

BIG GAME

FISHING ANNUAL

THE YEARBOOK OF THE NORTHEAST SPORT FISHERMAN

THE EDGE BIG GAME FISHING ANNUAL

ABANDON SHIP

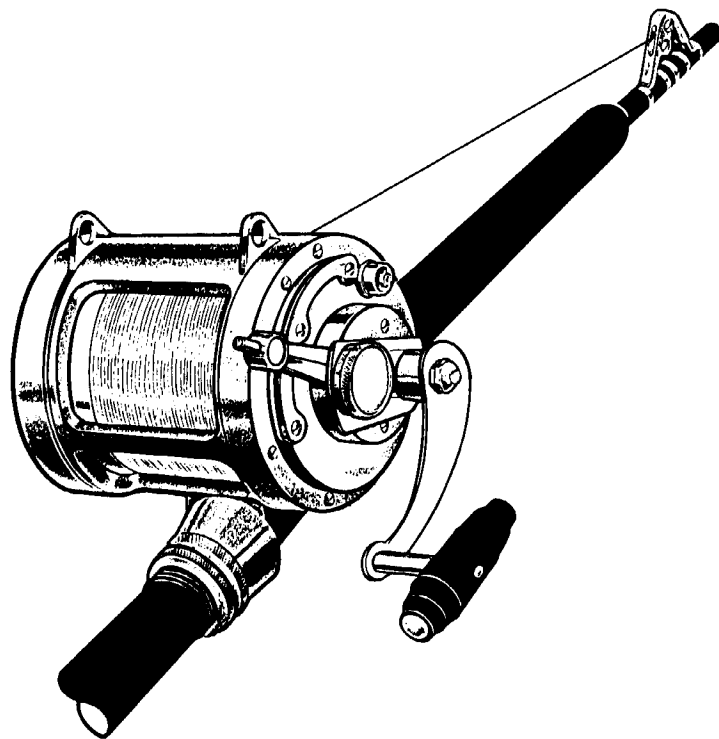


by
CAPT.
RICHARD
SWITLIK

Capt. Richard Switlik Jr. holds a Master's License for power and sail and has logged over 35,000 ocean miles, including two trans-Atlantic crossings. He is vice president of Switlik Parachute Company, designer and manufacturer of safety and survival equipment for 70 years. Safe boating is no small concern for Capt. Switlik; he has lived on the water for 17 years.

What do I do if I need it? How does it work? Does it inflate with carbon dioxide? These are questions life raft manufacturers are frequently asked at boat shows. Whether you already own a life raft or are planning to purchase one, knowing how to operate it is just as important as the decision to buy one. Basically, the question is how do you transform your raft from its tightly packed state inside a fiberglass container or fabric valise into an inflated life raft?

First, it's important to understand the five major components of a life raft "system."



1. CONTAINER

The fabric valise, or preferably a rigid plastic or fiberglass box, holds the life raft in its compact, uninflated state and protects it.

2. MOUNTING CRADLE

Made of stainless steel, anodized aluminum or plastic, cradles use metal tubing, stainless steel cable or nylon webbing to secure the raft container to the vessel. A hydrostatic release may be included as an option.

3. LIFE RAFT

Life rafts come in all shapes, sizes and designs, but they share one basic feature: They are inflated into their designed shape by compressed gas.

4. INFLATION SYSTEM

The carbon dioxide used to inflate the raft is contained in a steel or aluminum cylinder. The gas flows from the cylinder through a hose or manifold into the raft when the valve that seals the cylinder is opened.

5. STATIC LINE

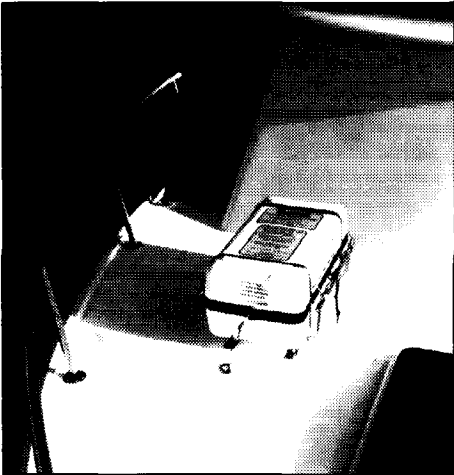
Also called the mooring line, painter or tether, it serves two purposes: It

secures the raft to the vessel during launching, and it actuates or opens the inflation cylinder valve, releasing the carbon dioxide into the raft.

Successfully launching your life raft begins the day you install it. A surprising number of rafts launch themselves when screws used to attach the cradle to the vessel's deck pull out; hardware such as a turnbuckle comes undone; or nylon tie-down straps, rotted by prolonged exposure to sun light, fail. Life rafts often weigh close to 100 pounds and through-bolts with backing plates must be used when mounting the raft cradle. Be sure turnbuckles are safety wired and that a sufficient number of threads on their tongs have been screwed into the turnbuckle centerpiece. Avoid using nylon straps to secure your raft unless you're prepared to replace them every year.

