



Floating Alone in the Chesapeake in January

By "Popeye"

This incident occurred on the Chesapeake Bay near Annapolis, Maryland on January 28, 2012. But by the grace of God — and four wonderful people aboard a boat named Audacious — I would not be alive today to share my story. While wiser, I am also humbled and embarrassed by the experience. I share my story to (1) hold myself up as a cautionary tale, especially for experienced sea kayakers who might be complacent (as I was), and (2) to recognize the people who saved my life.

I'm a 48-year-old man who's been paddling for more than 15 years. I've also been a sailor since I was a kid, having grown up with a father who was a career Coast Guard officer. I'm comfortable on and in the water. I paddle almost every week, year-round, and often solo. I've taken numer-

ous paddling classes and have paddled in all kinds of conditions in lots of places. I've done multi-day kayaking trips, ocean paddling, flat water and moderate whitewater. I have (what I thought was) a pretty decent roll and I know a few different self-rescue techniques (though I hadn't practiced in several years).

My kayak is a Necky Looksha IV HV and is constructed of kevlar and fiberglass. It's a great boat. I've had it for 12 years. I was wearing a dry top, neoprene gloves, and I used a skirt (of course). I had no hood, dry or wet pants, or boots (I know, I know — I will get back to this). I did have a PFD on.

On January 28th, I decided to take advantage of the sunny day and the warm-for-winter temps and drive from where I live in Washington, DC, to Annapolis and paddle out to Thomas Point Light. This is a short paddle — about four miles round trip from my put-in. I've done it 4 or 5 times, and I've sailed in the area countless times. I launched around noon. The weather forecast was for mostly sunny skies, highs in the low 50's, and winds out of the south at 10-15 knots (though building throughout the afternoon). A small craft advisory had been issued for 6pm and into the night. I expected that, even with some goofing off and photo taking, I still wouldn't be on the water longer than two-and-a-half hours (i.e., back by 2:30pm).

It was a lovely day, but breezy as expected. I would be paddling southeast so the winds were off my starboard bow. I had a nice paddle to the lighthouse and dealt with a bit of chop just fine. I took some photos (see on Flickr: <http://bit.ly/zAHCt9>). The winds were definitely building and the growing waves began to make me uncomfortable with having my nice Nikon camera out. I didn't want to get it wet so, with it hanging around my neck and waves splashing the boat, I paddled to the lee side of the lighthouse and then under it to hold onto a dock piling while putting the lens cover on, getting it back in its dry bag and strapping it to the deck. I drank some water, took a phone call(!) and then took off for the paddle back. Everything was fine.

By this point the winds had built to probably 15-20 knots, gusting higher. The tide was going out (against me) and the winds were off my port stern quarter. With the wind and tide going different directions — combined with being right over a shoal — the waves were a bit bigger than usual, but still nothing I found alarming. I've handled worse and was actually enjoying surfing down waves while also noticing the faces were steeper than I was used to. Right around the shoal near the lighthouse the sea was in a bit of a confused state. The wave direction wasn't totally consistent. While on the crest of a wave focusing on balance I reached back on the port side to brace with the paddle when suddenly water wasn't where I expected it to be. The paddle was still in the air where I expected resistance and I capsized to port.

I immediately attempted to roll back up as waves were tossing around the boat and me. I was not successful and then attempted two more rolls. I really wasn't even getting close. I decided to exit the boat to attempt self-rescue using the Ladder technique (YouTube: <http://bit.ly/wMW43Q>). I got to the rear of the kayak and began crawling to the cockpit and got knocked over by another wave. I was realizing I was in serious trouble because the cold water was quickly sapping my strength. I tried another self-rescue and was once again knocked over.

I didn't see any boats on the bay. I knew I was in a really bad situation.

