Recovery Person From the Water — study guide

A person in the water has minutes, not hours. Recovering them safely depends on spotting them fast, approaching with care and knowing what comes next. This guide covers the search, the approach and the aftercare.[1]

Spotting and reporting

The code flag **OSCAR** means man overboard. It is harder to spot someone in the water in reduced visibility and inclement weather. If a person is reported missing and has not been seen for many hours or longer, it is imperative to establish when they were last seen and to confirm whether they may have fallen overboard, so that emergency action and recovery can be attempted.

Why people fall overboard

People fall overboard during recreational activities such as boating, sailing and water sports; during operational activities such as fishing, working over the side and transfers; if PPE has been misused or not used at all; and vulnerable persons, or people suffering from a mental health disorder, may involuntarily or voluntarily move too close to the edge.

Dangers in the water

Those who have fallen in face debris or rocks that can cause harm, soaked clothes that become heavy and make staying afloat harder, the effects of cold water such as hypothermia, and marine wildlife such as sharks and jellyfish.

Approaching for recovery

The rescue boat should approach a casualty taking extra care in heavy weather, at a **safe speed**, and ensuring the boat is not swept onto the casualty by the wind or waves.

After recovery

Once on board, it is imperative that the **casualty** receives the necessary medical attention available and is transported to the nearest **port** or rendezvous point. There is always a risk in moving a casualty, especially in inclement weather, so it should only be done if necessary; the decision is made by the on-board **medical officer or doctor**. Training in Personal Survival Techniques (PST) is mandatory for all personnel prior to employment on a ship, as per STCW.

Key facts to remember

- Flag OSCAR = man overboard. Harder to spot in reduced visibility and bad weather.
- Missing person: establish when last seen and whether overboard.

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- Causes of falling overboard: recreation, operational work, PPE misuse, vulnerable persons.
- Water dangers: debris/rocks, heavy soaked clothes, cold/hypothermia, marine wildlife.
- Rescue boat: extra care in heavy weather, safe speed, don't let wind/waves sweep it onto the casualty.
- After recovery: casualty → medical attention → nearest port/rendezvous; move only if necessary; decision by the on-board medical officer/doctor.
- PST is mandatory before employment (STCW).

Sources

1. SOLAS Chapter III and the LSA Code — life-saving appliances and recovery of persons from the water.
2. STCW Convention and Code — Personal Survival Techniques (Section A-VI/1) and rescue boat training.