

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

You should memorize and follow these basic steps, however, 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. If your raft is packed in a soft valise, this paragraph should be, **RETRIEVE RAFT** from its dry cockpit locker or somewhere down below, possibly already under water.

2. THROW RAFT OVERBOARD

When you throw the raft container overboard, the inflation/mooring line, usually about 25 feet long, will begin paying out of the container. If your raft container has stainless steel or plastic bands holding its two halves together, don't worry about them, they're designed to stay in place until the raft begins to inflate. If you've installed the raft's hard container and the Life Raft inside it to the cradle correctly, you don't have to remember to secure the life raft to your boat before throwing the container in the water,.... you did that when you first installed the raft.

With a Life Raft in a soft valise, the mooring line will probably have either a rip-cord handle or snap shackle at its end, and an additional step is introduced. Pull out five feet or so of slack line from the raft's valise and secure it to a strong point on the vessel, before you throw the raft overboard.

3. HAUL IN LINE

Pull the remaining 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 or more to actuate the inflation valve; anything less and you'll simply pull the raft container through the water with the raft still snug inside and you getting more panicked and cursing the manufacturer. Once the raft begins to inflate in the container, the stainless steel bands will break, and the container halves will fall away and sink. In a soft valise, the container will open automatically. Depending on the raft type, it will be completely inflated and ready for boarding in 10 seconds, to well over a minute.

5. BOARD RAFT

If you've launched your Life Raft from the bow or stern and time permits, pull the raft amidships and secure it close to the hull for boarding. Even if launched amidships, immediately pull it close to the hull and re-secure it. In heavy weather, an inflated Life Raft can drift to the end of its mooring line and be difficult or impossible to pull close enough to board directly. Avoid jumping into the water to swim to the raft. It can be exceptionally difficult or impossible to climb out of the water and up into a Life Raft using only a "boarding ladder." Try to climb directly down and into the raft. If you're sure no one is directly under the canopy, most Life Rafts are tough enough to have survivors jump directly onto them. Once in the raft, you'll also be substantially drier than having jumped into the water first. This is especially true in colder conditions

6. CAST OFF

Either untie or unshackle the mooring line from the boat or cut the line when everyone is in the raft. On most rafts, a safety knife is mounted on the raft near the attachment point of the mooring 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 boomkin, stern pulpit, ladder, self-steering vane, or prop, and at the bow, the anchor; any of which might puncture the raft as your boat pitches 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 container as the vessel sinks. Unfortunately, the raft container could be inadvertently launched should the hydrostatic release be opened by the water pressure of a large sea's breaking fully upon it or a capsize and the complete rollover of your boat....no easy answers. 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.

In the best of a bad situation, 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 mooring line paying out as it goes. When all the line has pulled out of the container and it goes taut, the buoyancy of the un-inflated 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. Hopefully this occurs close enough for all the crew to be able to swim to the raft.

Remember "Circumstances alter cases." These are only guidelines, not iron-clad rules. Try and anticipate the many different ways things can go wrong and how you and your boat's strengths and weaknesses can affect survival. You may only have 30 seconds to launch your Life Raft and get your crew into it, so know how to do it. You may seem to have more time, so plan ahead on how you'll use it. What seems to be, often changes rapidly, and with no warning, so be prepared to drop your plan and go into your 30-second drill.

Talk about it with your crew and formulate your plans ahead of time for each and every circumstance.

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

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