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AUGUST 2005

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TAMING TEMPESTUOUS Seas

Suggestions from a Seasoned Skipper Can Help You Return Home Safely When the Weather Goes South

By Capt. Andy Mezirow

I WATCHED DARKENING CLOUDS ROLL IN OVER THE PACIFIC OFF Alaska, 25 miles from my home port of Seward. I was just leaving a placid bay to start the long crossing over open ocean. Soon, the charter boat's increased rise and fall signaled a deepening swell. Less subtle were the breaking waves and whitecaps I could make out on the horizon. I throttled back to ease the ride, but even so, the 27-foot Farallon began taking spray on the windshield.

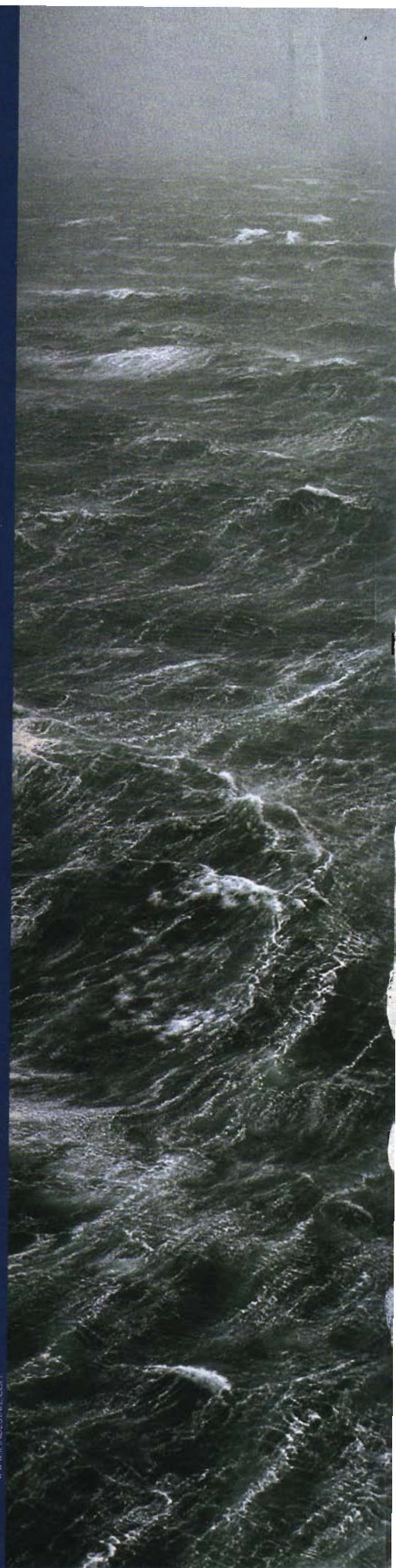
Before long, the waves had grown into fast-moving, dark mountains of water. I slowed to barely 10 knots, carefully climbing the face of each breaker, not quite making it to the top before the wave crest slammed down on my pilothouse. Each wave filled the cockpit, the water barely draining out of the scuppers before the next wall of water hit.

With the waves now too steep to turn back, I was going nowhere fast. I glanced at my gauges, hoping and praying that my engine would hang in there. Slowly, I picked my way through the waves; four hours and 15 miles later, I had made the port's sheltered waters.

This was hardly my first time in this situation and would hardly be my last. I began facing down raging seas two decades ago on a 70-foot swordfish boat that plied the Grand Banks, then while I worked as an officer and eventually a captain on oceanographic research vessels. I piloted these vessels from Tahiti to the Aleutian Islands and the Chukchi Sea, surely one of the world's most inhospitable, unpredictable and usually cob-rough places. Fortunately, seas make me sweat much less often these days, though as a charter-boat captain in Seward, Alaska, I still face rough conditions.

However much any of us might hope to avoid a rough ocean, that contingency is simply part of the reality when we venture offshore in search of game fish. A seaworthy hull, combined with sound judgment and essential seamanship skills, will get you home safely. While developing those skills requires plenty of hands-on experience, there are tricks a (not-so-) old salt can pass on, and that's my goal here.

Any advice comes with this obligatory caveat: It's simply never worth pushing your luck and trying to head out into the open ocean when current conditions or the day's weather forecast don't look favorable. But again, there will be times when, even after exercising the very best judgment, you'll find yourself far from port in rough water.