I wasn't far from the lighthouse — a couple hundred yards at most. I thought my best chance was to swim for it and to try to climb up on its dock. I began swimming and immediately realized I couldn't swim the kayak upwind in those conditions. I wasn't making any headway at all. So I made a quick decision to let the boat go, even while knowing "stay with the boat" is almost a mantra for problems at sea. I didn't think that was an option, though, because of the cold water and being nearly two miles from shore. So I let the boat go and the wind quickly took it. I'll never forget that moment when the thought hit me "I'm floating alone in the Chesapeake...in January."

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I began swimming on my back toward the lighthouse. I was making minimal headway against the winds and waves. The cold water was causing great pain at this point, and my ability to swim was rapidly leaving me. During those few minutes I knew I was facing death. I was angry at myself for doing this to my father. Just a few months earlier we had lost my mother to cancer — his beloved wife of 51 years. I remember thinking that at least they will know where to look for my body because I had emailed a float plan to him and my sister that morning.

I was swimming as hard as I could with whatever strength I had left and decided to roll over off my back for a second to check to see that I was at least still pointing at the lighthouse. I saw a boat up ahead! It was a classic white Chesapeake Bay fishing boat. I learned later she is the Audacious, seen here at Thomas Point Light (not my photo):



I began yelling. They couldn't hear me and it appeared, at first, that it would just cruise by me when I realized they were actually slowing down to pull up to the lighthouse. I kept yelling but was growing worried that I wouldn't be able to even yell much longer. I was exhausted. Then the boat pulled up to the dock (positioned exactly as in that photo) and someone jumped off the boat with a line to secure it. He was now facing me and I yelled again with every ounce of energy I had. He heard me! He looked up, waved and immediately jumped back in the boat and they headed my way.

I wasn't going to die.

There were two men and two women on board. They had to literally pull me out because I couldn't help them at all. I weigh 200 pounds, was almost dead weight from exhaustion, was obviously soaking wet, and the boat was rocking around because of the conditions. It was really hard for the two guys to pull me up by my PFD, but they were champions and managed to get me on board with some serious effort.

They got me inside the small cabin and began drying me off and warming me up. While I was in there they retrieved my kayak and paddle, which must have been a half-mile downwind at that point. My camera in a dry bag was still secured to the deck, which is why I have the photos.

I estimate that I was in the water for about 15 minutes, which is right about the limit before total exhaustion in 40-degree water (which is what that part of the bay was on that day). I could have expected to lose consciousness after 30 minutes and would have been dead within 60, at best (and these figures are *without* physical exertion).

I'm not being overly dramatic when I say they saved my life. I have no doubt that this is true.

MISTAKES I MADE:

1. I should not have been paddling solo in the winter on open water like the Chesapeake.
2. I should have been wearing pants, shoes, and a hat made for cold-water immersion. I couldn't find my wetsuit pants that morning and went anyway.
3. I should have had a submersible VHF strapped to my PFD, as well as flares and/or a smoke signal device.

Solo winter paddling in open water and not wearing pants/shoes/hat for cold-water immersion were total rookie mistakes. "Dress for the water, not for the air." I know this and ignored it. I nearly paid for my mistake with my life. Other lessons: I must work on my rolls and self-rescue techniques every year, and practice in conditions closer to what could be expected in a real life emergency. I was clearly complacent and over confident in my skills. If there are other paddlers out there, no matter how experienced, who might be taking on needless risk like on did I hope this story will change their behavior.

I want to publicly thank my rescuers Henry and Chris Gonzalez, and Captain Howard and Cathy Lewis. Henry is the lighthouse keeper for the Thomas Point Lighthouse (www.thomaspointlighthouse.org) and vice-president of the U.S. Lighthouse Society (www.uslhs.org). Howard is the owner and skipper of Audacious, and I understand he lends his time helping out with the lighthouse. They were on the water that day — the ONLY boat in the area at that time — to do their annual winter check on the lighthouse. In all the years I've paddled and sailed near Thomas Point Light I have never seen a boat pull up to it. The long odds of them being there at that exact time and within earshot defy description.

I am very, very fortunate to be alive. The term "divine intervention" comes to mind.

Editor's Note: Check out the reactions to and discussion of this article on the Forum at <http://www.cpakayaker.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=25&t=6404>