



What Have You Done to Save a Life Today?

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Sink or Swim?

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Summer has officially arrived, and many Americans will look to beat the heat with a refreshing dip in the water. Regardless if their favorite cooling-off spot is the ocean, lake or pool, being mindful of the risks associated with water-related activities could be the deciding factor on whether they sink or swim.

One of the most important precautions anyone can take before heading to the water is to learn to swim. However, no matter how confident they may be in their own swimming abilities, they should always bring a buddy along.

“Even the most experienced swimmers can encounter difficulties in the water, so 'buddy up,’” said Richard Scott, a safety specialist at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center. “Always swim or operate a watercraft with a buddy, every time, whether you're swimming in a backyard pool or sailing in open waters.”

Another water safety measure many overlook is the importance of wearing a personal flotation device while on a watercraft. Just as a driver of a vehicle must make sure passengers always buckle up, it's a boat operator's responsibility to ensure all aboard the vessel wear their PFDs at all times. Accidents on the water can happen in an instant, and often there isn't time to grab a stowed PFD.

The Coast Guard estimates PFDs could have saved the lives of more than 80 percent of boating fatality victims. Still, many make the conscious decision to not wear them.

One reason some boaters-especially those who know how to swim- resist wearing a PFD is they don't believe they're at risk for drowning, said Lynda Nutt, program manager for the National Operations Center for Water Safety at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“They think having life jackets on the boat is enough and, if anything happens, they can just put them on,” Nutt said. “To me, this makes as much sense as saying you can put on your seat belt right before an accident.”

While a PFD is a proven life saver, boaters can negate the benefits of wearing one by operating their watercraft under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Coast Guard statistics reveal that a boat operator with a blood alcohol concentration above .10 percent is estimated to be more than 10 times more likely to die in an accident than a sober operator. To make matters worse, watercraft motion, vibration, engine noise, sun, wind and spray all intensify the effects of alcohol and drugs. When operating a watercraft, it’s best to leave the alcohol on the shore.

The Army isn’t immune to recreational swimming and boating accidents. In fiscal 2010, eight Soldiers died while participating in off-duty water-related activities, including:

- A Soldier who had been snorkeling in shallow water with Family members was found unresponsive. She was pronounced dead at a local medical center.
- A Soldier drowned in a hotel swimming pool while on a brigade-sponsored retreat.
- A Soldier drowned in a lake when he attempted to swim from a boat to retrieve a can floating on the water.
- A Soldier died when the boat he was operating struck a concrete bridge piling.
- A Soldier drowned when his kayak capsized on a river while on a recreational trip.

More recently, a Soldier drowned when he fell from a boat into chilly water while fishing at a pond earlier this year. The Soldier, who was not wearing a PFD, was unable to climb back into the boat and sank below the surface.

To prevent future fatalities, Nutt said it comes down to everyone following the basics of water safety.

“When on or near the water, know your limits,” Nutt said. “Learn to swim well, have someone watch you and don’t get out there by yourself. And the most critical factor of all--wear your life jacket!”

For more information, visit the Coast Guard’s Boating Safety Resource Center at www.uscgboating.org/.