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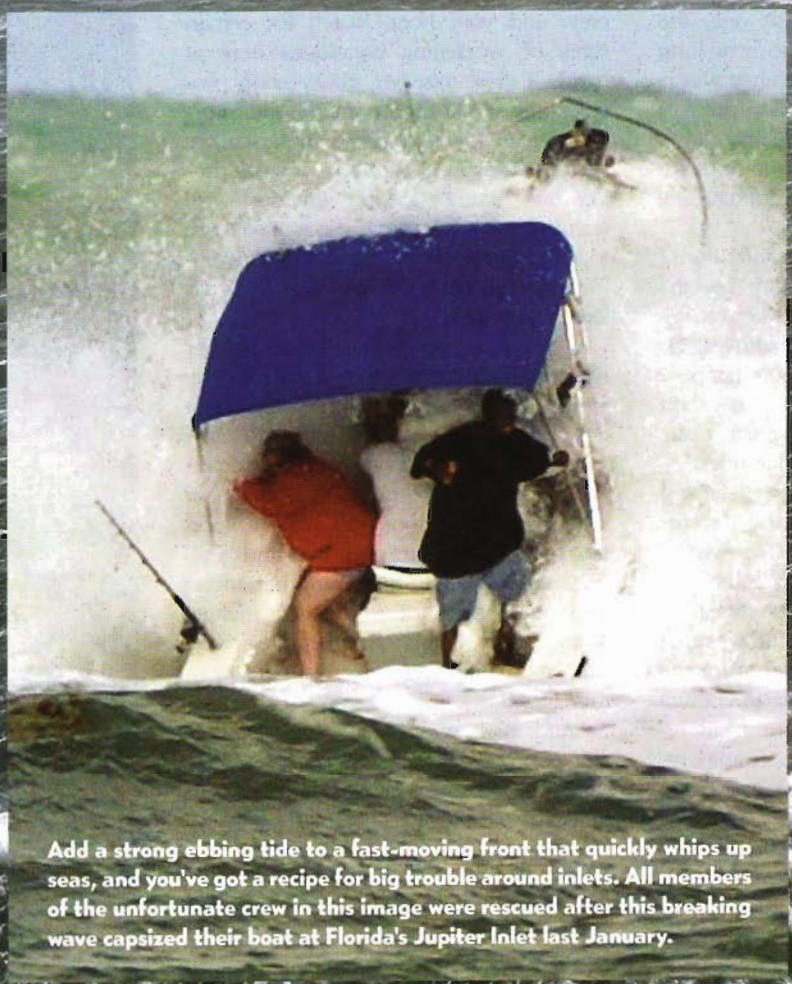


REUTERS

Add a strong ebbing tide to a fast-moving front that quickly whips up seas, and you've got a recipe for big trouble around inlets. All members of the unfortunate crew in this image were rescued after this breaking wave capsized their boat at Florida's Jupiter Inlet last January.

CONSIDER THE SEA

Before considering seamanship, we must consider the sea: Anyone taking a boat offshore needs to have a clear understanding of the ocean before he can skillfully navigate or maneuver his boat.

Factors that help determine how tall waves will grow include not only the strength of the wind, but also how long it has been blowing. The distance waves have had to travel without disruption is another factor, along with the depth underneath you and where you're headed. Tides and currents may dramatically affect your trip home.

Wave height is not the sole indicator of how threatening the seas may be; the wave period — the time between waves — is critical. When waves remain very far apart, 10-footers are gentle rollers that pose no difficulties. But a 5-foot sea with a short wave period of a few seconds can make for a bone-jarring, white-knuckle ride.

Before I leave on any trip offshore, I enter into my logbook tides and currents for the day, along with the NOAA weather forecast. I also download weather observations from three NOAA weather buoys in my area. With this information, I can ascertain the likely weather for the next 24 hours. I can't emphasize enough the importance of using your local resources to judge real-time sea conditions. The National Weather Service has a system of weather buoys and ship observations (www.ndbc.noaa.gov/data/Forecasts/FZAK51.PAFC.html). Once on this site, note the dial-a-buoy feature, allowing you to access buoy information later when offshore, from your cell or sat phone.

TIME TO GO?

A critical question is, When do you declare it time to throw in the towel and head for the barn? Fishermen seldom want to feel they're leaving a decent bite just because the waters have gotten a little choppy. On the other hand, staying too long in some situations can endanger your crew and your boat. Watch for certain signs of worsening conditions near at hand. A close-together, glassy chop provides one of the most common indicators of substantial wind to come. In Alaska, we see this condition about once a week during our fishing season. Sometimes we encounter a glassy swell, also, but so close together it makes traveling very uncomfortable. This never fails as a sign of significant wind ahead.

