2013 Incident Report: 7-Mile Bridge

All my life, I've always heard of how unforgiving the sea can be. I don't think anyone who has traveled on a large body of water during bad weather can disagree with that. I'm taking the time to write this because I think we need to take a good look at what happened on the last stretch of the 7-Mile Bridge crossing so that we can learn from it and become a stronger paddling team. Please keep in mind that I'm writing this from my perspective, if I leave out any pertinent details, let me know and we will include them in the discussions that I'm sure will follow. This might come across as too official or too serious, but we must realize that the situation could have gone far worse than it did.

In addition to discussing the specific events, we need to understand all the pieces of the puzzle that came together to put us in a rather undesirable situation. I know this sounds a bit corny, but when we're on the water, safety has to be our highest priority. That doesn't mean we can't have a great time, but we must have a certain level of preparation so we can deal with problems quickly and effectively. Good training is the best way to prepare for potential problems.

I'm also attaching a simple chart that I'll be referring to. I traced/drew it by hand so we could have an uncluttered reference of our location and track. The track on the chart is accurate and it shows how chaotic a situation can get in a short amount of time. What immediately stood out to me when I first looked at the GPS track was how far we drifted during the capsizes/rescues. We drifted about 1/2 mile in a short while. That doesn't sound like much, but getting pushed 1/2 mile downwind and downstream, in a kayak, in the middle of a storm, really sucks. You'll probably have to rotate the chart clockwise by 90°; I'm low tech and I couldn't figure out how to save it that way.

Capsizes, T-Rescues, and Towing

While on our break at the Molasses Keys we watched a storm developing several miles north of the 7-Mile Bridge. We watched it for a while and using the radar apps on our phones, determined that it wasn't getting any closer. Since that break is one of our favorites, we stayed for a while, had some drinks, and smoked some cigars. Finally, under the influence of persistent lightning/thunder, OB convinced us to get going. As we paddled away from the Molasses Keys, the storm started expanding in our direction and it became apparent that we would be in the middle of it within a few short minutes.

I had been paddling with the guys at the front of the group trying to keep us on a good track to Bahia Honda. When the storm started getting close, I stopped to wait for the rest of the team and used the time to pull out my tow line and put the strap around my body. I was thinking that we needed to get to shore as quickly as possible and that it might be a good idea to tow the slowest paddler. While waiting for the rest of the team to pass me, the wind got stronger and the waves increased in size. As Lou passed to my left, I screamed out a couple of paddling tips, told him to paddle as fast as he could, and to follow the other kayaks.

A few seconds after Lou passed me, the capsizing began. Stephen capsized first at point #1 on the chart. Eric immediately went to his assistance and started a t-rescue, but as he soon found out, stormy conditions make kayak rescues much more interesting. Eric capsized while trying to help Stephen, that's why points #1 and #2 are on the same place on the chart. I finished turning my kayak and paddled over to Stephen and Eric. I decided to get Stephen back in his boat first and told Eric that I would get him next. Once Stephen was back in his boat, it took us a couple of minutes to get his skirt back on and we drifted to point #3 on the chart. I advised Stephen to stay loose and keep paddling to avoid another capsize. As soon as Stephen moved away, I turned my attention to Eric who was directly to my right and upwind. I asked Eric to swim his kayak over to me as I tried to move my kayak sideways toward his bow. If anything, I was able to hold my position against the wind/waves and Eric did a great job of getting his bow close enough for me to grab. We performed a t-rescue while drifting to point #4. Eric capsized a second time right after the first t-rescue. I was still close by, so we immediately went into another rescue and drifted to point #5 by the time he was ready to resume paddling. I can't remember if it was after the first or the second t-rescue on Eric, but right after letting go of his boat, a wave lifted his bow and pushed it onto my rear deck. Eric had to stabilize and paddle while I pushed his boat off of mine. When Eric was ready and paddling away, Stephen capsized a second time and Anthony had also capsized at point #8. Jeff was trying to get Anthony back in his boat, but didn't remember how to stabilize the kayak. I asked Eric to go help Jeff and told him that I would go assist Stephen. I paddled over to Stephen who was close by at point #5 and began another t-rescue. That one went a little faster and after Stephen was back in his boat, he and I turned towards Ohio Key. By this time, Jeff and Eric had gotten Anthony back in his kayak and were also paddling towards Ohio Key. We paddled for about 2 minutes and Stephen capsized a third time at point #6. I turned around and went to his bow for another t-rescue. Turning a kayak, specially one without a rudder, in heavy wind and waves is a bit of a challenge, so I decided to do the t-rescue on my left side. Everything went well, except the waves turned Stephen's kayak parallel to mine and pointing in the same direction. While I'd rather stabilize the kayak in front of the cockpit, stabilizing it from behind the cockpit also works well and Stephen was back in his boat rather quickly. By now we were at point #7 and ready to resume paddling. I told Stephen that I was going to clip my towline to his kayak and help him along. I clipped the carabiner to his perimeter line at the bow and started paddling towards Ohio Key.

