

When should you call Coast Guard for help? - Capt. Geoff

That could be more complex than you might initially think. Sometimes it is very simple, you've struck a log, the vessel is sinking rapidly and lives are in "grave and imminent danger", so it is a distress situation, make that call. But other times, it is not so clear. I was in Coast Guard for almost 36 years, most of that time doing primary SAR, and most of that time as one of the Captains of Point Race, based in Campbell River. Some years Campbell River is the busiest SAR station in Canada, and always in the top three. I saw many people in difficulty on the water, so believe I can give you some good advice.

Let's take a look at what to do when your only engine breaks down. If you are far from dangers, such as a lee shore or shipping, and it is calm weather, you can check out and maybe resolve the problem or call a friend to bring out a part or give you a tow in. If you have no safety concerns, there is no need to immediately call Coast Guard. At the other end of the scale that same engine breaks down in rough weather, when you need your engine to hold you at a safe angle to the waves. It is time to make that call. Because there is obvious risk, the call should at least be rated as urgent (Pan Pan). If you feel there is "grave and imminent danger" then it should be a Mayday call.

But it gets more complex than that. Imagine you have broken down and the weather is calm, but you are in Discovery Passage, between Cape Mudge and Seymour Narrows. Two additional variables come into play. First is the current. Currents run up to 9 knots off Cape Mudge and over 15 knots (almost 30 kph) through Seymour Narrows. If you break down off Discovery Harbour, with a maximum flood, you could be off Cape Mudge in 20-30 minutes. It doesn't take much wind to make the Cape Mudge rip a dangerous spot for a small boat, especially when it is without power. Breaking down anywhere north of Duncan Bay on a maximum ebb could put you into Seymour Narrows in about the same amount of time. (A note here that attempting to anchor in more than a couple of knots of current when you are drifting can be very risky. The anchor can catch the bottom, and if the current is four knots, the result is the same as if you were in still water, and someone suddenly started to tow you at four knots. The transition can be very abrupt. It can pull people overboard, rip out cleats and part lines.)

In Discovery passage, at times when the current is minimal, the second factor comes into play. This is the time when large commercial shipping has to transit. Because of the narrow channel, they cannot easily get around a broken down. This is particularly true for large tug and barge combinations. The remaining current still generates eddies that can push a barge off to either side of the tug, or your boat into the path of the barge. The tug cannot instantly stop the barge if something happens, and generally has to keep some way on to control the barge so it doesn't swerve into the beach.

I would suggest there is always a degree of risk when broken down between Brown's bay and Cape Mudge, and most times it would justify an urgency broadcast.

You also have to remember that when you call for help, it will likely take a while to get there. During the day, Coast Guard can generally get away from the dock within a few minutes (after 1600 it could take 20 to 30 minutes), but it could still take another 10-20 minutes to get on scene in Discovery Passage, depending on the direction of current. If there is another incident going on, Coast Guard could be on the other side of Quadra Island, or farther. (If you decide to help out a boat in this situation, be aware

that most pleasure craft cleats are not built to take the strain of towing. If you use nylon line, its stretchiness will give a little more shock absorption than polyprop, but if it breaks it will snap back more.)

Another major factor when you are in trouble is “comfort” level in terms of risk. If anyone aboard is not comfortable with the situation, it can lead to some bad decision making. Unlike driving a car, you can’t simply pull over to the side of the road to take a break. I’ve seen a number of situations where panicky decisions made a situation much worse, such as heading for the nearest land in rough weather, when it is a dangerous lee shore. I have also seen the opposite, where a decision is made to ignore doubts, and push on. Both have cost lives.

So what happens when you call for help? If you decide that lives are at immediate risk, making it a distress situation, all vessels in the area are required by law to assist, unless it puts them at risk.

Back at the other end of the scale, there is no risk. For example, anchored in a safe anchorage, with the engine broken down again. You can’t raise any friends on your cell, and you’ve made a couple of VHF calls for vessels in the area with no answer. If Coast Guard Radio doesn’t respond to your general calls, you can give them a call. Sometimes they are very busy, but they may be able to provide a number for a mechanic or phone someone for you and pass a message if you have no cell coverage. They can also broadcast a request for mariners in the area able to provide assistance. With their more powerful transmitters they may be able to reach people in the next bay over that can’t hear you because of the mountain in between. You can ask them to call a specific vessel, or just a general call to any mariner in the area.

You may be contacted by a commercial towing vessel at this point. Commercial tows can be quite expensive, and your insurance may not cover the costs. To save money, you may want to be towed to the closest port where you can get repairs instead of all the way home. Or you may decide to wait to see if you can raise your friend a little later.

If there is some risk, but in your mind it is not at the level that justifies either urgency (Pan Pan) or distress (Mayday), then you need to make the risk very clear to Coast Guard Radio, so they can make it clear to the Co-ordinators at Rescue Center, who will make the decision whether to task Coast Guard resources. If Rescue Centre doesn’t get the sense that there is some risk, they will put your vessel in the stack with the vessels broken down in a safe anchorage, and “let the broadcast run”, instructing Coast Guard radio to simply continue broadcasting for another boater to assist. If the situation deteriorates, you can upgrade your situation to urgent or distress. The decision is yours.

I want to stress the risk aspect. Some people are hesitant to advise Coast Guard of their concerns about risk. But in a number of cases, particularly because of the distance we had to go, by the time we would get on scene, risk had become a certainty, and the situation had deteriorated into a distress. In some cases we got there just in time only because there was early recognition of risk.

You can also feel some risk when nothing has gone wrong. For example, for a slower vessel, it is a long way from Mitlenatch to Cape Mudge. If the Southeasterly starts coming up half way back, you may feel

that risk is coming into play, and there is no close refuge. You can contact the Coast Guard Radio station and advise them of your situation and ask them to call you again in half an hour. If they can't get hold of you in half an hour, Coast Guard at least know where to start looking.

You can get a similar result by calling a friend and setting up the same call back – however if someone else has reported you as possibly in difficulty, it will activate the SAR system. The first step of the SAR system will likely be a general call by Coast Guard radio on VHF. If you don't have VHF, or are monitoring another channel, you will miss the call, and the system will go to the second level, dispatching Coast Guard. Contacting Coast Guard directly will allow RCC to tie the information together. If you only have a cell phone, calling in to Coast Guard is likely even more important. I'd suggest using *16, which is generally for emergencies, but in this case you are trying to prevent one.

I'll always remember one phone call I got during a calm, sunny afternoon. A lady phoned, very hesitant, saying there were a couple of kids sitting on a log off the beach, and something just didn't look right. Our boat went out to check on them, and they were both hypothermic. The hospital said one wouldn't have lasted another half hour. On the other side of the coin, we got many calls about suspicious objects that turned out to be birds on logs, and the like (looking at something with binoculars for a long time can transform many things). Whenever we investigated what turned out to be a funny shaped branch sticking out of the water, or a piece of Styrofoam with a rust streak, I used to think about those kids on the log.

The Campbell River/Desolation Sound area is a magnificent place to cruise. You do need to be aware of tides and currents to transit most of the passages safely.

Beyond knowing when to call for help, and how to read the current tables, you need "proof of competency" to operate your boat. You also need an ROC to operate a VHF radio. To learn more about these, check our website at riplerocksquadron.com. Also, if you want to learn about charts, GPS, navigation and other boating knowledge above the level of the PCOC, you may want to consider taking our Boating Course. Again, there is more info on the website at <http://www.riplerocksquadron.com>