

The Superyacht

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REPORT

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THE YACHT
report

The leading magazine for the design, construction, management, ownership & operation of luxury yachts.

Considering the 'What Ifs'

ARE WE PREPARED FOR THE DANGERS WE MAY ENCOUNTER WHEN OUTSIDE OF OUR COMFORT ZONES?

Steve Monk is a director of Da Gama, a company that assists professional mariners in day-to-day safe navigation and conduct of their yachts. With over 20 years' experience at sea as an operator and instructor, he is well versed on the challenges and excitement of life onboard. Here, he discusses some of the demands faced by those with the responsibility for vessel and crew safety and provides an introduction on how to prepare for the unknown.

On a day that began like many others during a charter, we were holding our yacht on Dynamic Positioning approximately 500 yards off the beach, with our guests enjoying the surrounding areas. Two tenders were at the jetty, having ferried personnel and equipment ashore and the helicopter was preparing for the flight to the mainland. Two jetskis with three young guests were being briefed back aft and the Bosun was 20m underwater giving a couple a tour around a nearby wreck. With so many things going on, and all the crew occupied, I was conscious that being alone on the bridge, I also needed to maintain the safety of the yacht's position.

The weather forecast predicted a bright and sunny start, but there was an approaching low pressure to keep an eye on due to the likelihood for increasing winds and poor weather. The flight deck called for engine start and rotor engagement, so running through the check-offs, and noting the jetskis now clearing on the port quarter, I gave approval. The anemometer read 10 knots blowing onshore - but stepping out onto the bridge wing I sensed the change in the approaching weather. Perhaps the jetskis now racing off past

the bow might find their trip cut short? I was then recalled to the bridge by the sound of an alarm on the fire panel – a smoke alarm in the main switchboard. The duty engineer was sent to investigate, while I checked our position on the chart to check our

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proximity to dangers. My attention was then drawn to one of the teenagers turning too tightly and throwing his passenger from the jetski, which was now 300 yards ahead of us and just clear of the headland. The noise of the helicopter rotors engaging grew deafening, so I went to shut the bridge wing door just as the engineer radioed up to advise me of an electrical fire in the switchboard. He was attempting to fight it with an extinguisher, but had been burnt on the hands and needed assistance.

I sounded the alarm to alert the few crewmembers we had onboard, and was reaching for the checklist when it became evident there was a problem with the jetski group. No sign of the third person - with the other two frantically looking around for him. Noting gusts of 20 knots and the sea state increasing around the headland, I reached for the radio to recall the crew from ash, when we suddenly lost all power. Numerous alarms were now going off, and it obviously wasn't going to be a normal day any longer.

WHAT NEXT?

It's an uncomfortable feeling to be in – but that's what happens when we go outside our comfort zone and have to consider the 'what ifs'. The example above may just be an extreme scenario, but with such a wide variety and increasing number of toys and equipment now carried on yachts, it's important to look at the responsibilities placed upon the crew and review their skills every now and then. For many vessels, and those who professionally man them, a regular programme of summer in the Mediterranean and winter in the Caribbean can generate an unintentionally complacent familiarity

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of knowing your cruising area well. Regularly visited bays and coastlines provide a subconscious cushion of recognising the dangers around you, all backed up with a wealth of useful information to assess your location, situation and weather forecast. So there's really nothing to worry about. Or is there?

What happens when a decision is made to break from the norm and go off the beaten track? In most cases, human nature causes us to conduct impromptu risk assessments in almost everything we do, and from this we create check-lists in our mind or on paper to ensure that the procedures necessary to maintain safety are generated and followed. But how prepared are we for the unexpected challenge or emergency?

- What if you can't see the rescue boat being launched in a heavy swell while standing on the bridge wing; there's a diving emergency; the returning helicopter calls an emergency landing or you're trying to recover the tender in an uncomfortable sea state?
- What if you're in port and receive a call that a charter or visit from the owner will happen in three days but the pick-up is 300 miles away? It's blowing force six outside the harbour and you have to go. Do you? Is it safe? Many yachts would have no problems working their way through a sea state five, but do you drive hard and risk damaging the vessel, arriving at the new port in time to recover, repair and collect the guests? Or do you passage at a more sedate pace, protecting the vessel and crew to arrive just in time for the pick-up?

