

the parachute anchor

why I would not go offshore without it

by KLAUS SCHMIDT

WE LEFT HOBART, Tasmania, late February 2008 for a crossing of the Southern Tasman Sea. Our anticipated port of arrival was Bluff, the southern-most port in New Zealand.

A westerly gale had just passed Tasmania and the forecast called for several days of westerlies up to 30kts, promising a fast passage for my 41' Lagoon catamaran, *Zero Gravity* (ZG).

My crew were a couple in their 30s with some sailing experience, mostly in fair weather. Unfortunately the two had repeatedly been seasick sailing south with me from Sydney to Hobart. However, they felt their sea sickness was under control and they wanted to continue with

me across the Tasman Sea. As it turned out both of them got sick again on day one and became worse day after day.

I had hoped to make daily passages of about 200nm and reach Bluff after five to seven days. With my incapacitated crew I decided to sail less aggressively and during the first 24 hours covered only 155nm. After three and a half days of fair sailing conditions, having made good 550nm towards our destination, the fair weather window quickly closed. Earlier that day the forecast warned that a severe south-easterly gale with very rough seas was coming our way and would be in our area for at least 48 hours.

As winds and seas were building, I considered my options. First I manually steered ZG, maintaining a course towards Bluff. The ever increasing waves started to break on the starboard beam and the angle ZG sailed along the side of these steep waves, neither felt comfortable nor safe. Next, I pointed higher into wind and waves, which essentially stalled the

boat and meant losing control. I pondered deploying the drogue and running with wind and waves. Not only would this take us away from our destination, it also meant actively steering the vessel. Steering on my own for 48 hours or more was out of the question. As last resort I decided to deploy the sea anchor.

For offshore passages I had equipped ZG with a life raft, a parachute sea anchor, a drogue, as well as a storm jib. When buying this equipment I was told that I would probably never use any of it. However, I later realised that these comments were made by sailors who choose to sail in more benign latitudes and if possible only in fair weather. My research into parachute sea anchors had led me to Alby McCracken, paraanchors.com.au in New South Wales, Australia. The company offers their equipment unassembled or completely assembled. Alby had recommended the correct size of equipment for ZG and I had purchased the assembled unit, which

Looking through the window with a wave building that will break over much of the cat. (above)

came nicely supplied in bags. I had also bought a drogue (a smaller parachute) from Alby, just in case I ever wanted to sail with wind and waves, e.g. to claw of a lee shore and slow the boat down to prevent her from pitch poling.

Alby, as well as others writing about parachute anchors, recommend that for any offshore voyage, the parachute anchor be carried on deck, shackles appropriately fastened to the vessel and all ready for instant deployment. Essentially on my own, with the weather worsening rapidly, I now regretted not having followed that advice. My equipment was in the most forward starboard locker, only accessible from the deck. After opening that hatch, shipping plenty of water, I had to climb down a ladder and heave the equipment on the trampoline of ZG. After sorting the lines, I attached the bridle to ZG and then the long line with the parachute anchor to the bridle. Finally I attached the line with a large orange buoy to the parachute. All equipment is very well made, is very strong and inspires confidence.

I tightened the shackle bolts with pliers as hard as I could but based on experience felt that the bolts had to be secured with stainless steel wire, which I did as well. The only shackle I did not secure was the one holding the line with the orange float. That line and float were no longer there when I retrieved the equipment two days later. Clearly I highly recommend securing the shackles. Of course all this was done while I was being continuously drenched with 13°C sea water. Yes, I wore my self inflating life

jacket and yes I was attached with my harness to the safety line. The life jacket being frequently under water had inflated itself.

I was now ready to throw the equipment from the trampoline over the bow into the sea and made my next mistake. Alby and authors clearly inform to deploy the equipment from the windward side of the bow. It did not look right to me and I chose the leeward side. As a result lines and parachute immediately floated, in my case under the port keel, propeller and rudder. The orange float line wrapped itself around the rudder and the parachute had also been hooked by the sizeable fish hook of my trolling line, that I had forgotten to retrieve earlier. Efforts to free subject lines failed and I cut both lines. Instead of the orange float, I attached a large fender to that line. Now lines and parachute floated freely and paid out. Before long ZG was riding to the parachute anchor.

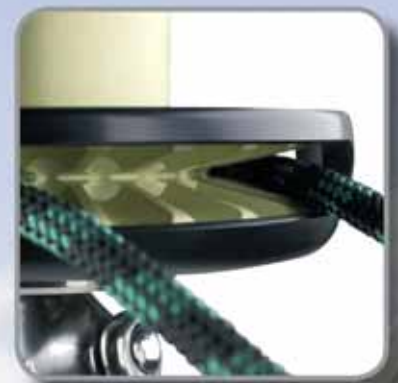
Finally I was able to check on the state of my crew, the current wind speed and to see if an updated weather report had been forwarded. Earlier the male crew member had actually mustered some energy and had provided some help deploying the sea anchor. Now, however, he appeared worse than ever before. He was lying listless, sick and unresponsive in his bunk. His wife, in somewhat better physical shape was afraid for her life. She was weeping and crying. The wind blew

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a constant 40 to 45kts, and at times exceeded 50. I estimated the wave height at six metres with breaking waves frequently washing over the entire vessel. ZG rocked violently from port to starboard. Being a catamaran with over seven metre width, the heeling angles were reasonable, however, the noise of wind in the rigging, and the sounds of seas thundering below against the bridge deck and hammering the entire vessel from above also took their toll on me.

