

OGAWA Lessons Learned from Friday 28 February 2020 at Walpole

(collated by Jim Black - C-Fleet Captain - *Wee Birlinn* - Ness Yawl)

Background

The annual OGAWA "Walpole-Denmark Rally - Cruising & Racing in Company" was held 26th February to 3rd March 2020. Fifteen boats, thirteen of them OGAWA C-Fleet members planned to take part in some or all of the events, thirteen boats actually took part.

On Friday 28th February, the day before the start of the Walpole Regatta, the OGAWA boats planned to set off for a sail South across the Nornalup Inlet from Coalmine Beach to a landing spot near the ocean entrance and back. The wind was blowing from the North, quite strongly, and by the afternoon was gusting up to at least 25 knots, maybe 30 in some of the stronger gusts.

Eleven boats set off, or intended to, three refrained from sailing far from the Coalmine beach, and of the eight that sailed the whole day, two capsized and neither of them was able to self-rescue (*Gryphon* - Bayraider 20 & *Gumnut* - Oughtred Tirrik).

So what went wrong? Key people directly involved have provided responses, where appropriate, to the following set of questions:

1. Did the event organisation fall short in any way before we left the shore?
2. Were you given/did you have adequate information to enable you to decide to take part, and in an appropriate condition (POB, reefed, ballasted, etc)
3. Was it clear to you that there was a "support" or "sweep" boat?
4. What would you have done differently to ensure that you did not capsize in the first place?
5. What would you have to have done differently to ensure that you could have self-rescued?
6. Could the rescues of *Gryphon* and *Gumnut* have been carried out in any better/safer ways?
7. Given that *Fala* was not able to tow the flooded *Gumnut* ashore to windward, what alternatives did we have within the group to self-rescue it that Walpole rescue boat had not been there?
8. Should the recovery of the drifting trailer sailer have been carried out any differently to minimise risk and prevent damage to the rescuing boat (*Tela*)?
9. Anything else of relevance?

Before Setting Off

There was an initial agreement the night before as to starting time and destination but to quote some responses:

It is always frustrating when boats do not set off together. Some boat owners are not ready at the allotted time and the other yachts mill about and finally, out of sheer frustration, set off in advance or in small groups. This makes monitoring of the fleet difficult. We should insist boats are ready to go within a very narrow window to avoid this.

and:

The start was a bit disorganised owing to misunderstanding of departure times.

and:

Nomination of safety boats and protocols for assistance should be explained prior to setting off.

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So, it certainly seems that the organisation and effective communication of information was less than desirable, even allowing for the fact that such effective communication can be remarkably difficult with such a diverse set of individualistic sailors.

With regard to the advised conditions, these days most people check forecasts for themselves on their preferred websites, but none of us were all that familiar with any particular idiosyncrasies of Nornalup Inlet, and I think none of us had experienced a strong Northerly wind across the Inlet. Although having sailed there several times in past years, even I was caught out by the apparent calm in the lee of the Coalmine dunes and set out with only one reef in, when two were actually called for as soon as exposed to the full force of the wind.

Support/Sweep Boats

According to the OGAWA Operations Manual, this was a type 3 event: "**OGAWA Day Events in Coastal Waters and Protected Waters where no Rescue Support is available**" and consequently required "At least one boat in the event to be designated a "Support" or "Sweep" Boat; that boat to have a recommended minimum of two persons on board and to be equipped with motor, tow rope, first aid kit, VHF radio, EPIRB, and means of recovering person from water".

Although it was generally understood which boats had the capability of acting as sweep boats, on the day this was not formally agreed and advised to all; nor was there any formal check that such boats actually had the full required capability to act as such; for instance:

I was fortunate that Fala had a full fuel tank when I set off. I did not bring an additional fuel container on the boat as I did not consider the extra fuel use if rescuing or towing was involved. Safety boats should ensure adequate fuel for rescue tasks.

Also, there is the question as to whether any boat being singlehanded should be considered an effective support boat; which probably requires further discussion as there are divergent views on this topic, such as:

I (Gryphon, singlehanded) was acting as sweep boat, went back to pick up Gumnut

and:

Sailing singlehanded in potentially a lot of breeze is not a good idea.

and:

noting the above OGAWA requirement that the sweep boat "have a recommended minimum of two persons on board".

Fitness to Sail

This is another touchy subject, particularly given the "O" in "OGA", which warrants further discussion. Some thoughts were expressed as follows:

It is amazing how quickly older people like us get tired. The water was not very cold but Chris was starting to suffer and cramp after only 20 minutes or so.

and:

We need to address the issue of crew suitability. I do know now, after witnessing the Gumnut and Gryphon incidents, that one of my crew during the regatta would find it impossible to re-board the yacht in the case of a capsized due to knee problems. How do we handle this scenario?

