CASE STUDY: Cold Weather Boating Activities

We normally think of boating as a summer activity, but many people use their boats all year, even during the winter. Boating in cold weather can be as much fun as boating in summer months. Personal safety becomes a much more critical factor during colder seasons. The risk of exposure and hypothermia are greatly increased. Falling overboard into cold water is life threatening, and the onset of hypothermia is rapid.

Even the best equipped personnel can become victims of hypothermia, if the length of water immersion is long enough. Case in point, four USCG personnel in the water as the result of a capsize in Lake Ontario this past March. Two perished as the result of hypothermia, even though they were wearing dry suits and PFDs.

The USCG estimated that the total in water time may have exceed four hours. The water temperature was about 37 degrees F. Sea conditions were one to two foot waves with winds of 10 to 20 mph and occasional swells to four feet. With their 21 foot inflatable capsized, they had no communications to call for help. Two crew members died and two survived.

The casual fisherman standing while casting a line into the water becomes a high risk in colder weather. Regardless of the type of boating activity in colder weather, everyone should be aware of the risks associated with exposure.

Review the signs of hypothermia and the tables of survival vs. water temperature. The awareness of risks associated with cold weather boating is what all boaters should know.

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