On The Water

Building a better mousetrap — Part I

By Joel Milton

Every once in a great while someone comes up with an idea that is a truly innovative. An idea that profoundly changes and improves the way something is done. Paul Driscoll, a former Coastie, has done just that. He has come up with a device that all mariners and company safety managers should pay very close attention to.

His invention is called the Life Safer Personal Retriever (www.life-safer.com). It provides rescuers with a fantastic new tool with which to recover a person in the water or on ice. Essentially, it is a modified high-tech Frisbee attached to a 100-foot floating line that can be thrown to a conscious person. More importantly, it can be deployed quickly, with great accuracy, and without injuring the person on the receiving end.

The U.S. Coast Guard-approved Type V personal flotation device is 11" in diameter, weighs only 24 oz., and provides over 11 lbs. of buoyancy. It has an expanded polyethylene foam top that is soft to prevent injury. The bottom is made of propylene and provides a frame to wrap the 3/16" polypropylene line around for storage.

Deployment time is approximately 10 seconds or less on the first throw, with redeployment taking about 45 seconds or less. Full extension can be achieved into a 15-knot wind.

Anyone who has tried to throw a conventional life ring for distance, let alone with accuracy, knows that it is almost impossible. And you certainly don't want to be hit by one. I believe that conventional life rings, when equipped only with a strobe light, are best used as a marker from which to start looking for a missing crewmember. Also, if deployed quickly and relatively close enough to the man overboard, it is possible that they may be able to swim to the ring. Other than that, a life ring's usefulness is extremely limited in a typical rescue situation.

It took a lot of persistence from Driscoll to get his device approved by the Coast Guard and finally put out on the market. I hope that both mariners and safety managers will recognize a good thing when they see it.

The most dangerous part of a water rescue is maneuvering a vessel in order to make the recovery. With a life ring's poor range and accuracy, it is often necessary to steer extremely close to the person being rescued, which could result in the person being smashed by the hull in rough seas or sucked into the wheels.

But the range and accuracy of the Life Saver Personal Retriever permits the vessel to stand off at a safe distance while someone on deck makes the throw. The goal is not a direct strike right on the person in the water. Instead, it is ideal to toss the retriever over and past them, and then manipulate the line to pull the disc back across them. Once the victim has grabbed it, he can then be pulled directly back to the best location for bringing him aboard the vessel. To gain an even greater advantage in accuracy and to maximize range, the disc should be thrown from an upper deck. To gain proficiency requires a little practice, but it's well worth the effort.

The device is clearly superior to all other current methods including heaving lines and line bags. It should be standard equipment on all commercial vessels. When combined with a Jason's Cradle, it provides a

complete and truly effective means for recovering people from the water quickly and with the highest level of safety. The life ring has had its day, and now it's time to retire it and move on. It should be noted that many Coast Guard units have been using the Personal Retriever for some time now, long before it was officially approved by the agency for commercial use.

Mariners owe Paul Driscoll a debt of gratitude for both inventing this device and persevering to get it through the Coast Guard's ponderous approval process. Thank you, Paul.

I ended last month's column with a question: Why would anyone in their right mind want an approval system that's slow to the point of near paralysis, unnecessarily chokes off beneficial competition, and allows innovative new products to die on the vine for no visible reason?

The answer is as simple as it is obvious. They wouldn't. So why do we have such a system, and why hasn't it been changed? It's because the Coast Guard's marine safety people have forgotten their roots and lost their way.

At some point the Coast Guard lost sight of what the marine safety big picture is supposed to be, which is to promote and advance the cause of marine safety, especially search-and-rescue procedures and equipment.

Over the years I've seen a number of new and promising products that would disappear without a trace, having failed to gain Coast Guard approval. From the '90s, Stormy Seas flotation jackets and vests and foul weather gear comes to mind (Go to www.stormyseas.com/important.html for the company's take on Coast Guard approval.). And Greatland Laser's rescue laser flare looked like a sure winner too (www.greatlandlaser.com). The rules appear to be very clear — if you aren't an established player then you'll have almost no chance of success. The lone recent exception is the Personal Retriever by Life-safer (www.life-safer.com). The company received Coast Guard approval only after company owner Paul Driscoll waged a long hard battle. The way he was put through the wringer by the Coast Guard is an example of the problems permeating this system.

The people who decide what we're allowed to use [to meet carriage requirements] are far removed from the real-life consequences that result from their ill-advised decisions — decisions that keep good products out of our hands. Maybe if their own lives depended on the equipment they approved, and maybe if they were bona fide professional seamen, then just maybe we'd have a marine safety program worthy of the Coast Guard's proud past.

For now, however, we just have to wait and see if the new commandant has it in him to set things straight. If not, we'll have to depend on Congress to step in.

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