Communications

The OGAWA Operations Manual, as revised February 2019, requires that a VHF radio be carried by all boats on all OGWA events, whereas in the Event notice it was listed under the "recommended minimum" equipment to be carried, rather than being "required" (As an aside, this is not the only area where recent event notices have differed somewhat from the requirements stated in the Operations Manual.)

So, **was the use of VHF communications important on that day? Absolutely yes**, and for two very good reasons:

First: *Fala*, being ready well ahead of most of the other boats, sailed down towards the ocean entrance and was able to advise of its unsuitability as a destination under that day's conditions, before any other less capable/less experienced boats/crews put themselves in any danger.

Second, when *Gryphon* made the call for assistance, it was heard and immediately responded to, even though the message itself was somewhat unclear.

Relevant comments on this matter were as follows:

I wonder if Gumnut had a radio? I doubt she did because she never called to say there was an incident. We only managed to get a garbled message from Chris and were lucky to get that. If we had waited until Gumnut got around to us, I suspect it would have been another 15 minutes before we had got to him which would have made the situation that much worse. Maybe we need to make it mandatory to have a VHF on future cruises in company.

And:

As Gryphon and Gumnut were out of sight, there was a significant period of time before we realised there were problems. I am not sure exactly from whom the radio call came. Was it Chris or Murray? Nevertheless, if it was not for the radio call, it would have been a long time before assistance was offered possibly causing hypothermia or exhaustion. Therefore it showed the value of radios, but emphasised the need to constantly be in visual sight of one another so more timely assistance can be offered.

And:

What put a doubt in my mind was the fact Fala picked up Chris's radio floating in the water afterwards so he must have become separated from it after the call.

And:

It was Chris who made the radio call. I assume Gumnut did not have a radio. I heard Chris' call even though it was very garbled mainly because he made it from the water after he had capsized. Really the only word I heard was "help" so I assumed there was an issue and we needed to send a rescue boat. We all assumed when we left Deep River it was Gumnut we were going to rescue.

And:

In retrospect Chris should have used the international call of Pan Pan. It was not a Mayday but was more than a Sécurité situation.

In fact, *Gumnut* was carrying a VHF radio, but to quote Murray:

One of the big problems with a small boat in severe conditions, one just doesn't have enough hands.

Could the Capsizes have been Prevented?

It's always easy to be wise after the event, but here are the relevant comments from those involved:

I think I had my main sheet cleated while I was watching out for Gumnut, got caught by the "bullet" of wind and had no time to react.

And:

I should use ballast more often, especially when single handing.

And:

We were not up to speed with this new boat.

Gryphon's Capsize Recovery

Note: *Gryphon* capsized off Newdegate Island, out of site most of the rest of the fleet which was already entering Deep River and landing for a lunch break. The capsized recovery was assisted by *Fala*, under power, four up for the rescue, with two of the crew entering the water to assist on board *Gryphon*.

Relevant comments as follows:

In retrospect my anchor coming free and then setting forced the mast into the mud otherwise the asymmetric buoyancy plus my weight would have brought her up. Also lost a shoe which caused me to slip off the hull and made it difficult for me to get back up again – no grip.

And:

The main difficulty in getting the boat up was caused by the gaff sticking into the bottom while the bow was effectively held firm by the anchor that self deployed from the bucket it was stowed in. [it was actually worse than this because the anchor deployed from just abaft the mast, not the bow, thus keeping the boat beam on to the wind with the embedded mast/yard to leeward] *If Chris had had a crew then he/she would have most likely stowed the anchor properly so it would not have fallen out. Because the boat was held by two points, the gaff and anchor, it was not possible to rotate it into the wind which is pretty essential to right any capsized boat. It was only when Fala got a line on to Gryphon and forced her round did we have any chance of getting her up*

And:

Have a look under your boat and try to reduce sharp fittings. Gryphon has small bilge keels which helped to get up onto the centreplate but they had stainless steel strips and some of the corners of the strip and screws affixing it may have been responsible for the small lacerations I suffered. Everything needs to be tied to the boat or in lockers, particularly the anchor.

And:

Before entering the water from Fala to cross to Gryphon I took off my shoes, which made it hard to get a grip on the slippery hull - I should have kept my shoes on and just tightened the straps to ensure they stayed on during the swim across.

And:

It was not until we eventually righted the boat that we realised that the anchor had deployed and that the anchor warp was taught at it's full extent. If we had realised earlier this was the case it would have been quite possible for me to locate it and cut it free (I always carry a knife in my pocket when sailing).

Gumnut's Capsize Recovery

Note: *Gumnut* capsized late in the day, not far from our return destination of Coalmine Beach. The capsized recovery was assisted initially by *Wee Birlinn* picking up and returning *Gumnut's* crew member who had become separated from the boat, then by *Fala* who took her in tow, and then by one of the Walpole rescue boats who completed the tow.

Relevant comments as follows:

We did not uncleat the jib as we went in and couldn't free it from outside the boat without tipping it over.