Once you've through-bolted the cradle to the deck and properly secured the raft container to the cradle, don't forget an often overlooked but very important step. Using the end of the static line protruding from the raft container, attach the life raft to the cradle

or a pad eye through-bolted to the deck. If your cradle has a hydrostatic release, be sure there is a "weak link" attached to the end of the static line. Use a snap shackle to attach the weak link to the cradle or pad eye. The snap shackle makes it easier to cast off the raft once it's inflated.



Now that you've installed your raft, how do you launch it when needed? Unfortunately, there is no set way to launch your raft that is appropriate for all circumstances. Remember the legal saying, "Circumstances alter cases." The amount of time you have is the main thing to consider. Fire, the raft's location, number and condition of crew, and wind and sea conditions all may alter your actions.

However, you should memorize and follow these basic steps for virtually all situations:

1. RELEASE RAFT

Whatever the release mechanism, snap shackle or pelican hook for example, its operation should be easy, obvious and fast.

2. THROW RAFT OVERBOARD

When you throw the raft overboard, the static line, usually about 25 feet long, will begin paying out of the container. If your raft container has stainless steel bands holding its two halves together, don't worry about them, they're designed to stay in place until the raft begins to inflate.

3. HAUL IN LINE

Pull the remaining static line from the container until you feel some resistance, and no more line comes out of the container.

4. PULL LINE HARD

It takes 20 to 25 pounds of force to actuate the inflation valve; anything less and you'll simply pull the raft container through the water. As the raft begins to inflate in the container, the stainless steel bands will break, and the container halves will fall away and sink. Depending on the raft type, it will be completely inflated and ready for boarding between 10 seconds and over a minute.

5. BOARD RAFT

If at all possible, pull the raft to the cockpit area for boarding if it's been launched from the bow. (Note: Where to mount a life raft on a sportfishing boat is another topic. See THE EDGE CANYON FISHING REPORT, V. 4, I. 14.) Since the bow seems to be the most popular location, let's take a quick look at its advantages and disadvantages. In the event of fire or sinking, the bow is usually the last place to burn or go under. This advantage is outweighed by the foredeck's relative inaccessibility on a sportfishing boat in offshore conditions. It's very difficult to get the entire crew up forward and then down six feet (remember your bow's high freeboard) into the raft. And as a sportfishing boat sinks by the stern, just getting to a life raft mounted on the bow becomes, quite literally, an uphill battle. Dragging the inflated raft back to the cockpit area is almost as difficult. The preferred locations are the cockpit or flying bridge. If at all possible, avoid jumping into the water to swim to the raft.

6. CAST OFF

Either untie or unshackle the static line from the boat or cut the line when everyone is in the raft. On most rafts, a safety knife is mounted near the attachment point of the static line.

In the event of high winds and seas, try not to launch your raft on the windward side. It could be pinned against the boat, greatly increasing the potential for puncturing the raft. On the other hand, if a fire is burning out of control, don't launch the raft on the leeward side. That's where the flames and thick, acrid smoke will be. If it's windy and there's a fire, launching and boarding the raft over the transom might be preferable. But be careful of the trim tabs, which might puncture the raft in rough conditions.

If you are unable to get to your bow-mounted raft, and it is equipped with a hydrostatic release, the release will free your raft as the vessel sinks. But in the event of fire, your boat, and the raft along with it, may burn to the water line before the boat sinks, without giving the hydrostatic release a chance to work. If your boat is holed and sinks so rapidly that you can't get to the raft, this is what happens while you're treading water: Five to 15 feet below the surface, water pressure causes the hydrostatic release to open, allowing the raft container to float to the surface with the static line paying out as it goes. When all the line is out and it goes taut, the buoyancy of the raft, in its container, is sufficient to actuate the inflation valve. Once inflated, the buoyancy of the raft causes the weak link to part, freeing the raft from the boat.

Launching a life raft in a soft valise is easy. Carry the raft in its valise to the location where you'll be boarding the raft. The raft static line location is labeled, and you'll find either a rip-cord handle or snap-hook on the end of the line. Before throwing the valise into the water, secure the static line to a cleat or strong point on your boat. Then throw the valise in the water, pull the line out until resistance is felt and give a hard pull.

As captain, purchasing a life raft, installing it correctly, and having it inspected and serviced once a year is not enough. You have to be mentally prepared and know how to launch and board your raft in a wide variety of sea conditions. Boats can sink or burn with frightening speed; you may have less than a minute to get everyone into the raft—and you're only going to get one chance to do it right ■