

How To Survive a Cold Night at Sea





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My detachment was embarked in USS *Bunker Hill* (CG 52) and participating in an exercise off the southern California coast with the USS *Constellation* (CV 64) battle-group. Although it was early fall, the already normally cool sea temperature had begun to drop to 62 degrees Fahrenheit. Our crew was scheduled for an early morning launch for a routine flight. During our 0100 brief, word was passed that a *Connie* Sailor had fallen overboard. We did our preflight checks and waited to hear about search efforts. Then, our 0300 launch officially became a SAR mission.

Several airborne and surface assets already had been searching for the airman. Night vision goggles were maximizing visibility on this dark and overcast night. Even so, visibility was still poor, and even from 300 feet it was nearly impossible to see anything below. There never is a “good” night to be in the water, but this night was especially poor.

We checked in with the SAR coordinator and flew our assigned area search-pattern. We knew the Sailor had been wearing a float coat when he fell overboard, so we searched for a strobe light. We could barely see whitecaps, so we hoped reflective tape on his cranial or float coat might catch our searchlight should we unexpectedly fly over him. After searching for an hour, it looked like we wouldn’t find anything until daylight.

A couple of factors contributed to diminishing chances of finding the Sailor alive: The first was that strobe lights on float coats last for about an hour of continuous use. If this Sailor’s strobe light worked and he used it before anyone could see him, it was probably no longer functioning. Second, estimated survival time in 60-degree water is four and a half hours. Most Sailors are in good physical shape—which would help this Sailor a lot—but if his float coat had failed to inflate, he would have had difficulty treading water for that

long. Finally, he had fallen a great distance from the carrier's flight deck, increasing the possibility that an injury had impaired his physical abilities.

We continued to search as daylight broke, having renewed confidence that we might find something. A *Connie* helicopter renewed its search by using a different pattern, hoping to find something they earlier might have missed. However, with no success among several airborne and surface assets involved in the search, we reevaluated our tactics. We coordinated with *Bunker Hill* to recalculate set and drift, and we shifted our search pattern accordingly.

A little more than half an hour after sunrise, we turned to make a last search leg on our pattern—it was then when we spotted a neon green spot in the water, attributing it to a sea-dye marker. We reported the sighting and held our breath as we flew toward it to see if there was a survivor. Once we saw waving arms in the water, we heard shouts of joy and excitement in the cockpit. We struggled to get the “survivor in sight” report out to the battlegroup, which by now collectively had been searching for longer than seven hours.

A few seconds later, the admiral came up on the radio to confirm what we had seen. Three minutes later a helicopter from the carrier was picking up the Sailor and taking him to a warm, dry medical clinic for evaluation.

The Sailor saved that day was more than just lucky: He knew his survival gear and how to use it. He had saved his sea-dye marker until daylight when helicopters would be nearby, knowing we probably wouldn't see it at night or from too far away.

There are some other survival techniques that can make the difference between life and death for any Sailor who is unfortunate enough to go for an unexpected swim.

Before you don your Mk-1 float coat, make sure you are familiar with all its gear and how to operate it. An operational check will take only a few minutes and help make sure everything works. Check for tears, any degradation, an operable battery, and make sure the coat has properly tightened CO₂ cylinders. Be sure the strobe works, and make sure you have a sea-dye marker. [*Note: At the time of this mishap, sea-dye markers were not required (see sidebar following this story).*]

Should you fall overboard, the first priority is to activate your inflation cartridge. Don't panic if the automatic inflator doesn't work: use the oral inflation tube. If you know how to manually inflate your float coat you can overcome your initial panic and inflate the vest yourself. Second, think about survival: Conserve body heat by curling up your body as much as you can, and minimize your movement to conserve both energy and heat.

Try to stabilize injuries you might have sustained, and save your strength for the rescue. Finally, consider signaling options. Bear in mind that the strobe-light's battery life is about an hour, so consider using it over a longer period of time for five-minute intervals, or wait until you know an aircraft or ship is headed to rescue you and point your strobe in their direction. If you have reason to think rescuers will be wearing night-vision devices, use the strobe light because it can be seen from many miles away. During daylight, though, a sea-dye marker might be more effective than a strobe, although the strobe light will still help when used in conjunction with your marker. Wait until you hear or see aircraft overhead or in a nearby flying pattern so you don't waste your sea-dye marker before a search platform can see it.

Once you've been found and a rescue swimmer approaches, follow swimmer instructions and do not try to grab onto him. If you have questions, ask them calmly. SAR swimmers are trained to safely get you aboard the rescue vehicle. Trust them to position you to get you quickly and safely out of the water. If a helicopter is hovering above, it will be difficult to see in the rotor wash, so listen to the rescue swimmer as he tells you what to do.

No one thinks he or she will ever fall overboard—until it happens. Our helo crew was proud to have taken part in saving the young *Connie* Sailor who had been in the water for longer than seven hours. In truth, he saved himself by knowing his survival gear and using it to its full potential. If you follow these few simple techniques, you will be well prepared should you fall overboard. Above all, don't panic, use common sense and use the life-saving tools the Navy has given you. You then will live to see another day. 🌀