

Teachable moments for a sailing class

Saturday we canceled the 0700 lab because we thought it was going to be wet and cold. We met for the 1000 lab lecture and went sailing at noon with the first group. We had been warned that the seas were rough (actually we could just look out the window) and there was a large powerboat washed up on the beach at Doheny. Not surprising since Friday night had been stormy.

Outside the harbor entrance we could see the powerboat (44ft. Sea Ray) on the beach and noticed an expensive looking PFD floating in the water off the beach and near the jetty. I figured it might have been lost from the powerboat or perhaps involved in some other accident and so planned to recover it and pass it off to the Harbor Patrol. In the process we used it for our man overboard drills as we tried several times to stop alongside it.

I should have noticed that it didn't behave as it ought to as each time we approached it and hove to. At one point it went completely under our boat and surfaced sluggishly as we drifted by. I was surprised it didn't drift toward the jetty or beach as I would have expected. But it wasn't until I finally took the boat hook myself and hooked it that I realized the truth. It was anchored to the bottom by ropes. I could clearly see the ropes tied to it as my boat drifted slowly away and I realized if I didn't let go of the boat hook I would be pulled over the stern rail. But during the few seconds it took for me to process that, I lost my footing and went over.

It must have been a spectacular sight since I flipped completely over, feet in the air briefly before I hit the water. It was one of those disbelieving moments; I have had a few in my life (motorcycle going down, falling out of a tree with a chainsaw). Instinct kicked in so I held onto the railing and ended up only half way in the water. Somebody lowered the ladder on the stern and I climbed back in, but my pockets were soaked including cell phone.

I recall thinking I would have to maintain my white knuckle grip on the railing because if I let go there was no line attached to the throwable life ring on the stern. That meant if they threw me the ring it might be a while before they got back to me. After all, they were beginners on this overboard recovery stuff. It appears to be confusion with a Coast Guard regulation that has caused 40 foot lines to be removed from some life rings, contrary to common sense.

For the rest of Saturday we continued to use the lifejacket for our MOB drills and considered how to pick up the boat hook that was hooked to it and floating. Under the stormy circumstances nobody was anxious to lean over the side far enough to grab it.

The next day, Sunday, it was calm and beautiful. When we first arrived at the spot there was a small sailboat anchored there with a couple of guys aboard that seemed pretty stoned. At first I assumed they were the ones that had tied off their anchor to the lifejacket and had come back to anchor. But no, as soon as I mentioned the lifejacket and boat hook one of them launched into an angry tirade about having tangled his rudder in the rope attached to the lifejacket and had to cut it loose to get free. No boat hook they said, no indication of why they were anchored in that precise spot, but they held up the lifejacket and wanted to know if we wanted it back. I said no it wasn't ours but they were unable to grasp that we weren't the ones that sabotaged their rudder. My guess is they snagged their rudder trying to recover the lifejacket, and we could have easily had the same problem the day before when we drifted over it.

When we left the stoned guys, one was yelling at me, "bro", about how uncool it was that I had set this trap for his rudder "bro". The other one finally got the idea it wasn't us and got through the hazy confusion of the first one (he was adamant he was not confused) who called an apology as we sailed out of earshot.

Later in the day on Sunday we sailed around a larger sailboat with turquoise canvas anchored in a nearby spot, farther from the jetty. I asked him if he knew anything about the anchored lifejacket and he said yes, it was done by a friend of his. I tried to explain what had happened over the weekend but I'm not sure he understood it all. He said he'd let his friend know what happened to his lifejacket and anchor. No telling what really happened to the boat hook.

As if this didn't make the day exciting enough, a neighboring boat on B dock is "Jack Flash", aptly named as it turns out. He had several girls on board and had been doing some hearty partying and entered the harbor about the same time as we did late Sunday. As we passed their slip on the way to ours "Jack" shouted something about a Navy freighter pointing machine guns at them. I went over to get the story since we had seen what appeared to be a Navy freighter off the coast earlier. Apparently the partiers had decided to go entertain the sailors by racing up alongside with the girls all topless. The girls were delightedly telling the story. The Navy gunners had their 50cal. machine guns trained on them the whole time as they tried to warn them away. Another partier from another boat had got photos of the ship and it appeared that there were a number of guns at various positions on the ship, all manned and ready. The girls were unfazed. Combat is not what it used to be. I wonder if "Jack" gets a visit from a homeland security black ops unit.