

# GRAB A SURVIVAL BAG



**C**aptain Michael Howorth and his Chief Stewardess wife, Frances, wanted to assemble a Grab Bag before taking a 50 metre yacht transatlantic. They looked for a book to teach them what to do but after finding none on the market they researched the subject and then wrote their own.

Survival in a life raft is a topic that usually recalls stories of starvation, shark attacks and dehydration under a relentless sun for days without end, until hope of rescue is all but extinguished. Of course those are only the stories with rescue as a happy ending.



What to pack in a grab bag is never likely to become a popular subject for discussion in a crew bar during happy hour, but it is a subject for consideration if your yacht frequently makes passages out of sight of land or further field. The lists for a large yacht expecting to make an ocean voyage will be different from that packed by yachts that undertake short trips or day passages. Always keep a list of the grab bag contents in the top of the bag, noting any expiry dates, so everything can be checked just prior to any passage. Give this job to fellow crewmembers; it gives them a chance to familiarise themselves with the bag.

Start off by making a list of the items you want to store in your grab bag. It will start as a very long list, containing far too many items. It was discovered that the

only thing to do was to start from the other end, so we selected the bag first, then fitted what we could inside.

## PROPER PREPARATION AND TRAINING

The danger is greater the further you go off shore but a shipwreck, however, can happen anywhere, at any time, through no one's fault. If you do have to take to your life raft, what can you do to improve your chances of being rescued? The Grab Bag Book needs to be read at your passage-planning stage to help you decide what to select for your own emergency bag — then store the book in the bag itself so that you will have it with you in the life raft. This book should be read by every crewmember, re-read regularly and used for training exercises.

Research has shown that at the moment when disaster strikes 75 per cent of people will be stunned and bewildered. Those who have been trained to expect and to cope with such situations will fall back on well learned patterns of behaviour. A trained crew will work together to leave the yacht safely, carrying with them the maximum equipment to aid their survival. It is vital that the Captain demonstrates strong leadership and



appropriate action both before and after abandonment. With modern communications, help may well be on its way to your raft, but you still have to survive until it arrives.

What is already packed inside your life raft and what you additionally take with you, including your grab bag, are your keys to survival. Remember: no one is a survivor until they have been rescued or have reached safety by their own efforts. Your grab bag should contain everything essential to your survival in a life raft.

### LIFE RAFT EMERGENCY PACKS

Horror stories about the survival gear found in life rafts abound. It's not just a question of the lack of equipment or the missing items, but also the quality of the supplies. Even in the best of life rafts the supplies included are limited. Most rafts for the leisure market are sold with a choice of packs, with the most basic and cheapest being a selection of simple items to maintain the raft — and not necessarily of high quality. Pray you never have to survive for long with just a basic pack.

A life raft is designed as a last resort, to keep the crew of a yacht alive after their vessel has sunk, until help arrives. A life raft should never be used unless it is certain that the boat herself cannot be saved. It is not a better refuge than a boat, nor can it be considered safer in rough seas than the much larger parent vessel. Remember the old adage: Never step down into a life raft.

Buying any life raft is all about choices. Sea conditions can be as rough close to shore as in the middle of the ocean. The main difference when going further a field is not the quality or style of your life raft but the need to carry more survival gear.

### WHAT TO PACK IN YOUR GRAB BAG

The book is divided into a series of categories:

- Search and Rescue
- Maintenance and Protection
- Medical
- Food and Drink
- Survival and Morale
- Personal
- Miscellaneous
- Last Minute Grabs

Except for Last Minute Grabs, the categories are in order of priority but the items listed within the pages are purely in alphabetical order. Items you would find in most comprehensive standard emergency life raft packs, such as SOLAS 'A' are highlighted.

The book has been written with professional crew in mind, it serves to help Chief Stews and Captains put together a well thought out Grab Bag and will undoubtedly be useful at on board training sessions as a thought provoking teaching aid.

*The Grab Bag Book by Frances & Cpt. Michael Howorth is published by Adlard Coles and is available from all good nautical bookshops.*



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