The barometric pressure offers another clue that weather is taking a turn for the worse. Even without a barometer, you can listen to local observations on NOAA weather radio, which often states barometric pressures. If the pressure is dropping significantly near your port, that's a good indication it's time to pack it in and head for home. A falling or pulsing barometer also offers signs of a weather change, along with winds shifting clockwise (in the Northern Hemisphere) as they increase.

And if low, dark, puffy cumulous clouds or even a dark line of higher altostratus clouds move in as well, it's time to pull in the fishing gear and bail, because it's going to blow. By the time you've picked up all your gear, the wind may have already picked up, and you face low black clouds in your course home. Despite the urge to get moving before conditions worsen, your first obligation is to make sure everything you have taken out for use that day is stored and secured for the ride home. Don't trust heavy rods to rod holders if you can store them on V-berth cushions.

Make sure all aboard understand that the weather is going to get rough and that they need to find a secure seat. Instruct them also to use a buddy system: If the seas are bad enough to make the boat heave and pitch, another angler should keep close tabs on anyone who must move about the cockpit or deck for any reason. Finally, of course, take time to ensure everyone is wearing a personal flotation device.

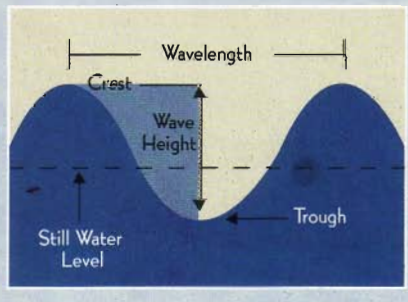
Finally, before you leave the fishing grounds, be sure you've planned your route home, with waypoint(s) punched in. Consult the tide chart if you have to run an inlet: Are you going to arrive when the swell is running hard against an ebb


MARC SAMS

SF **INSIGHT**

IT'S NOT (JUST) THE SIZE OF YOUR WAVES ...

... it's also the distance between them. The most obvious manifestation of the sea's state, waves are also the least understood. Wind generally creates waves, although (as recent, devastating tsunamis remind us) seismic and tidal activity can also. Once the force creating the waves has dissipated, the sea condition left over is swells. Ocean waves are shaped very much like sound and seismic waves. The distance between wave crests is the wavelength, and the time between crests is the wave period. A long wave period means even high waves may seem gentle — and vice-versa. Significant wave height — what the National Weather Service describes in its marine forecasts — is the average height of the tallest third of waves observed.



What constitutes "rough" seas may vary by location. Fishermen routinely fish (even solo) some of the most roiled waters off Europe; however, their boat-handling skills far exceed those of most weekend anglers.

tide? This can make getting through the inlet risky — enough so that you may want to throttle back if it's feasible and you know that a slack tide won't be too far ahead. Of course, you need to let any other boats out with you know that you're heading home.

HINTS FOR HANDLING THE HELM

Once you get underway, you can assess the sort of sea condition you'll have to negotiate. I run with one hand on the throttle controls and one hand on the wheel. This ensures that I can simultaneously control both the boat's speed and its heading. Avoid overcorrecting to keep your heading; that only wastes fuel and tires you at the helm.

