

Personal Survival at Sea



Maritime &
Coastguard
Agency





This leaflet gives you guidance about how to survive at sea should you ever need to abandon your ship. You will need to take the right precautions to help yourself by preparing well. You should know about different survival techniques and be well informed about what survival equipment you have on board your ship, where it is and how to use it.

What to do when you hear the general emergency alarm signal

Signal: *sounding of alarms and seven or more short blasts followed by a long blast on ship's whistle or as addressed in the muster list.*

Put on as many layers as possible of warm clothing (woolly clothing has the best insulation) with an anorak or oilskin on top. If you have got enough time try to close the sleeve and trouser leg openings.

If an immersion suit is available put it on over your clothing – it may not be insulated, so make sure that you're wearing warm clothing underneath. The layers of clothing will buoy you up if you have to enter the water (through the air trapped between the layers). The clothing will also slow down the cooling of your body by reducing the circulation of water over your skin.



Put on proper shoes and take your lifejacket (if your immersion suit doesn't have inherent buoyancy in it) and any essential medicine with you.

Stay as calm as possible and go to your muster station quickly – you can adjust your clothing on the way. The general emergency signal is not the 'abandon ship' signal – you will get further information at your muster station.



Preparing for abandoning ship

Only abandon the ship when told to do so by the master or his/her representative – in many cases the ship itself is the best lifeboat.

Put on your lifejacket and ensure that it is properly secured. It will keep you afloat in the water and will keep your mouth out of the water even if you become unconscious. If you end up in the

water, you are likely to suffer 'cold water shock' meaning that you will involuntarily gasp as you enter the water and that your limbs will become numb. Your lifejacket will be your lifesaver.

If time permits, take the recommended anti-sickness medicine. Seasickness will remove precious body fluid, makes you more prone to hypothermia and impairs your will to survive.



Abandoning ship

Dry hood lifeboats or davit launched liferafts

If the order is given to abandon ship (usually given by verbal command), board the lifeboats or davit-launched liferafts at the embarkation deck. This is the preferred way to abandon ship and gives you the best chance of survival.

Throw-over liferafts

Some ships also have additional throw-over liferafts that can be used as a last resort or to assist people who are already in the water.

If the order is given to launch a throw-over liferaft, make sure that it is secured by its painter (operating cord) to a hydrostatic release unit (HRU), or if you need to move the liferaft re-secure it to another point so that the liferaft remains with the ship. The painter is used to inflate the raft and to



hold it alongside. In this case the HRU will ensure that the liferaft floats free even if the ship sinks.

Make sure that the water in the launching area is clear of people or obstructions then launch the liferaft, before pulling on the painter until inflation occurs.

There may be up to 72 metres of painter within the liferaft container which must be fully withdrawn and given a sharp pull to inflate the raft.

Wait until the buoyancy tubes are fully inflated before boarding, since premature boarding may prevent proper inflation. Try to stop the liferaft from chafing on the ship's side as this might damage the liferaft.

If the vessel carries Marine Evacuation Systems (MES), only enter the slide when instructed to do so.

Entering the water

Avoid entering the water if at all possible – if you have to abandon the ship use lifeboats or davit-launched liferafts. If there are no other means of escape use over-side embarkation ladders or, if necessary, lower yourself by means of a rope or fire hose.



Choose a suitable place to leave the ship, bearing in mind the drift of the ship, the sea state, hazards such as burning oil and the position of any survival craft in the water.

Don't jump onto the liferaft canopy – you could injure yourself or someone already inside and you may damage the canopy. Remember that the survival craft may drift more quickly than you can swim. If there is no survival craft you may prefer to abandon the ship from the bow or stern to get clear of the ship with more certainty (amidships may be more difficult because of the ship's drift).

If there is no other option than to jump into the water from the ship, bear the following in mind:

- Try to minimize the shock of sudden cold immersion. A plunge into cold water will cause an uncontrollable rise in breathing rate and may result in an intake of water into the lungs.



- Keep your lifejacket on, securely fastened.
- Keep your elbows to your side and cover your nose and mouth with one hand whilst holding the wrist or elbow with the other hand and try to hold your lifejacket down.
- Keep your feet together, check below to avoid obstructions, look straight ahead and jump feet first.

Action when in the water

Try to orientate yourself by locating the vessel, any lifeboats or liferafts, other survivors or other floating objects. Get clear of the ship – you could be struck by surfacing wreckage. If you haven't already done so, do up all your

clothing now. In cold water you may experience violent shivering and pain – these are natural body reflexes. Take action now before you lose full use of your hands – turn on your signal lights and locate your whistle.





If you can, get out of the water into a liferaft immediately, but don't attempt to swim unless it is to reach a nearby craft, a fellow survivor or a floating object on which you can lean or climb. Unnecessary swimming will increase the rate of body heat loss and send warm blood from your core to the outer parts of your body. If you can find other survivors, form a group – you will be more easily located.

Float as still as possible with your legs together and your elbows close to your side, and arms folded across the front of your lifejacket. This position will minimize the exposure of the body surface to cold water.

Boarding a survival craft

Try to board a lifeboat, raft or other floating platform or object as soon as you can. Make maximum use of footholds and handholds. You might want to bob down and use the buoyancy of your lifejacket to help you get out of the water.

Once all possible survivors are on board, cut or slip the painter using the safety knife provided in the liferaft – it will be near the entrance to the liferaft.

Manoeuvre clear of the ship's side or any obstructions, and then stream the drogue or sea anchor. The drogue or sea anchor reduces your rate of drift and so assists those searching for you. It will also keep the entrance of the craft away from the weather, steady the craft and improve the stability in rough weather.





Close the entrance to keep out the cold and wet, and to retain any warmth generated by survivors. If in an open lifeboat, rig the exposure cover. Put on any thermal protective aids and post a lookout.

Maintain your liferaft by inflating the floor for insulation against the cold, baling out any water and checking for damage or leaks. Keep it ventilated by maintaining a small opening.

Rig the radar reflector and emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) or search and rescue transponder (SART) if available.

Huddle together to maintain body warmth and try to stay as positive as possible – your will to live makes a difference!

Principles for survival

Use this sequence of priorities – without this approach only the lucky will survive:

1. Protect yourself against the environment.
2. Stay as close as possible to the last known position of your ship to aid location by rescuers. Don't deliberately sail away from it.
3. Keep survival craft together for a bigger location target and so that you can share survival aids.

It is possible to survive days without water and weeks without food, so these are low on your list of priorities!

Attracting the attention of rescuers

If you have a survival craft portable radio, transmit a distress message using the instructions on the equipment.

Switch on any EPIRBs or radar transponders.

Use distress flares and rockets sparingly when they are likely to be seen – do not fire if there is a helicopter overhead!

If the sun is shining the signalling mirror can be used to attract attention.



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**Remember: no one is a
survivor until rescued**



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MCA/075