

Flinders Islet Incident

Summary by Evans Starzinger

SUMMARY

The Cruising Yacht Club of Australia (CYCA) ran an overnight Category 2 race on November 17th 2009. One of the marks of the course was Flinders Islet. The vessel *Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC)* hit this islet and was lost. Two members of the crew died.

CONCLUSIONS

The incident can be broken into two separate components – the grounding, and the aftermath:

1. This incident would have been entirely avoided if *PwC* had successfully rounded Flinders Islet, as hundreds of other yachts have over the past decade. The root cause of this incident was over reliance on electronic gps/plotter navigation. This resulted in: (a) failure to keep a proper watch looking outside the boat (rather than just at the plotter screen) either visually or by radar, (b) a planned rounding with only meters to spare and failure to set a conservative rounding distance given the night time conditions, and (c) no 'traditional' navigation (setting clearing depths or clearing lines) to double check the plotter.

This incident is almost an exact replica of the recent *Cork* (clipper round the world race) grounding, passing an unlit islet at night with no watch keeping (visual or radar) and no navigation except for the gps plotter, and planning on only 10's of meters of clearance from the danger.

2. Three people were sucked overboard after the grounding and two died. This is an instance where two normal safety procedure appear to have been counterproductive. (a) Normally you stay with the vessel 'until you step up to the rafts'. However this vessel quickly became untenable. It was rolling violently and being swept by waves and the crew were being sucked off one by one. After losing three crew members, the rest were able to quickly and safely evacuate off the boat to the islet. (b) Normally being tethered is the best way to stay on the boat. However in this case, Sally was swept over while tethered (and wearing a pfd) and the tether appears to have caused her to be trapped bashing against the side of the boat. An un-tethered (but wearing pfd and harness) crew member was swept over but quickly carried clear and was later safely picked up. The Skipper was swept over (without pdf or harness) but appears to have suffered a head injury while being swept off the boat – it is unclear if a tether or pdf would have helped him

3. There is some reason to believe that fatigue on the part of the skipper, and a “culture of complacency and philosophy of not delegating responsibility” was the underlying factor in both the above. The skipper had been steering and navigating for 7 hours straight. Before the grounding he was obviously not taking the kind of navigational attention one might expect in a night rounding of an unlit rocky islet. After the grounding he appears to have frozen behind the wheel and not been leading/organizing the crew to respond to the incident. The crew very quickly and successfully abandoned ship after he was washed overboard. And there does not appear to have been a strong watch captain to take up the slack.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Navigators must be reminded forcefully that gps plotters do NOT see or show a true picture of the world. The gps signal can degrade and the chart can be inaccurate. The plotter must be paired with navigation that does in fact actually see the real world – deck watch, radar, and depth sounder.

2. Captains (And watch captains) must be forcefully reminded that this situation was one where decisive leadership immediately after the grounding could have saved all lives. However, relying on various of the safety equipment (tethers and pdfs and vhf and life rafts) did not work for various practical reasons. The PLB’s and flares did function correctly and accelerated the rescue but in the final analysis probably did not make a decisive difference to the outcome.

DETAILS

The Grounding

The islet was approached at about 2:30 am. On approaching Flinders Islet the weather was moderate winds of 15 to 20 knots. The weather had cleared, there was good visibility (stars and moon visible), with ‘pleasant night sailing’. On approach, the high ground at the southern end of the islet could be clearly seen on the port bow silhouetted against the background shore lights of Port Kembla. One mile out from Flinders Islet the complete silhouette could be seen against the background lights.

The skipper was both steering and navigating, and had been for 7 hours straight. He was primarily relying on an in-cockpit gps/plotter. He did not ask for any reports from the bow of the boat or ask any crew member to lookout forward.

Close to the islet, Matt Pearce, in the bow, felt the boat surge and begin to surf. He heard breaking waves and when he looked forward was shocked by what he saw with the boat heading directly for breaking water and the low rock shelf at the northern end of Flinders Islet. He yelled aft ‘come away, come away’ when they were only about

200metres from the rocks and less than 30 seconds from running on to them. The Skipper turned off but not quickly enough and the boat struck the rocks and came to a dead stop.