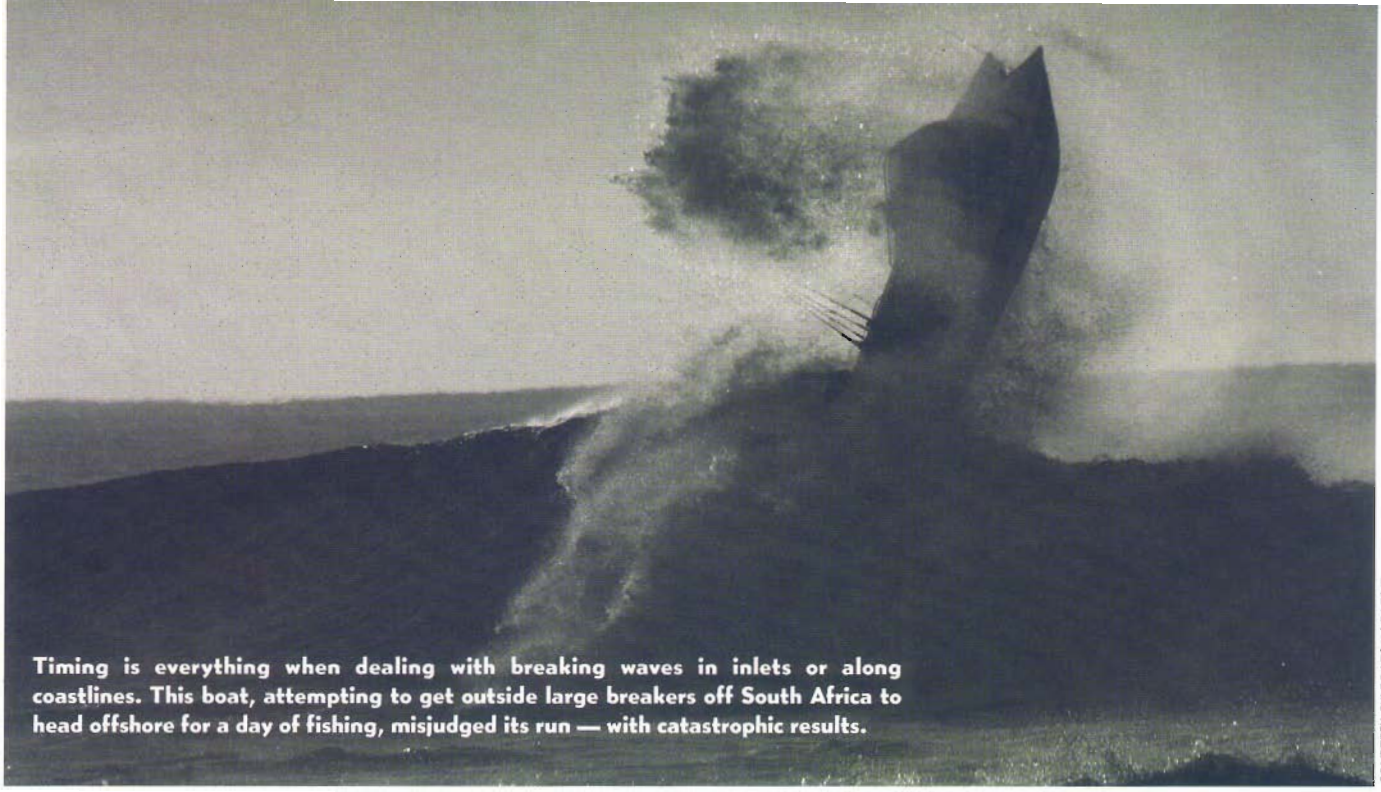
If you're heading in with a following sea, you'll find it difficult to keep your boat at a consistent speed. Often, even the best rough-water boats will wander and roll sickeningly in a big following sea. The most important thing to remember when traveling in this sea condition is to control your speed. If you allow the boat to go too fast, it may jump off one swell to bury the bow into the back of the swell in front of you. If this happens, your boat will slow down when its bow gets buried, raising the stern and forcing your props into turbulent, air-filled water, leaving you temporarily without steerage. Without steerage, a boat can broach, turning sideways in rough seas and leaving it vulnerable to rolling or capsizing.

If you do run the bow of your boat into the next steep swell ahead, you may find yourself losing control because your stern is pushed up high enough that the props aren't getting a good bite. Avoid panic and don't necessarily try to power out right away. Once your boat is at a steep angle stuffed into the swell in front

SF TIP

HEAD HOME WITH A DRY BILGE

Even if threatening weather has you in a rush to start your trip home, take the time to check your bilges. Ensuring that they're completely dry before getting underway is time well spent. The free-surface effect (the force of a liquid sloshing back and forth) of even 20 or 30 gallons in your bilge is enough to make your ride home more difficult. And while you're at it, empty your livewell(s); that will reduce weight abovedecks, also — always helpful in rough weather.



Timing is everything when dealing with breaking waves in inlets or along coastlines. This boat, attempting to get outside large breakers off South Africa to head offshore for a day of fishing, misjudged its run — with catastrophic results.