On our way towards Ohio Key, Stephen was getting used to the waves, was able to stay upright, and we moved along quickly. As we paddled, I kept scanning the sea to my left. I was hoping that I wouldn't see the hull of a kayak drifting out to sea with the wind and the current. To be honest, I was worried about Lou. If he would have capsized while trying to catch up to the rest of the team, I don't think anyone would have seen him. After paddling with Stephen for a few minutes I saw two kayaks in front of us and they appeared to be coming towards us. After a few more minutes I realized that they were not paddling towards us but still trying to get to Ohio Key. Stephen and I passed Jeff and Eric right before we reached the shoals on the South East side of Ohio Key. I got out of my kayak, detached my tow line from Stephen's boat, and pulled my kayak closer to the island. My mind was quickly put at ease when I found out that everyone else had made it to shore and were taking shelter under the bridge abutment.

Lessons Learned

One of the things I've come to realize in life is that experience is the best teacher. The only problem with that, is that we must be willing to learn from our experiences. That's why I'm writing this. If we just say, "Wow, that storm really sucked," and we don't take the time to discuss and think about the situation, we won't learned anything at all. If we don't learn from our experiences, we'll likely repeat the same mistakes again.

First of all, we trusted the radar apps on our phones when we had a big storm brewing to our North. I should have known better and it angers me that I fell into that trap. From my past adventures in hang gliding, I know that storm cells not only move across an area, but they can also grow/expand in any and all directions, sometimes very quickly. How many times have we seen afternoon thunderstorms in Florida grow and move against a strong breeze? The wind doesn't always push them along in one direction. We have to keep in mind that technology is merely a tool; in the end, you have to use all the tools available to you, including your own judgment, experience, and knowledge to make decisions. As soon as we noticed the storm brewing North of the bridge, we should have left Molasses Key. Yes it's one of our favorite break spots and we like to relax for a while, but simply put, we should have left a lot sooner.

Second, speed is our friend. About half way between Molasses and Bahia Honda, it was obvious that we were about to get pounded. After I stopped to wait for the paddlers at the back of the group, OB and I discussed turning and paddling towards Veteran's Park which is on Little Duck Key right at the Western end of the 7-Mile Bridge. I told OB that we would be padding against the wind, the waves, and the current from the outgoing tide. Then I strongly suggested that we just keep going on our current track. While I hated to disagree with OB, I made a decision and hoped that it was a good one. After plotting our track on a chart, I'm confident it was the right decision; I seriously doubt we would have made much progress against that combination of wind, waves, and current. The best course of action at that point was to get out of the storm's way as soon as possible; minimize the time spent getting pounded. We need to be able to paddle more efficiently (faster) as a team. I'm not saying that we need to be out there paddling at a sprinting pace all the time, a good cruising speed is fine, but when we need to speed up, it would be nice to kick it into high gear.

Third, the way we set up our gear and kayaks makes a difference when things get interesting. Both Eric and Stephen had paddle leashes. I've never been a fan of paddle leashes, but after multiple t-rescues, I have to say that I'm very glad they had them. Usually during a t-rescue, I stow my paddle under my perimeter lines as soon as I grab the bow of the capsized kayak. Then, I can either stow the swimmer's paddle or hold it under my arm while stabilizing their kayak. The paddle leashes on the rescued kayaks eliminated one step and gave me one less thing to worry about.

Camel backs, deck bags, chairs, and other objects on our decks are a real pain during t-rescues. It's hard enough to lift and rotate a kayak full of gear and water and then put it back down without scooping up more sea water, but when you add rough seas, high winds, and items on the deck that are flopping to one side it can be a real headache. We need to do a better job of securing deck bags and camel backs so that they don't slide around side to side.

Perimeter lines are extremely useful on a kayak. If you're in the water it gives you something to hold on to. If you're the rescuer, it gives you a good handle when it comes time to get the kayaks from perpendicular to parallel for stabilizing and re-entry. During one of the t-rescues, Eric's perimeter line popped out of the pad-eye and I almost lost control of his kayak just as he was climbing back on. We need to check our kayaks and make sure everything is rigged securely.

Fourth, when things get hairy, we have to remain calm. I won't elaborate too much on this one right now, but I must say "thank you" to Stephen and Eric for remaining calm and cool under pressure.

Plan of Action

Yes, yes, I'll say it again: We need to train. It doesn't sound like much fun, but it does pay off and it actually makes paddling more enjoyable. The more confident you are of your skills and the more comfortable you are in your kayak, the more you can relax and enjoy paddling. We need to train and we need to put ourselves in challenging (but safe) conditions. Going out and paddling in calm, sheltered waters, doesn't help instill a sense of confidence when things get ugly.

For starters, we need to learn how to brace. Bracing is easy and it could be the skill that determines whether you paddle or swim. Kayak rescues - as if you wouldn't have guessed - need to be one of our top priorities. There are a bunch of different kayak rescues and most of them have several variations that are worth learning. I don't suggest that we all learn every kayak rescue with all the variations possible, but learning a few basic rescues isn't too difficult. The forward stroke is a trickier little sucker. If done correctly, there are a lot of different things going on at the same time. When most people think of the forward stroke they think about what their arms are doing, it's much more than that. The bad news is that there are lots of little things to incorporate into the forward stroke. The good news is that the more of those things you use, the faster and more efficiently you paddle. Remember, speed can certainly help get you out of a hairy situation.

I've never used my instructor's certificate for employment and I'm pretty sure it already expired, but that doesn't mean I can't pass along what I learned. I've been lucky enough to learn from some of the best and most experienced paddlers in the world. I've also had to do a lot of kayak rescues in all types of conditions. I don't know if that's good or bad luck, but I've never had to call the Coast Guard or local Fire Dept. for help. Please allow me to pass on what I've learned from expert paddlers and from my own experience. Let's train.