and a wetsuit) I had been wearing. This time, as I hurried to get back into the water, I had forgotten my booties and gloves. These items might not have been a factor, except for the fact the sandbar my trusty ride had stranded itself on was covered with razor-sharp oyster shells. I spent a long time picking my way through the calf-deep river mud, gingerly stepping on and around what must have been thousands of oyster shells. I eventually made it to my WaveRunner and, with great effort and a few more cuts and scrapes, freed my ride. **Wear the proper PPE—every time, all the time.**

In the end, besides the sore muscles, several cuts on my hands and feet, and a bruised pride from the ribbing I took from the peanut gallery ashore, I came away with a renewed sense of caution and respect for riding my personal watercraft. Maybe I should stick to flying a little while longer and put my "professional" WaveRunner-stunt career on hold. With a slight modification, though, I might have figured out an impressive finish.

Resources:

- http://www.uscgboating.org/regulations/fedreg.htm *[Federal Regulations]*
- http://www.uscgboating.org/regulations/regulations.htm *[Regulations]*
- http://www.answercentral.com/main/ntquery?tname=personal%2Dwater%2Dcraft%2D1&print=true *[Personal Watercraft]*
- http://www.ntsb.gov/publictn/1998/SS9801.pdf *[Personal Watercraft Safety].*