

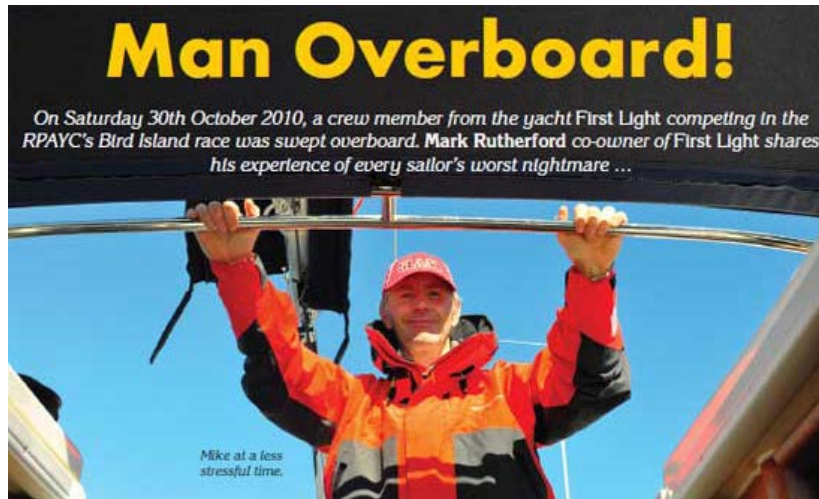
December 2010



Front Cover: Stephane Howarth's Sydney 38 Mille Sabords approaches the finish line of the Melbourne-Stanley Race held over Melbourne Cup Weekend. Photo by John Curnow.



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To those of us who go to sea in boats "Man Overboard!" are the two words we never want to hear, the two words we train and drill to cope with and the two words that we never want to write about after it has happened.

Let me set the scene. First Light is a Beneteau First 36.7 regularly crewed by four mates and others who have sailed together forever. If I mentioned our cumulative years of offshore racing experience you would place us on Mount Ararat. We were competing in the first of the 2010 RPAYC Blue Water series – a 50-miler to Bird Island and back in a building nor'easter. As is our custom we conducted a pre-race briefing, rigged for Cat 3 safety and ran through MOB drills. Mike assembled and rigged the danbuoy – his future best friend.

The race was good. Not much breeze to get started but in no time 10-12 knots and a lovely sail. Bird Island looked a long way off into the wind but the romp home looked like fun. By the time we came to the final tack to lay Bird Island we had 20 -25 knots, gusting above, and were sailing under main and No 3.

We tacked, perhaps the 15th for the day, First Light took the breeze on the new tack, put her shoulder down and Mike lost his footing, rolled from the high side to the low side, slipped through the guardrails and in disbelief I yelled those dreaded two words: "Man Overboard!"

Remaining on board we had five, four who have completed the Safety and Survival at Sea Course (SSSC), two first aid qualified people, three qualified radio operators and not to mention a few years under the keel for all of us.

All five did what we had trained to do. Locked our eyes on Mike and pointed. Looked a bit like an ABBA concert. On the helm Derek threw us into a tack and hove to. So far so good. Mike was 10 metres away downwind. That's when we started to get it wrong.

Derek called for sheets to be released. We were all too busy watching and pointing. Ma Ma Mia! The main took charge and the boat took the wind and headed back towards Bird Island. Too late, sheets were eased and I took the helm as skipper.

First Assessment. First reactions were good, so good in fact that over confidence lead us to believe that Mike would be back on board in seconds and the race resumed. Instead of one person taking the duty of watching the man in the water we all took it – and neglected any other duty both MOB or controlling the boat.

I turned the boat downwind to get in a position to round up for a pick up leading to our first beam

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to beam jibe as we rounded up. The approach was good.

Mike looked cool with hat back on his head and sunglasses in place and we luffed within metres of him. In that breeze the luff lasted seconds, we payed off and departed the scene yet again.

Finally training was kicking in and Chris released the Danbuoy and strobe, landing it about five metres from Mike who swam to it and entered the horseshoe float. I was much encouraged that he was buoyant and marked.

Second Assessment. Still overconfident. We believed that we could recover Mike and had made no attempt to deploy the recovery float, start the motor, reduce sail or rig for recovery.

Once again I turned downwind, once again a hard jibe, once again a failed recovery. In the jibe, main sheets must have caught the steering pedestal and the wheel became stiff.

Third Assessment. Not so confident. We had got more wrong than right. Crew work improved. One man now locked onto Mike, the rest working the boat.

We started the engine, checked for lines and motored head to wind, dropped the main and returned to Mike. Sounds easy but the crew worked hard to achieve this in minutes in strong wind and heightened stress.

Mike's comment later was that he felt some discomfort when he saw us motoring away with one man on the stern waving goodbye. In fact that was Chris pointing the man.

And so we returned to Mike under control but in choppy seas and strong winds. And missed him again.

Fourth Assessment. Where had our training gone? No heaving line on deck, the MOB recovery system still safely in its bag. Steering compromised. Nobody standing by on the radio for a PANPAN or MAYDAY.

Final attempt. Heaving line on deck, good approach, some heroics by men who found strength they did not know they possessed and Mike was deposited into the cockpit, hustled below with a first aid operative and we recovered the boat, tidied up, retired and headed home with dodgy steering, headsail only and making a good 8-9 knots.

Conclusions

- Training is the beginning not the end. First Light crew take safety seriously but despite training and drills, we were found wanting.

- Practise MOB, don't just talk about it. When you practise it will probably be in the harbour and still water. Remember, if it happens it is much harder in open water and strong winds.

- Allocate key roles, each to two people. Everyone has a secondary duty. Look and point, radio, GPS MOB, sail handlers. Why two? One of the two might be in the water.
- Have one person call the shots at the beginning. Either helm or skipper remembering that offshore, the skipper may not be on the helm. That person is to make sure that people lock into their jobs and avoid the desire to look and point as the primary duty of all on board.
- Avoid unnecessary jibes. A 'granny' would have done the job for us and we would not have damaged the steering.
- Regardless of the circumstances, follow the drill. Deploy the Danbuoy and retriever float immediately. Ready the heaving line and recovery tackle. Make a precautionary or emergency radio call.

Twenty minutes after being recovered Mike came on deck, warm, dry and in good humour. He contributed to our wash up and was well enough to share a warming rum as we entered the calm waters of Pittwater.



Mark Rutherford in the sling during MOB drills. Note calm weather and concrete platform.



Teki Dalton (in red) conducting safety brief before Coff's 2010.

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- ▶ November '16 issue - 10 October
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