The islet position is charted to +- 50m. The GPS system had a particularly poor satellite geometry at the time of the incident with a horizontal error about twice it's typical error level. The combined charting and gps error could have been 100 meters, and 300meter might have been a prudent rounding distance at night.

There is a shoaling area starting approximately 100m in front of the islet of 6meter depths that might have given an alert navigator warning that the vessel was not on the desired rounding track.

The Aftermath

The boat stopped dead like a car crash. The bow ended up about 10 metres from the visible rocks. The boat was upright, pointing north west and all crew were onboard. People were thrown about on deck and gear was thrown about below decks.

The sheets were dumped to depower the sails and prevent the boat driving further on to the rocks. Almost immediately the boat was subjected to sets of waves breaking on to it. *PwC* quickly slewed to port and ended facing west at about right angles to the coastline. The wind angle was 60° to 70° on the port bow. The boat was pitching on the fore and aft line with the wave motion.

Peter Geddes was directed below to start the motor. The engine started but ran only for about 30 seconds. It revved wildly when the propeller was clear of the water and stopped abruptly when a rope is thought to have fouled the propeller. The motor would not restart.

Peter Geddes was then directed to send a 'Mayday' but just as he was about to transmit all power was lost in the boat. All lights were extinguished and it was pitch black below decks and a flooding mess with gear and sails strewn everywhere.

The soft pack liferafts were inaccessible under all the debris and sails and unable to be moved on deck in the circumstances. The skipper (at the helm) had a handheld VHF radio but was unable to get it to operate.

About 1 ½ minutes after grounding a wave caught the stern and swung it to port. The starboard side was now exposed to the swell and *PwC* rolled very heavily to port.

The main boom swinging violently from the starboard side to the port side. There was no starboard runner on to support the mast and the port runner was subjected to the shock loading of the impact of the boom and the force of the mainsail. The rig was over-

stressed and the mast broke and fell over the port side. The bow was still clear of the rocks. About this time the bulb of the keel broke off the keel fin, and the rudder broke off.

Solid green water was coming over the port side. The crew were being swept around the deck, it was difficult to hang on and they were underwater for considerable time, having difficulty breathing. Sally Gordon was in the cockpit, wearing PFD and harness, and tethered to port jackstay. One set of waves, when receding, sucked Sally out of the cockpit and most likely under or through the port lifelines. Matt Pearce and Peter Britt went forward to try and get Sally but they could not pull her onboard using her tether. After several attempts they noticed she was not responding to them. There was another call of 'big wave' and as the boat rolled back to starboard they were swept across deck to the starboard side.

This big wave came from slightly behind the skipper – still not wearing a PFD or safety harness – and forced him against the wheel and swept him and the port wheel overboard. This wave also swept Nicholas Short (wearing pfd and harness but not clipped on) off the boat, and swept to the north and clear of the islet. Once clear of the yacht he inflated his PFD and was later rescued by the police boat.

Matt Pearce and Peter Geddes called for the crew to abandon and get onto the islet. They all got off quickly in about 30 seconds. The total time from the initial grounding to all being off the yacht was only about 4 to 5 minutes.

Two PLBs were also activated and signals received at 2:46am and 2:48am. Two flares were ignited and these were sighted by *Yendys*, *Ragamuffin*, *Quest* and *Living Doll*. There was no handheld VHF set and no mobile telephones.

Within about 15 minutes a police boat and the pilot cutter approached Flinders Islet,. The crew were able to pass a message to the pilot cutter by shouting that there were 15 on the islet and 3 in the water. After a further 10 to 15 minutes the four yachts which ceased racing and joined the search and rescue effort were sighted from the islet. About an hour after getting on the islet a helicopter which had been involved in the search approached and commenced winching crew members on board to ferry them ashore.

Quest sighted Nicholas Short in the water and observed that he was alive. The police boat then recovered Nick from the water. *Quest* continued its search and came upon Andrew Short. He was brought onboard over the stern and placed in the recovery position and examined by first-aid trained crew. Andrew was assessed as deceased and CPR was not commenced. A crease was noted on Andrew's forehead consistent with a blow. *Ragamuffin* sighted Sally Gordon floating face down. When Sally was recovered onboard *Ragamuffin* she was no longer wearing her PFD and harness and had an injury to her head. The assumption is that Sally was pulled out of her harness by the force of the waves and floated clear of the boat but this cannot be proved.

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