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Snap into safety

Officials encourage all boaters to don life vests this summer

By Mollie Miller

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A life preserver will preserve no life if it is stuffed into a compartment on a boat, slung across the back of a seat or sitting at the bottom of a pile of fishing equipment.

This is a fact and it is a fact that thousands of boaters, water skiers and fishermen around the country have learned following the drowning death or serious injury of a friend or family member.

The U.S. Coast Guard reports that in 2008, there were 4,789 boating accidents that resulted in 709 deaths and 3,331 injuries. More than two-thirds of boating accident fatalities drowned and, of those people, 90 percent were not wearing life jackets.

The Army team has also seen its share of accidents where a life preserver may have helped a Soldier avoid a fatal injury. In 2009, two Soldiers drowned in separate boating accidents, one while river rafting and the other on a fishing trip. Neither Soldier was wearing a life preserver.

With boating-related drowning accidents continuing to log preventable fatalities, both within the Army and nationwide, officials are encouraging everyone to snap into a life preserver before setting out on any water adventure this summer.

"There is simply no good reason not to wear a life preserver while out in a boat," said Richard Smith, Safety Specialist at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center. "Having one in the boat is just not enough; you have to put it on."

Smith said he has heard many reasons why people don't wear life preservers like how they are too bulky or will "mess up tan lines" but none of these excuses are really valid anymore thanks to a booming life jacket industry.

"These aren't your grandfather's giant orange life jackets anymore," he said. "These days, life jackets come in all shapes, sizes and colors to fit every style and water activity and there is no reason not to wear one."

Although vital to a safe boating experience, snapping or buckeling into a life jacket is just one piece of staying safe out on the water during summer fun. John Clancy, Outdoor Recreation Program Manager at Fort Rucker, Ala., said well maintained equipment, training and proper planning all contribute to a good day on the water.

"While boating is a fun experience, remember that it comes with responsibilities too," he said. "In order to have a fun and memorable trip on the water you need to be safe and you do this by being prepared for anything that could happen."

The U.S. Coast Guard reports that there are five common factors that contribute to too many boating accidents every year. These factors include inattention, reckless operation, passenger/skier behavior, operator inexperience and no proper lookout. Alcohol use has also been cited as a contributing factor in many recent accidents.

Managing these risk factors is easy, according to Clancy, as long as boaters follow a few simple rules – check it, follow it, pack it.

“The biggest mistake people make is to assume they already know everything about their boat without ever reading the manual,” he said. “The manuals address many of the common mistakes and a quick read will save boaters time and frustration down the road.”

At the beginning of every boating season, all boats should be checked thoroughly from bow to stern. The Coast Guard Auxiliary offers free vessel safety checks. To find the closest inspector, visit www.vesselsafetycheck.org.

An initial inspection is not enough, however. Clancy said a five point check that includes inspecting the engines, navigational equipment, communication devices, lights and safety equipment as well as a weather report should be completed every time a boat leaves the dock.

“Performing the five point check and getting good a weather report can be difference between having a good day on the water or a bad night stuck waiting for help,” he said.

All boats should also have some sort of emergency kit on board at all times, according to Scott. These kits should contain at least a first aid kit and a whistle or horn to use as a distress signal. Other equipment that should be readily available on most boats include a towline, emergency radio, bailing device, fire extinguisher, flashlight, extra batteries, matches, a map of where you are, flares, sun screen and a paddle.

The final piece of the safe boating equation focuses on following rules. Like drivers, boaters must follow rules to keep them and those around them safe. Officials at the National Safe Boating Council said knowing the “nautical rules of the road” is an important part of every safe boat trip.

“Boating can be more dangerous than driving a car, no matter how long you plan to be out on the water,” Clancy said. “In order to avoid some of the more common problems it is important to follow rules.”

Following an established float plan is also vital to a safe outing. A float plan outlines information like where the boater is going and when they will be back. A copy of the plan should be left with a friend or family member who will be expecting the boat back at a certain time and can notify authorities if the boat does not return.

A sample float plan is available online at www.floatplancentral.org.

More information about boating safety including checklists and tips is available at www.safeboatingcouncil.org or <http://rentalboatsafety.com>. For additional information about summer risk management, visit the 2010 Safe Summer Campaign Web site at <https://safety.army.mil/summersafety>.



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