
Dewatering And Self-Rescue In A Skin On Frame Boat

Or, up a creek without a pump
By Peter Strand

One of the questions that has haunted me since I swamped my first skin boat 40 years ago is “How am I going to get the water out of this thing and get back in?” The boat that I paddle today holds about 600 pounds of water when fully flooded. This brings on a quantum increase in the degree of difficulty that conventional, assisted or solo, rescues require. At worst a rescue that involves bringing any part of my boat over another boat and dewatering it is probably impossible. If you manage to do so, something or someone is going to break. At best several gallons of water will rush from end to end and never drain out.

I have demonstrated the inadequacy of re-entry and roll in skin boats at rescue clinics. A re-entry into a small cockpit skin boat must be done inverted. Wriggling into the cockpit, fighting the buoyancy of flotation gear while holding onto the paddle all the while holding your breath makes for a little to interesting adventure. As soon as the cockpit rim is dipped partially under water the boat rapidly begins to fill up. Until now, my only solutions were to swim the boat to shore and dewatered it there, or dewater it with 2 people pumping.

Before we get to far, let me say that the only way that I have ever fully flooded a SOF boat is to do it deliberately. A typical Greenland size cockpit admits very little water in a capsize. Try rolling with your skirt removed from the rim of a Greenland or Ocean size cockpit sometime. Even Derek Hutchinson was surprised at how little water comes into the boat during a layback roll. Derek commented that he would seal the cockpit with his belly and not admit any water if he were doing it. No BCU stars for me.

To dewater a flooded boat, I retrieve my inflatable paddle float and secure it

under the deck lines (not elastic bungee cords) in front of the Masik and fully inflate it. I position myself at the backrest and roll the boat to 90 degrees of heel. Water will start flowing out very rapidly. Keep rolling the boat over until it is fully inverted, supporting it with your buoyancy and the paddle float. Water will continue to flow out as long as you keep an even keel. Be sure to check that water is flowing from both ends of the boat and, out of the cockpit. When the boat is as empty as you can get it, flip it back upright.

BOAT-FLOODED-INFLATE FLOAT



ROTATING BOAT DEWATERING



CONTINUING ROTATION



DEWATERED



To prepare for re-entry, take your paddles and slide one of them, pointing away from you, under the aft deck rigging and cinch it down, the other paddle is then cinched under the fore deck rigging, pointing out on the same side that you are on. The paddles now act as outriggers and give incredible stability, especially with low flat decks.

SECURING PADDLES



SECURE SECOND PADDLE



Now do a Sea Lion re-entry, pulling yourself over the cockpit, swing your legs to each side of the hull, sit on the aft deck, get your skirt under control, slide your legs into the cockpit and re-enter. I leave the paddle float under the deck lines. With practice you can do all this with only one paddle. Leave the paddles as outriggers while you gather yourself up and fasten your skirt.

OVER COCKPIT



SLIDING IN



READY TO PADDLE



When you are sitting on the aft deck preparing for re-entry your center of gravity is about 15 inches aft of where it is in the paddling position. Any water in the boat will run aft and move the overall center of gravity even further aft. If you have several gallons flowing around,

expect three things to happen. First: it will be very difficult to pump out water that has flowed to the stern. Second: you will be a passenger on Cleopatra's Needle as the stern sinks and the bow rises to vertical. Third: the boat will be very unstable. Get out as much water as you can before reentering.

This dewatering procedure depends on the buoyancy of the paddler to support the aft of the boat. If you are not wearing additional flotation, such as a PFD or Tulik, the process will take longer and may not be possible at all.

I have totally flooded my boat, and then in two minutes, dewatered, and re-entered. Now, I know that some people can do five rescues in two minutes with partitioned boats. These rescues are with skilled participants and "ready, set, go" classroom conditions. What happens when the hatch comes off, or a bulkhead fails, or the boat only has one bulkhead, or no assistance is available, or there is inadequate strength or skill to do a Tee rescue and a shakeout? Then, to quote Sherlock Holmes, "The game's afoot."

“Skin on Frame boats possess some wonderful traits and some difficult problems.”

The last time that I had to wet exit, I tried to pump the boat out but gave up and opted to swim the boat 100 yards to shore, dewater, portage over the railroad embankment, paddle ¼ mile across the cove, load up and go home. It was late May, I was wearing a lightweight wet suit and a PFD, the air was 65 degrees, the ocean was 50 degrees. The water was 5 feet deep and there was a 2-foot swell. My immersion time was 15 minutes. I had become so fatigued; that back at the put in I capsized again getting out of my boat. I shivered for 4 hours after I arrived home. Time is of the essence; hypothermia kills. Bobbing around in cold water will soon sap reason from your mind and strength and coordination from your muscles. Two minutes is better than fifteen in the water,

far better than the rest of your life. If I had known how to dewater and re-enter this way I probably would have decided to catch up with the group and enjoy the outing that evening.

The question that I am sure you are asking is: In how rough of conditions can this be done? I cannot answer that for you. As with any self-rescue, only practice will answer that question and the answer will be different for everyone.

A Skin on Frame boat possesses some wonderful traits and some difficult problems. Dewatering is one of those problems. Try this technique on your own boat regardless of construction, whether it be custom made or store bought. Take what works for you and make it part of your arsenal. Improve upon it as you wish and hope that you never have to use it. Spread the word. Practice this and other self-rescues, especially the three second ones... rolling.