He or she will spend most of their time on passage looking ahead, both visually and on radar, collating a wealth of information to confirm the vessel position by all available means and ensuring they are where the GPS, or fix by other means, says they are. Enthusiastic and motivated, the responsibility placed in the hands of these predominantly 20-something year olds is really quite considerable when you remember the size of some of the vessels now – over 100m and rising.

Is it possible to put a price on the value of the yacht, the lives onboard, and therefore the training and experience necessary to maintain that safety? Compare this with the demands of a young airline pilot who is flying something just as expensive, just as big and with just as many lives onboard. They are tested in a simulator every six months and put through a series of challenges to assess their reactions and solutions to maintain the safety of the aircraft and everyone in it. The bridge team of a yacht isn't very different in its responsibilities – but without regular simulations – should embrace their training and realistically recognise their level of knowledge by looking to challenge themselves when considering the 'what ifs' when on watch.

A simple and inexpensive way to assist in times of crisis is the use of proper check-off cards. In the same way pilots resort to these for all procedures, including those conducted at every take-off and landing, bridge teams should be encouraged to do the same. That said, it is important not to become complacent and simply cast an eye over them or claim they have been done when they haven't for the same reason it would be regrettable if the pilot did likewise and hadn't remembered to put the undercarriage down on coming in to land!

The analogy often used is that of the swan – calm and graceful on the surface, but paddling like crazy below. We feel comfortable as airline

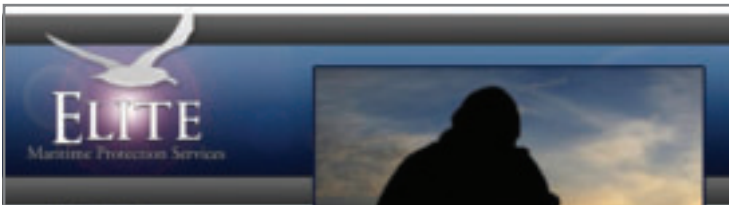


CONSIDER THESE 'WHAT IFS'

- For example, what if during the approach to the berth you lose an engine, a steering motor, the bow thruster or communication to the crew manning the lines?
- What if, while cruising, the GPS goes down, there's a fire in the engine room, a man overboard or you receive a distress call within your vicinity?

The intention here is not to make you paranoid or spend every waking moment concerned by health and safety implications, but how often do you consider these 'what ifs'; do you have a contingency plan in place, and how confident are the crew in implementing it?

Let's take a closer look at the bridge for a minute and reflect on the duties of the officer of the watch (OOV).



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passengers, because we appreciate and recognise the training and skill of the pilot and crew. Yacht guests should be no different and they should understand that a crew have pushed themselves to demonstrate skills, in not only the hotel services but in overall safety. In the unlikely event of a situation becoming critical, the most comforting thought is to know the professional, calm and firm leadership of the crew will protect the guests. However, this only comes through practice, teamwork and knowledge of each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Officers should not be concerned or feel threatened if asked to operate outside their comfort zone. This might include taking the vessel somewhere new, or into challenging weather conditions, or recovering tenders in marginal weather. Or they may face an emergency onboard, which could result in an evacuation. Don't wait for it to happen the first time, to be the first time you think about it. Captains, managers and owners should look at when the crew were last challenged, and really put through them through their paces.

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Time is a precious commodity on any ship, and, as such, finding just enough of it to dedicate to effective training sessions with the whole crew let alone just the bridge team is difficult to integrate into an operational programme. Additionally, it is usually the case following an extended period alongside, when new crew have joined or when working up for the forthcoming season that 'more important' things work their way into the schedule than running a few exercises to test the team.

However, management companies should be aware of and actively promote the skills of the crew and their ability to set a high standard in not only the hotel services but firm in the knowledge that in the event of an emergency, the guests will be so well cared for and looked after they may never, in the majority of cases, even know there was a problem in the first place. ■

Image: Jim Raycroft

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