

(Taken, with permission, from FSKC)

A Disjointed Evening - Wed 6th August

It is not every day that one has the unexpected privilege of swimming in a busy shipping lane with a dislocated arm. When it does happen it seems a good idea to write down the experience for the grandchildren.

The e-mail which came round the Fife Sea Kayak Club the day before had said that we would be practicing rescues in the bay and that we should bring along with us our tow ropes, slings and be prepared to get wet.

So loading up the car the night before I put in my full length steamer wetsuit along with all the usual gear.

It was a grey evening with rain starting and stopping. A good night not to mind getting wet. I arrived at Aberdour late and was scrambling into my gear as the others were congregating at the water's edge. With frequent dunking in mind I put on my fleecy base layer then wormed into the wetsuit, drysuit trousers and then with assistance from a local congregation of neds got into my touring cag. I grabbed tow rope and neoprene balaclava and waddled down to the sands. I was helped to launch and set off in hot pursuit of the bobbing boats out in the bay.

Within a few metres all did not feel 'right'. Was it the extra layers – I had never before paddled in a full length wetsuit under drysuit trousers and cag? I was certainly warm and fast overheating. The unseen hand of the swell entering the bay kept pulling the nose upwind. As I edged and put in extra sweeps to turn toward the direction of the others I could hear myself wheezing gently. Nowadays my asthma only really becomes a problem if I laugh too much or sometimes if I swim in cold water. My mind flashed back to an early January day 7 years ago when I went for a long swim in the tail of Campsie Lynn on the river Tay. That day the water was frozen to the banks and I can still remember gasping for oxygen when I was finally reunited with my waterlogged kayak. But right now I was very hot. My arms felt like they were attached to bungee cords and every stroke and correction was an effort.

By now it was clear that the group had decided to go for a paddle rather than play rescue games, so before we got to Braefoot Bay I had rafted up to get assistance to extract myself from the touring cag. Never capsize when half way out of a tight cag I thought to myself as my companions unpeeled me from my expensive Christmas present wrapping. What a relief. Now the bungee cords were much less aggressive but I still made a mental note never to go to sea again in a full length wetsuit if I wanted to paddle any distance. We bunched up to cross over to Inchcolme Island just under a kilometer into the estuary. By now I had better temperature control and all was good.

When we reached the NE point of the island the swell was deepening and I moved from 'nonchalant chatting mode' to get a 'bit of sea space and wish I had a hearing aid' mode as my fellow paddler babbled on and I heard not a word of it. The swell steepened and I decided now was a good time to clip my paddle leash to the deck. The swell was starting to break but in a 'friendly' sort of way so I was still having fun but more aware of the need to watch what was coming in on my starboard bow and where everyone else was around me. The last time I was here I had paddled too vigorously in the bigger seas and ended up out on my own and unable to screw my head round to check. So this time I resolved to be a good boy and stay totally with the group. True to my word I kept pace with 2 others downwind who were taking a more direct line back to shore. I even shouted to them to wait for the others behind us to catch up. To take the direct line meant baring my beam to the waves and in these conditions I prefer to head into or near the wind. But I was determined to go where they were going and stick together.

Ahead of us lay the buoys of the shipping lane where the breaking waves looked a good size

bigger with long trailing plumes of frothy water on their backs. I moved into 'I'm concerned' mode. 'Stay relaxed below deck' I told myself and keep your eyes peeled for any big ones that come near. And then it came. An altogether mountainous wave rearing up and up (I suspect it was not as big as it was in my dreams later that week...) and then I don't remember. Did I brace heavily into the breaking foam, or did I do a 'rabbit in the headlights'? I'll never know. I do remember crying out 'O God' – half a cry of fear and half a prayer of desperation. The prayer was answered. Next conscious memory is the boat past the point of recovery and my head entering the green room. First thought is for my shoulder. It's been dislocated 4 times already and I'm due for a long awaited repair job in 3 weeks time. These paddling trips were all part of my campaign to build up popeye muscles pre-op. I was even booked into the gym for 7am the next morning to get a weights routine going.

Now I can roll from any angle in the pool but this was the first time on the open sea when a roll was needed in anger. But on this occasion I consciously decide not to go for a roll and jeopardise the shoulder. So right hand goes for the deck toggle and pulls. Nothing happens. Did I pull hard enough? Strange. Try with the left hand – it won't come off. Yikes! I ram my knees hard down against the stretched neoprene and it will not budge. What happened next I can't truly remember but I came out! I think I went back to a heavy duty heave with both hands as I was on the brink of gasping a lungful of brine. (Later S did say he thought it took rather a long time for me to surface!) I remember no pain and no cold. I popped up downwind, paddle in hand and boat in the other.

