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Safe Passage

**Strategic Communication Directorate
U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center
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Whether you're fishing, swimming, tubing or just cruising along taking in the scenery, spending a day on the water is a great way to relax and enjoy the outdoors. For the uninitiated or unprepared, however, the water can be deadly. Taking just a little time to learn the nautical rules of the road will go a long way toward keeping you and your passengers safe on the water.

Knowing your boat is the first step — and even if you're not the owner, you're still responsible for your safety as a passenger. Be sure to know the location of all personal flotation devices, fire extinguishers, emergency signaling devices and other safety gear. Also get a lesson on the boat's basic operation: how it starts and stops and how to use the emergency radio. The more time you take to educate yourself, the safer you'll be should an emergency occur.

Weather can be a boater's best friend or worst enemy. Be sure to check the forecast before you depart and know what to do in the event of inclement conditions. The following safety devices are a must for all boaters, but are especially vital when the weather gets bad:

- **Personal flotation devices.** Many states require at least one properly sized PFD be available for each person onboard any watercraft. According to the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, 672 Americans died in boating accidents in 2010, and about 88 percent of drowning victims were not wearing a lifejacket even though one was available. Don't take the chance — always wear a lifejacket or other PFD on the water.
- **Whistle.** Always keep a waterproof whistle handy. If the weather turns or visibility is limited, blowing your whistle will let other boaters know your location. In other emergency situations, blowing constantly can attract attention from anyone within earshot and ensure help is summoned.
- **Flashlight.** A flashlight will allow other boaters to see you in bad weather, or it can be used as a signaling device in the dark.
- **Oars.** All boats should have two oars safely stowed onboard in the event of engine trouble. Oars should be stored in the oarlocks to keep them secure if the boat tips.
- **Bucket.** A bucket is useful for bailing out water that gets into the boat.
- **First aid kit.** Anything can happen on the water — be prepared with a first aid kit and know how to use it properly.
- **Blanket.** The body loses heat quickly in wet clothing, even during summer. Keep a blanket onboard and use as necessary to keep warm.

- **Ropes.** Keep two ropes onboard at all times, one for tying the boat and the other to help any passenger who goes overboard.
- **Mirror.** A mirror or other shiny object is perfect for daytime signaling.
- **Garbage bags.** In the absence of more formal gear, garbage bags can work as ponchos or shelter to protect against rain.
- **Plastic bag.** A large plastic bag will help keep all your safety gear dry and secure. An orange bag is especially useful because it can be used to signal for help.

Boating under the influence of alcohol doubles the probability of a watercraft accident and can be as deadly as drinking and driving. In fact, during 2010, approximately 16 percent of all boating deaths in the United States were attributed to alcohol, according to the USCGA. Local law enforcement agencies and the U.S. Coast Guard work together to enforce state and federal boating laws, and penalties for boating under the influence include fines, suspension or revocation of boat operator privileges and jail time.

It's also important to let someone know your trip details, whether by filing an official float plan or simply leaving a detailed itinerary with a friend or Family member. Details should include location, passenger names and approximate departure and return times. The need for a float plan applies to boats of all sizes and is equally important if you're heading out on a sleek fishing vessel or just getting some exercise in a kayak.

On the water, there's always the chance someone could fall overboard. Should that happen on your boat, kill the engine unless the individual is clearly out of range of the boat's props. If the person is close enough to catch a life preserver or rope, throw it to them and, if necessary, start the engine and head into the wind toward his or her location. Once the individual has a grip on the PFD or rope, tie one end to the boat and pull slowly so he or she drifts without struggling back to the boat. If the person can't get back into the boat by his or her own power or you can't lift them into the boat, ensure they have a PFD available, lower anchor and call for help.

Lastly, take a boating safety course. All military installations and most states require operators to successfully complete a boating class before they leave shore. Contact your local Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation directorate or visit <http://www.cgaux.org> to find classes and locations.

For more information on boating safety, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.



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