COURTESY *SKI BOATS* MAGAZINE

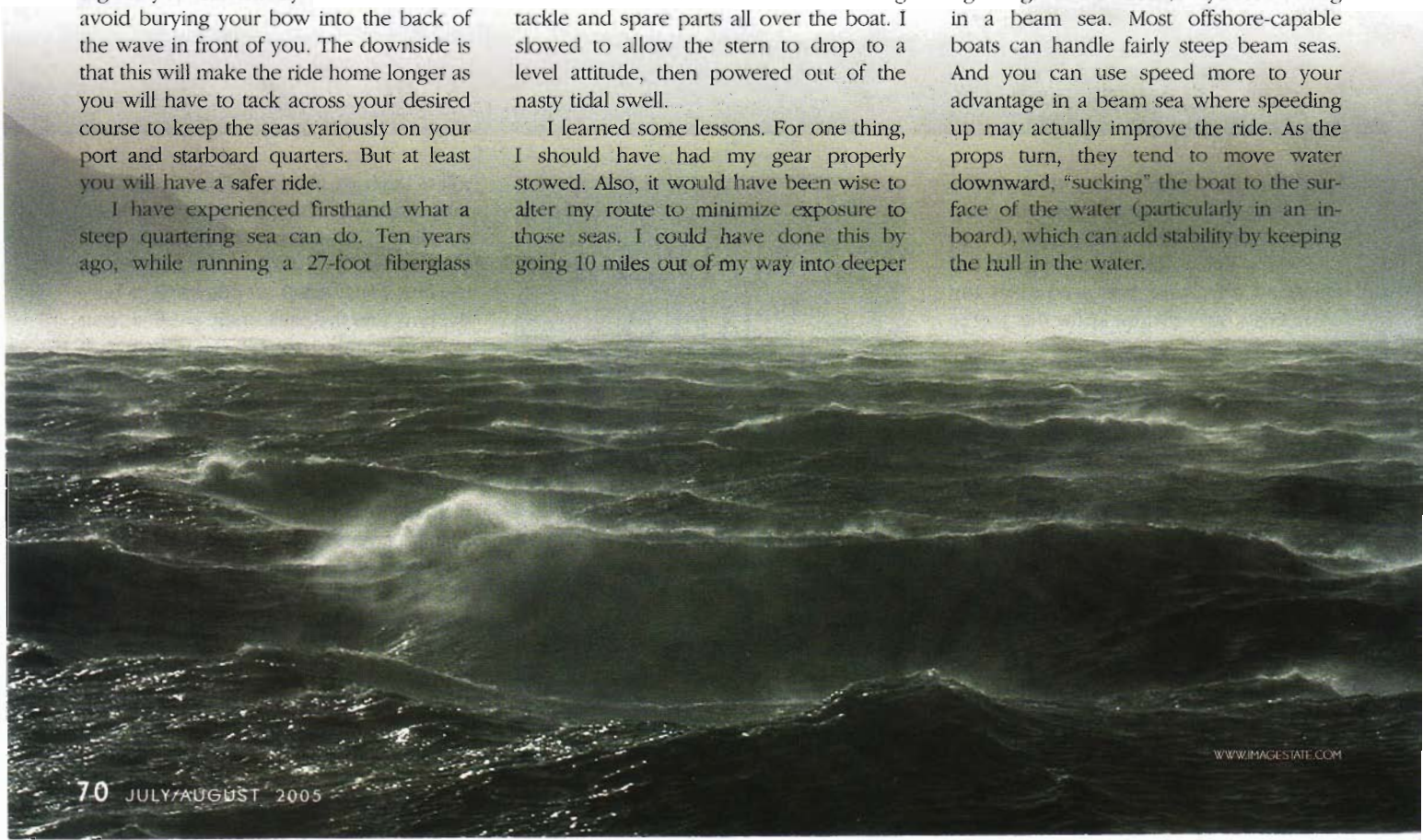
of you, the more power you pour on, the worse your situation will become, with your props mostly cavitating. Slow down and let the boat level out, then throttle up to get out of harm's way.

So in a following sea, you need to concentrate on matching your speed to the speed the waves are moving. Altering your course so that you take the swell on your stern quarter can help. In a quartering sea you can actually surf the swell and avoid burying your bow into the back of the wave in front of you. The downside is that this will make the ride home longer as you will have to tack across your desired course to keep the seas variously on your port and starboard quarters. But at least you will have a safer ride.

I have experienced firsthand what a steep quartering sea can do. Ten years ago, while running a 27-foot fiberglass cuddy charter boat in the Gulf of Alaska, I stayed on the fishing grounds a bit too long. Once underway, I began crossing Montague Strait where a 6- to 8-foot swell ran from the west-southwest against the last half of a strong incoming tide. That meant the steep swell was on my stern quarter. One particularly sharp wave caught the port corner and lifted it straight up, spilling my passengers from one side of the cabin to the other and scattering tackle and spare parts all over the boat. I slowed to allow the stern to drop to a level attitude, then powered out of the nasty tidal swell.

