

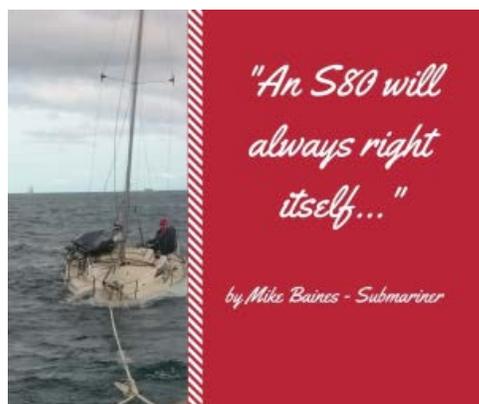
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Royal Yacht Club of Victoria

## An S80 will always right itself...

by Mike Baines - Submariner



"Don't worry, if we get knocked over, an S80, like any other keelboat, will always right itself." So went Bas' safety briefing to our first time racer, Ruben. Little did we know...

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In a windy Brass Monkey Winter Series race, Merak was looking good running under spinnaker in a close battle for the lead with two other S80's, Skipjack and Up 'N Go. We gybed onto starboard after rounding RMYS "C" in around 20-25 knots from the North, at times gusting 30kts. In one of those gusts we broached. Of course, you dump the kite

sheet and just wait until the boat comes up again. We've done this many times before.

This time, though, Merak stayed down, port rail in the water. We were taking water into the cockpit – not unusual. Then the top of the mast and mainsail dropped onto the water. That is unusual but not unheard of. Then the port stern locker door fell open and we started taking water into the locker. Then it started to get concerning. Merak was refusing to come up and the water was now also gushing into the cabin through the companionway. Then the mainsail started getting pushed under water, a sign that the keel was losing its battle with other forces at play. By the time she got to 120 degrees from vertical and continuing to roll, Bas ordered everyone into the water as he didn't want anyone caught under the boat. Luckily everyone was wearing PFDs.

The water was cold! After encouraging our first timer Ruben safely into the water, Bas grabbed his handheld VHF and issued a Mayday call. Merak came to an uncomfortable rest at around 140 degrees and continued to take water through the main companionway. At this rate, she was going to sink in minutes. Bas swam around the stern and tried a dinghy-righting technique on the rudder (he couldn't reach the keel) and Merak slowly righted. This was the first sign of the very poor stability of a keelboat full of water.

Ruben, whose automatic life jacket had deployed, had drifted away from the boat and Bas swam towards him to ensure he was safe. Our bowman, Andrew, joined them and the three drifted further away. Bruce, Rob and Mike hung around the boat and thought the submerged bow provided a good opportunity to re-board. Big mistake. The boat was very unstable and we quickly retreated to the water.

By this stage, the RMYS race committee boat "William Patterson" had appeared on the scene and were picking up Bas, Andrew and Ruben. We were really starting to feel the cold, so we attempted to board Merak again.

This time, Rob and Mike hung to the port side as far back as we could whilst Bruce climbed on and crawled to the stern. Rob followed, then Mike. We very carefully got the main down. Balancing the boat was very important. Next was the flogging spinnaker but the halyard was jammed so tightly in its cleat we had to cut it to release it. We retrieved the spinnaker, put a sail tie around the main and started bailing, very carefully, so as not to unsettle the balance of the boat.

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By then, we had the Police boat and a fireboat standing off from us and the William Patterson attempting to get a towline to us, the first line was too short but we took a second line successfully. Communication was very difficult.

Bruce was now very cold and we arranged for the Police boat to come and lift him off. The tow was a long and slow affair with Rob bailing vigorously – making around a 150mm difference to the cabin water level during the 40 minute journey to RMYS. The cabin water was up to the top companionway step and it was proving difficult to bail as everything was floating in the cabin.

Overall, our submarine performed well under tow and we successfully arrived at Squadron where she was pumped out by Victoria Police, RMYS shore staff and volunteers. Damage sustained was minimal with a wrecked windex (suspected due to the seabed), a cut halyard, a submerged outboard, bent stanchions, some electronics that will need TLC and a few soaked mobile phones (and car keys). The most damage was probably to our collective pride, although our first timer, Ruben, says he'll be back. No one was hurt, the people who came to our support were fantastic and Merak will race again soon.

Our very special thanks go to the crew of the William Patterson for their patience and perseverance. A big thank you to the Victorian Water Police and PoM Fire Brigade who stood by the entire time and then pumped us out. You should not underestimate the value of a boat standing by when you are freezing cold on something that is very unstable. Extra thanks to the Squadron staff and volunteers who were there to greet us with a range of dry clothing (very welcome!) and a spare key fob for us to gain access to retrieve Merak the next day. Also, thanks to Helen at Royals who was very sure to check we were all OK. Finally, a thank you also to Commodore David Seaman and Alexandra who provided the tow back to Royals the next day.

#### Learnings:

- Wearing life jackets pays off. Issuing an automatic one to a novice provides peace of mind.
- A portable VHF is indispensable.
- Review the locking mechanism for our stern lockers.
- Consider a washboard for the companionway.
- Everybody onboard should carry a knife.
- Be extremely wary of stability on a swamped boat.
- Keep your gear in a dry bag – a German supermarket chain offers good dry bags on special from time to time. Keep your phone and electronic car keys in a watertight container.
- When in the water, constantly monitor where everyone is. When the police arrived, they asked us if there were only three of us. "No, No" we yelled, "There were six but the other three are on the William Patterson."
- Surprisingly, moving around in the water is not as hard as expected – in full wet weather gear. Whilst Mike was wearing an inflatable PDF, he completely forgot to deploy it!
- Getting excessively cold can make you irritable. Watch this and try to manage it.
- An S80 doesn't always right itself.

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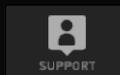
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