Life Rafts — study guide

The international rules governing safety of life at sea were spurred on by the 1912 Titanic disaster. This guide covers life rafts and evacuation systems, stowage, drills, and man-overboard recovery.[1]

Marine Evacuation Systems (MES)

A Marine Evacuation System can save up to 700 people in 30 minutes, requires little time and effort to assemble, can be deployed in 90 seconds by only two crew members, and takes up very little deck space — it is positioned on the front of the embarkation deck and on the sides of the ship.

Life raft types

A **coastal** raft has reduced capability compared with an **offshore** raft because the coastal concept assumes occupants will spend only a short period aboard, as help is minutes away. An offshore raft is equipped with advanced survival gear in the equipment pack, a large self-erecting canopy, a single large buoyancy tube or two stacked tubes, and an insulated floor to keep occupants warm.

Stowage and launching

Life rafts should be stowed forward of the ship and at embarkation stations on both port and starboard sides. Be familiar with the type of raft on board and its launching instructions, and take full advantage of the training. The **Stenhouse slip hook** matters here: if it were attached to the deck, the raft would never be able to deploy on its own.

Locating survivors

The **EPIRB** signal is detected by satellites operated by an international rescue service, and the **SART** lets rescuers find a distressed raft or vessel by creating a series of dots on the rescuing ship's radar display.

Davits and checks

During visual checks of davits, moving parts should move freely and be well lubricated, wires, falls, blocks and securing arrangements should be well greased at all times, and equipment should be free from corrosion.

Man overboard

If a person is reported missing and has not been seen for hours, establish when they were last seen and whether they went overboard, so that emergency action and recovery can be attempted. The code flag **OSCAR** means man overboard. The three types of turn are the Williamson Turn, the Anderson (Single) Turn and the Sharnow Turn. It is harder to spot someone in the water in inclement weather or reduced

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visibility.

Dangers in the water and recovery

Those who fall in face marine wildlife (sharks, jellyfish), soaked clothes that become heavy and make staying afloat harder, cold-water effects such as hypothermia, and debris or rocks. People fall overboard during recreational activity, during operational work (fishing, working over the side, pilot transfers), when PPE is misused or not used, and vulnerable persons may move too close to the edge. If no lifeboat is available, swimming to shore is **not** the best chance of survival. The rescue boat should approach the casualty with extra care in heavy weather, ensuring the boat is not swept onto the casualty by wind or waves, and at a safe speed. Once on board, the casualty must get the necessary medical attention and be transported to the nearest port or rendezvous point; moving a casualty is only done if a threat is imminent, and the decision is made by the medical officer or doctor.

Training

Personal Survival Techniques (PST) training is mandatory for all personnel prior to employment on a ship.[2] Regardless of rank or position, all crew must complete basic training in First Aid, Firefighting, Personal Survival Techniques and Proficiency in Survival Craft and Rescue Boats (PSCRB).

Key facts to remember

- International life-saving rules trace back to the 1912 Titanic disaster.
- MES: up to 700 people in 30 min; deploys in 90 seconds with two crew; minimal deck space.
- Offshore raft: advanced gear, self-erecting canopy, insulated floor; coastal = short-term use only.
- Rafts stowed forward and at embarkation stations, both sides. Stenhouse slip hook must release to deploy.
- EPIRB → satellites; SART → dots on a rescuer's radar. Flag OSCAR = man overboard.
- Man-overboard turns: Williamson, Anderson (single), Sharnow.
- STCW basic training: First Aid, Firefighting, PST, PSCRB; PST is mandatory before employment.

Sources

1. SOLAS Chapter III and the International Life-Saving Appliance (LSA) Code — life rafts, evacuation systems and launching arrangements.

2. STCW Convention and Code — basic safety training and Personal Survival Techniques (PST), Section A-VI/1.