So far so good. It seemed very soon that S was alongside and had a grip of the boat and M was arriving from downwind to sandwich my kayak into a heaving loose raft as they rolled it back upright. I ducked under my upturned bow and reached across for the rear deckline on S's boat and worked myself along. By now my right shoulder had that ominous 'disconnected' feel. I ignored it. S was giving good clear instructions. I twisted round and using both shoulders swung legs up together and over and slid my bum back into the waterlogged kayak. That seemed too easy I thought. It was only later I reflected on how did I manage to get back in so fast and so easily with a dislocation. My paddle however had gone AWOL. How come as it was on a paddle leash? Please can someone get it, I shout? And so to the pump out process. First pump didn't work. Onto 2nd pump and a few fast strokes got the water squirting out but it was spitting in the wind compared with the risk of swamping as more waves broke over the three-some raft. We soon gave up and fitted the deck so I could wallow in my own on-board brine.

The raft was joined by F from upwind and I leaned more heavily onto S's front deck with my dislocated arm holding the far side of his cockpit coaming and my left trying to grasp the nearside inner cockpit through the neoprene deck material. By now it was clear from the pain that the shoulder was most definitely out so I owned up to the fact and the implications were quickly discussed. I would need a well assisted tow – and the sea was moderate with regular breaking waves coming through. Within 2 minutes S (a coastguard by trade!) decided the best option was to call help so he sent a Mayday, Mayday, Mayday from the (O so glad we had one in the group) handheld VHF. It felt surreal. This was the kind of thing you read about in magazines. It never happens to you. It was almost fun.

The radio communication was precise and efficient. I had to hang on harder as S needed a free hand to work the radio so more of the raft holding was up to my right shoulder which felt every wave as it hit. I was leant upwind so saw each new rising wave as it bore down on us, sometimes broken into a white foam, sometimes just a lifting swell but each one hurt a lot. Meanwhile back on the radio the coastguard drops our call to a Pan Pan and says a lifeboat crew will be mustered.

We turn attention to holding the raft together and there is a short moment when one of the paddles goes adrift. S and M activate my strobe which lives permanently on the left shoulder of my buoyancy jacket. (I'm glad of that habit now). By now we are being swept south east out of the shipping line and into quieter waters with less breaking waves. S re-estimates our position to the coastguard and we are told the South Queensferry lifeboat has been launched. We assume the

Kinghorn boat will also be launching as it is nearer. The coastguard relays the Pan Pan to all shipping, but fortunately no tankers or naval vessels are to be seen ploughing up the shipping lane towards us.

Having picked up the wayward paddle, L, the fifth member of our group finally joins the raft and soon digs in his buoyancy aid and brings out chocolate! The medic in me calculates the likely time to surgery versus the wisdom of taking calories on board – but the chocolate looks really good. White chocolate with bits of strawberry in it so I go for the calories – yum. My arm is hurting a lot and time is passing. The evening gloom is deepening and it's raining again. The lifeboat must be here soon surely – please, please.

To try and pass time I start up a conversation with F the club vet about my dog's most recent ailment. She gives me that 'is now the right time' kind of look but we talk about doggie diagnoses for a few minutes which takes the mind of the disjointed tugs on my arm as the swell pulls at the raft. How long can I continue to do this for, I ask myself. Meanwhile S and M are digging out available flares. S has an all in one day/night flare instantly to hand and I have a smoke flare on a cord leash to the rear pocket on my buoyancy aid. This is when you wish you knew by rote how to operate these things. It's so much less easy to read instructions in a rolling raft in the gathering gloom. As we think we can glimpse the lifeboat approaching S lets off one end of his flare and we discover it's the smoke end. Wow it's impressive. This is fun.

But back comes the coastguard asking for us to use a night flare as the lifeboat can't see us. Using the other end off shoots the most violent red light. We are instantly bathed in fierce light and I wonder if M's head (downwind) will catch fire. I so wish I had my camera and could have used it. As the firework fizzles out S quickly drops it into the, now dark water before his hand fizzles up with it. My flare having been unattached from the attaching cord has been dropped. I remember that my second smoke flare and night flare along with my storm cag and spare food is all safely stowed in the boot of my car. I reckoned it would not be necessary as we were just going to be pottering at rescues and tows in the safety of the bay and who likes their emergency jelly babies all soggy and salted.

Moments later and the lifeboat sweeps in from upwind. Boy they look professional with their big fireman-like helmets and orange outfits bristling with clever kit. I was expecting gruff old sea salts but at first sight they look like normal citizens. They quickly decide to take the whole group back despite the 'quietening' of the sea state so they begin the process of 'unpeeling' each kayak from the raft and lifting them up and onto the stern section of the RIB. I'm glad the sea is not heaving as much as it was earlier as it would be all too easy for the RIB to scrunch down on a kayak bow and sink it. I'm third in line to 'reach' the side of the lifeboat and we wonder how to get me 'up there'.