The after hatch was loose so when we heeled over and took a wave the water quickly found its way to the after locker, leading to an unstable boat. I knew the hatch was loose, "but it's just a short trip back to the beach". I am sure the two watertight compartments would have been adequate for us to bucket out enough water for the bilge pump to take over. The bilge pump, by the way was still pumping when we eventually got to shore. Even though the battery box was underwater

And:

The (Walpole) rescue boat should have had a crew, it is too much for a skipper alone in an IRB. It wasn't a race therefore the rescue boat was not ready, but the service was appreciated. BTW I think the tow was too fast for our crew as we were dragged through the water [hanging on either side to keep the flooded boat upright - shades of Dumbleyung?]

And:

Fala's towing of Gumnut was initially proceeding well then, an issue developed with Gumnut. As I was skippering, I did not see exactly what happened to cause the boat to become unstable again. However, when I saw the rescue boat arrive, I cleared out and did not later get a full explanation.

And:

Gumnut's crew became separated from the boat when he went to retrieve a paddle that was floating away; a natural instinct but not a good idea! Having been through most of these scenarios before, it was quite straightforward for me, singlehanding, to sail up, heave to and drift back to him, deploy my rope steps, heave him on board (and the paddle!), sail up under the lee bow of Gumnut, and let him scramble back aboard.

The Trailer Sailer Retrieval

Towards the end of our adventurous day it was noticed that one of the trailer sailers that had been launched that day and moored off Coalmine Beach was well adrift and heading sternwards across the inlet. *Tela* went to the rescue, and during the retrieval some minor damage resulted; relevant comments as follows:

*As to the retrieval of the drifting keel boat I think I handled that badly. I asked Mike to come up to leeward so I could get on board and asses the situation e.g. could I get the outboard going etc. Mike kept *Tela* alongside which was a mistake as the keelboat was drifting abeam of the angle of the waves and wind. The damage was caused by the boats rolling together and a bolt that protruded below the gunnel of the keelboat damaged *Tela's* gel goat on her gunnel.*

*What would have been better was to approach as we did but for me simply to have boarded the adrift boat while *Tela* stood off out of harm's way.*

We had plenty of sea room so time was not of the essence.

As it turned out I could not start the outboard because it seemed locked in its hoisted position.

*Simple. All I had to do was organize a towline, hail *Tela* to take a tow and effect the retrieval. We did all that but we should have never put *Tela* at risk given the boat to be rescued was lying abeam the sea and wind.*

And:

I think John is right, I should have let John board and then stood off, the water was too choppy to try and hold two boats together. In the heat of the chase I forgot to put down fenders, big mistake!

However I now do excellent gelcoat repairs, you can't spot it!

The Boats that Stayed Behind - Good Lessons here too

As one of the boats that departed the shore at Coalmine Beach, but pulled out of venturing across the inlet that day, I feel compelled to offer the following explanation:

Following the capsize of Silver Gull on the Swan River after our Safety Day in Matilda Bay last year, I set out to rectify a number of buoyancy and self-righting deficiencies that I believed to exist. The modifications undertaken included:

- *The addition of the "Morris tiller restraint",*
- *The addition of 6 inflatable buoyancy bags,*
- *25kg of ballast added to the centreboard, and*
- *Righting ropes.*

I sent off the revised Self-Assessment form (plus the original assessment that showed the craft to fail the requirements for safety) to Jim on 21 February, ahead of the Walpole event. Unfortunately, I did not discover until well after I returned from Walpole that the email was stuck in my Outbox, owing to the file size being too large. I have now attached just the revised assessment. [actually, it was received and well noted]

I intended to sail across the inlet with the other OGA boats on the Friday, if the conditions suited my ability, considering:

1. *That I was single-handed that day, and*
2. *That I hadn't had an opportunity since completing the modifications to do a practice capsize and recovery.*

After leaving the shore with the main reefed, I observed the wind speed and direction, then the arrival of the blackening clouds. I made a decision to stay close to Coalmine Beach as I did not have the confidence to continue out. Michael Arthurs and I both sailed in proximity of each other until we both made the decision to return to shore. Whilst I had a VHF radio on board I was too busy controlling the boat to use it. Once back on shore we could not see any of the OGA boats that ventured across the inlet.

Summary

These were fairly extreme conditions for our small boats, particularly the sharp strong wind gusts that came hurtling through the fleet. I think all of us learned lessons that day, as well as the major ones above. I certainly did!

What seems to be of real relevance is that a stricter compliance with the Event Requirements of the OGAWA Operations Manual and the accompanying C-Fleet Self-Assessment Form would have been of great benefit. I recommend that we all carefully re-read and ensure that we understand Section 4 Event Requirements and the C-Fleet Form. Then we need to work out how we can all effectively comply with these requirements while sailing our very varied small craft under very varied conditions!

JIM BLACK
C-Fleet Captain
April 2020

END