I learned some lessons. For one thing, I should have had my gear properly stowed. Also, it would have been wise to alter my route to minimize exposure to those seas. I could have done this by going 10 miles out of my way into deeper water; these days, I would do so. I might have even waited until the tide stopped flooding, since opposing current and swell going across the strait made the waves much steeper. If I had waited another hour or two on the grounds — a bit uncomfortable but safe enough — the sea conditions going in would have been much smoother.

Your route home may put you at a right angle to the swells, so you're running in a beam sea. Most offshore-capable boats can handle fairly steep beam seas. And you can use speed more to your advantage in a beam sea where speeding up may actually improve the ride. As the props turn, they tend to move water downward, "sucking" the boat to the surface of the water (particularly in an inboard), which can add stability by keeping the hull in the water.



BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE DOCK

Maintaining your boat and engines, and carrying a reasonable amount of safety gear and spare parts, will put you one step closer to being properly prepared for traveling out of the sight of land. Every day I leave the dock, I'm prepared for serious weather. It's simple but essential to make sure that all items on board are stowed and secured. Having seen objects come loose when encountering unexpectedly adverse weather provides me more than enough incentive to secure them. In fact, I keep a checklist that includes such things as the life raft and any gear kept topside, as well as antenna bases. You surely don't want to be up there trying to fasten down anything in heavy seas.

Check your radio(s) to make sure it is (they are) working properly. How's the freshwater supply? If your fuel level isn't full, top it off. Even though I have the fuel capacity to run for three days, I never leave the dock without full fuel tanks. If you don't carry a jump bag with basic safety gear, you should start. It should include a second EPIRB (in addition to one you likely have mounted in your cabin), food, water, space blankets, hand-held VHF (in addition to mounted unit), flare kit, first-aid kit, horn or whistle and of course other items required by the Coast Guard.

Also on board my boat is a sea anchor, one of the most important heavy-weather tools you can carry. Sea anchors may be used for controlled drift fishing, and — indispensably — for safety. If your boat breaks down in rough weather, deploying a sea anchor can keep your bow into the wind and the weather off your stern, slowing your drift dramatically and stabilizing the boat enough to keep it from rolling severely or even capsizing.

Anytime it's possible to fish near a buddy in another boat, take advantage of the opportunity. Having another boat within a few miles at most can make a big difference if you have a problem. But in any case, make sure someone knows exactly where you are going and when you expect to be home.

If the swell builds to a point that you're growing uncomfortable running in the trough, you may have to temporarily change course and run slightly into and, alternately, with the seas. I've found that taking swells on either side of my bow offers the safest and most comfortable ride for a deep-V hull. You can see the swells coming without looking away from your heading. That allows you to slow down and (if heading into the sea) power up and over the top of particularly steep swells if necessary.

STAY FOCUSED TILL THE FAT LADY HAS SUNG

When you near home — often when land is in sight — don't allow yourself the luxury of breathing easy or relaxing your full attention. The most difficult part may lie ahead. As the seafloor shallows up near the coast, decreasing water depth means steepening swells. Combine this with the effects of tidal currents and narrow channels, and you will probably need to go slowly, picking your way the last mile or two. The fat lady ain't sung until you hit safe harbor waters. If you were out of range of communications, be sure to call someone and let him/her know you're back. Give an estimated time of arrival. Before you pack it in for the day, check your equipment one more time to make sure no water is belowdecks and nothing is broken.

COURTESY WARNER BROS.

The ultimate bad trip for any boat offshore! This nightmarish vision is one of the scenes generated by computers for the Warner Brothers' version of Sebastian Junger's novel *The Perfect Storm*.

Capt. Andy Mezirow has been on the water his whole life. His first job: working on a New York partyboat at age 12. Since then, he has worked as deckhand on a swordfish longline boat on the Grand Banks and has served all over the world on research vessels, tugs and fishing vessels as able seaman, navigational officer, chief officer and master. For the past 10 years, Mezirow has operated Crackerjack Sportfishing Charters in Seward, Alaska (www.crackerjackcharter.com), offering one-day and multiday adventures along the northern Alaska Gulf Coast and Prince William Sound. He's also president of the Seward Alaska Charterboat Association, a director of the National Association of Charterboat Operators and a representative for the International Game Fish Association.