I decide to take control as I don't want willing hands to further stretch an already over-elongated right upper limb. I lever myself onto the back deck and offer my right leg to the boat crew. Then the left leg. And one grunting sit up later I'm swinging inboard right arm flailing. It takes a few more minutes to get the rest of the group onboard and the engine is started up and we plough off back to the harbour at Aberdour. The 5 kayaks are perched precariously at the stern. I quickly chill down in the wind and request my neoprene balaclava which had been under my front deck netting. Now why had I not put in on from the start of the rescue? It is just the job. We're not racing to shore but boy do I feel every wave shock up my arm like a blast of electricity.

The group debates the logistics of how to handle my boat and waiting car. I'm glad of the article I had read in Ocean Paddler of the need to always have your car keys on your person and not in the boat. In the harbour I am struck by all the 'reflective jackets' milling around. The shore based coastguard are there (I never knew such volunteers existed), plus the familiar greens of the waiting ambulance crew. As we approach the granite harbour wall all concern is for the fibreglass of our beloved boats. Once they are floated off into the care of another of our kayak group the problem is how to unload me safely up a harbour wall. I mentally start calculating how I will climb a rusty ladder with one arm but fortunately we find a series of steps with a right hand railing so by

shuffling up sideways I reach the easier steps of the ambulance.

I'm now on home territory so to speak. It's strange how as 'the casualty' you are hustled into the ambulance and the scene outside is suddenly cut-off. I'm pleased one of the lifeboat crew pops their head round the door so I can shout a farewell 'thank you' before the doors close me off and into the arms of the NHS. The rest of the story is sadly for me, almost routine. This is the 5th dislocation, 4th kayaking, 1st time on the sea. As per the norm I insist that top priority is to remove my paddling kit intact. The first time it happened on the upper Findhorn we were almost laughing with the combined efforts of 5 totally understanding boaters (instructed to ignore all groans of pain) to extract me from an 'over the top' buoyancy jacket and expensive drysuit. This time it was the challenge of 2 layers of wet and skin tight neoprene. I was pleased the ambulance crew persisted but my arm must have stretched a bit.

By now the night is becoming foul with increasing wind and driving solid rain. Deposited at the local hospital I phone my wife to explain the change of plans and the need to recover the car from an isolated carpark. Next challenge is how will the nurse manage to remove my drysuit trousers which are sloshing with gallons of the Forth without flooding the casualty dept. Before I know it I'm laid out on a trolley with not a stitch of clothing. It's a very effective means of 'disempowering' the patient | can tell you. Later I discover that my wife used the same ploy (took away all my clothes, money and car keys) to ensure I remained in hospital until she decided to collect me. This was because once before I had discharged myself having come round from the anaesthetic and driven myself home from Fort William and she was not impressed. By 1am all was well. My humeral head was back to its anatomical home and I was happy on post anaesthetic morphine.

However, for the next few nights in those wakeful times in the wee small hours I receive visits from the taunts and terrors of 'what if's' and 'if onlys'. At the bottom line I believe the unseen hand of God had it all under control. I was appropriately dressed for a dip, we were together as a group when I went over, we got me out of the water in record time. The raft stayed intact with no crushed fingers. We had the right equipment, we had a coastguard with us, indeed we even had white chocolate with crunchy strawberry bits. No kit was lost (except my dropped flare), and none of my kayak clothing was cut off. And to top the evening they even got the shoulder relocated in casualty without me needing to go to the operating theatre. (It took in excess of 12 hours to get it back in the last time.)

So what did I/we learn:

1. Its not good to arrive late and miss out on the pre-launch briefing.
2. Be sure and have a pre-launch briefing.
3. Know who is the assigned group leader for the trip.
4. ALWAYS take your emergency kit – its no good in the boot of your car. (Even if your emergency jelly babies need replaced from time to time)
5. Have at least one VHF with each group.
6. If the sea builds when you are out it's good to clearly have a plan that is communicated around and understood by the whole group.
7. Carry flares (the club has just put in a bulk order.....)
8. Know how to use your own (and others) flares in the dark.
9. Put your hat/balaclava on as soon as you have a dip – don't wait till you're cold
10. Anything crucial – then carry it in, or attach it to, your buoyancy kit.
11. Beware of home made paddle leashes – mine failed.
12. Thank the lifeboat folk and make a contribution to beer or equipment funds.
13. Learn from tales such as these.