I had to do something to reduce my anxiety. First, I closed all curtains so as not to see this inferno any longer. Next, I placed soft ear plugs deep into my ears. While there was nothing I could do about the violent jerking and rocking motion, it felt much better now. However, I was greatly concerned about the overall strength of ZG, including the 12 large windows of the main cabin and could only hope that the vessel was built strongly enough to handle this onslaught.

The female crew member became rather hysterical and repeatedly begged

me to activate the EPIRB and make Mayday calls. I tried to explain to her that while our situation was scary and very uncomfortable, we were presently not in danger of losing our lives. Further, that with 400nm distant to the nearest land, a helicopter rescue was out of the question and under these conditions a rescue by a ship would be extremely dangerous if not impossible. By now it was dark. This was my first time lying to a sea anchor and I was also concerned to say the least. I tried to re-assure myself that with four bulk heads in each of the two hulls, we would not sink even if half submerged. I also visualised where to find essential equipment, such as the EPIRB and life raft, should we capsize.

My communication with the outside world was via SAIL MAIL (email through the onboard lap top). Through my partner Patricia in Victoria, BC, Canada, I had sent a message to Maritime Rescue Australia as well as New Zealand and requested that they notify shipping in the area that we were lying to a sea anchor and would not keep a watch. I had also

Zero Gravity moored at Southport Yacht Club, Gold Coast.

requested a weather forecast for the days after the gale, ideally in plain English. Further, I had emailed Alby McCracken, manufacturer of the parachute sea anchor, since our survival now depended on his equipment. Alby had come back with encouraging and humorous advice. His key comments were "Do not give up on your ship, my parachute sea anchor will see you through".

Lying to a sea anchor is totally passive and the best one can do is try to get as much rest as possible. I had provided soft ear plugs to the female crew and her husband as well and suggested that she should try and take in some liquids if at all possible and that she should also try and make her husband drink. Further, that she too should lie down and rest. There was nothing else to do but wait for the weather to pass.

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While she was somewhat successful and took in a little fluid, he refused, which greatly concerned me. To dull my senses further, I took several stiff drinks and found some rest.

The next day and following night, conditions remained unchanged. Since we had come through the first night I now had much confidence in lying to the parachute sea anchor. After a good meal and more drinks I again rested.

On the following day winds had abated and were blowing at only 25/30kts. The sea state was still very rough.

However, I wanted to start sailing as soon as possible to get my crew to safety. Pulling in the sea anchor by myself without any help, e.g. motoring towards it, proved to be impossible. I considered cutting the lines but also thought that I may still need the equipment again before reaching New Zealand. Therefore I appealed to the crew, that if they had any energy left at all, now would be the time it was needed. At first they did not comprehend my request. After a while they appeared on deck. I had started both engines and asked him to motor towards the sea anchor; the direction I would indicate while lying on the trampoline, pulling in the lines, while she could relay my hand signals to him. Within 30 minutes, using much strength and losing some skin off my hands, the equipment was back on the trampoline. I hoisted the genoa, started both diesels and motor sailed as fast as possible towards New Zealand, still over 400nm away.

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The rest of the journey to New Zealand

- Health of crew worsened;
- Maritime Rescue NZ diverted container ship *Edith* on day seven. No doctor on board, ships' crew not trained for transfer of crew from a sail boat. In my opinion, sea state would have made a crew transfer extremely dangerous and I declined;
- Day eight, passenger ship *Sapphire Princess* diverted to rescue crew. – ZG is not located at expected position and NZ fixed wing aircraft dispatched to locate ZG. Aircraft spotted ZG, reported her sailing and provided position, speed and direction to the Rescue Co-ordination centre in Wellington. *Sapphire Princess* locates ZG and successful transfer from ZG to their special rescue boat with trained crew and doctor on board;
- Crew receives appropriate medical attention in ship's hospital and recovers over the next few days;
- I declined offer of *Sapphire Princess* crew member to sail with me and continued on my own;
- When crew was rescued, ZG was approximately 200nm from the NZ coast. However, about 150nm north of Bluff. I received permission to enter NZ in Milford Sound, not an official port of entry. Officials came from Bluff to Milford Sound to clear ZG and me into NZ;
- The concern for safety of vessel and crew was not the wind speed, as that probably did not exceed much over 50kts. While strong, 50kts of wind are quite manageable for ZG. However, steep breaking waves created dangerous conditions.
- ZG did not appear to have suffered any damages but she has not been not hauled out yet;
- ZG had drifted about 25nm in north-westerly direction while lying almost 48 hours to the sea anchor.

Recommendations

For the parachute sea anchor, actually very little.

- Different colours of bridle line, parachute line and float line would ease handling;
- Perhaps bridle lines with more shock absorption (if these exist) may make motion less jerky and more comfortable.

General recommendations

- Familiarise yourself with the equipment before you have to use it;
 - Before ocean voyages have the fully assembled equipment ready on deck for deployment;
 - Fasten any shackles as tightly as possible and secure these.
- FINALLY, I CAN HIGHLY RECOMMEND AND ENDORSE THE STRONG, VERY WELL MADE EQUIPMENT OF PARA-ANCHORS OF AUSTRALIA. It may have saved our lives, it certainly saved my ship.