

“Sail Plans” - Capt Geoff

As retired Captain of the local Coast Guard Search and Rescue cutter, one of my greatest problems was trying to find missing people using vague information. The main reason for this is the speed and range of power boats. When someone was rowing, and left a certain point 4 hours ago, the search radius was reasonably small. Now, when boats can cruise at over 20 knots, they can be almost to Vancouver in that same timeframe. When that rowboat was going to a specific location and back, it made the search area much smaller. When our powerboat might try fishing at the hump, but then go up to Greensea, or maybe to Baker Pass, it makes the search area very large. It doesn't help when the person reporting them overdue is not clear on the details of the boat, such as colours, whether inboard or outboard driven, etc. or the intended voyage.

Coast Guard and Power Squadron recommend using a "Sail Plan" (also known as a Float Plan or Trip Plan). This can be very useful to searchers if you don't arrive when expected. It provides searchers of not only the itinerary, but a description of the vessel, list of safety equipment, etc., which can also be a great help. If the itinerary is specific, and adhered to, it is a huge aid in the event the vessel is reported overdue. Simply have someone ashore hold the Sail Plan, so they can give that information to Rescue Centre if you do become overdue.

Plans often change, because of weather, fishing and the like. Updating the sail plan not only stops your shore holder of the sail plan from reporting you overdue, but also stops searchers looking in the wrong area if you are reported overdue. Cell phone coverage on the water around Campbell River has improved greatly, but it is still spotty both to the North and Northeast (check with your cell provider for coverage maps). If you can update the person who has your float plan, you will have the grateful thanks of the people looking for you in the event you are considered overdue.

If you can't get through on the cell to update your sail plan, and believe you are going to be delayed, then the Coast Guard Radio station should take your information, recognizing it might avert a major SAR response when you are reported overdue. Remember that their transmitters and receivers cover a large area, and they may be working a distress or other emergency that you cannot hear. If they are busy, they may not be able to take your information right away.

Regardless of whether you have a sail plan, if you are in any doubt about your safety, please contact someone to advise what is going on, and what you plan to do. A good option is to contact the Coast Guard radio station via VHF. If you tell them what is going on, they may suggest that you contact them every hour or so to advise of your status. In the event you cannot contact them at the next scheduled time, it gives the SAR system a very good idea of where to start looking; something that is critical to saving lives. I suggest calling the Coast Guard Radio station in part because they or the Rescue Center may be receiving calls from other vessels or shore observers, thinking your vessel might be in difficulty, and can then tie these reports together.

The Rescue Centre may decide to send someone out to stand by until you are out of danger. This may feel a little embarrassing if everything turns out, but there have been many incidents where it has saved lives. The crews would much rather be out there before trouble happens, than getting

called out afterwards, when it could take many valuable minutes to get suited up and away from Campbell River and then the transit time to get to the scene.

If you are the holder of the Sail Plan, and the boat does not return when planned, or you become concerned because the weather has changed unexpectedly, or for other reasons, and you cannot contact them, you should contact Rescue Centre at 1-800-567-5111 or cell #727. They may have information on the boat, if it was reported by someone else. If not, they will do a communications search, which costs nothing and may quickly resolve the issue. If they cannot contact the boat, they will initiate a search. If the vessel is in trouble, the quicker the rescuers can get on scene, the better. So please don't hesitate to call them if you are concerned.

Like all articles in this series, this was not written to scare people off of boating. This is a beautiful area, with hundreds of miles of channels and many inlets and bays to explore. But accidents can happen, and taking precautions, such as using a sail plan can make boating less stressful if things do go wrong. To learn more about Boating safety, please visit our website at <http://www.riplerocksquadron.com>