

Sea Kayaking Death on Lake Erie: A Recap

By Joq Martin

It's November again. The air and even the water have turned cold, turning many sea kayakers to winter projects. But not all.

Last November, over Thanksgiving weekend, a Navy friend of mine launched his high volume Looksha into Lake Erie for a Saturday morning paddle out to "the crib" a conspicuous landmark in Cleveland--the city's water intake, an international orange structure with a large platform at the top, two miles offshore. My friend had boated out to the crib many times in his younger years, but now his new passion for sea kayaking gave him a chance to see this landmark from another viewpoint: his self-propelled kayak. He got there but he didn't make it back.

A series of electronic stories--some by this writer--circulated over paddling sites on the Internet last November and December following my friend's death. An article by Dr. Chuck Sutherland in *Atlantic Coastal Kayaker*, March 1999, provided more detailed analysis of what we thought we knew at the time. But all of our reports lacked final closure because the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office did not release its autopsy results--and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, in turn, could not release its report--until later in the spring of the year. The story also lacked the depth of other perspectives at the time--family, friends, the "why's" of the incident that we all needed for our own closure on this untimely death.

For some readers, much of this story will be a rehash of what we knew last winter. But there is some new data, some from the autopsy, some from interviews with those who knew my friend closely, some who knew him as a paddler. And there are new paddlers out there reading this story for the first time. It's a story about my friend "Rhino."

I didn't know Captain Tom "Rhino" Hancock as a paddler: I knew "the Rhino" for many years as a Navy colleague. We started our Navy careers the same way in 1966, but I didn't get to know him until much later, when he was in charge of maintenance for many of the naval aviation assets with which I was also involved in Washington. We talked about sea kayaking after he saw the racks on my car and asked many questions about the sport. His eagerness about the sport even then was clear and obvious--he wanted to become involved in the sea kayaker community. I told him about the clubs and activities in the area, about some of the local retailers, and offered help if he wanted more information. But then he retired, and we lost contact. I didn't know he'd become a paddler until I read of his death.

What we know now is this: Tom Hancock, after enjoying a fast-paced Thanksgiving holiday with old friends in northern and Tidewater Virginia drove to Cleveland to spend the remainder of the weekend with family. On Saturday morning, although he appeared tired and showed some signs of fatigue from holiday parties and long drives, he was determined to paddle his Looksha out to the crib and back, and suggestions from his family that he reconsider--that he take it easy--were ignored. (It's probably not a pattern specific to the Navy or to naval aviation, but we old Navy guys do tend to ignore the years in an attempt to perpetuate the self-imposed myth that we are still young Lieutenants. We can still hoot with

the owls and then fly with the eagles.) We know he left a float plan early Saturday morning, that he launched from a landing at a state park, and that his body was found floating near the crib early that afternoon.

We also know that the weather was generally pleasant and improving--air temperatures increasing from the 50 to the 60 degree F. range--with winds about 15 knots and low chop. The water temperature was in the mid 40 degree range at the surface. It was a "winter" paddling day in the northeast, but it appeared to be great weather for a day trip.

And we know that Tom Hancock was a relative "newbie" to paddling. He had had some training in sea kayaking, had done one clinic in self rescue, and had tried--with some limited success--to involve his wife and family in his new pastime. He thought he was prepared for winter paddling; he had bought a Kokatat GoreTex drysuit, wore a well equipped PFD, had his paddlefloat attached under his after deck-lines as he'd been taught, and was ready for his trip. He had and wore neoprene gloves, but he had no immersion protection for his head or neck, having only a fleece headband to protect his ears. But he was still a relative "newbie" with only a year's experience, he was paddling solo on an offshore adventure in near-winter conditions, and he had a lot working against him. **Strike one.**

When his body was found, he was wearing his state-of-the-art drysuit and his PFD; he wore neoprene gloves and booties. But under his drysuit, instead of the layers of synthetic fleece and other insulation needed to make the suit effective for cold water immersion, Tom wore an old, thin gray cotton sweatshirt and swim trunks. In 45 degree water, good insulation would likely have saved his life. But, for unknown reasons, he was not wearing an effective thermal barrier. **Strike two?** Maybe, but probably not.

He had another even more serious problem. His drysuit zipper was not closed. The heavy, waterproof zipper, which closes from the right shoulder to the left waist, had been left open about six inches. Had he become hyperthermic? Was he trying to vent off the heat generated by rigorous paddling? Did he simply forget to close off the zipper, now concealed under his PFD? We don't know. But we do know that, when he was found, his drysuit was completely flooded with Lake Erie's bone-chilling water. He became hypothermic. He drowned. **He was out.**

So says the Cuyahoga County Coroner: "... death in this case was the end result of immersion hypothermia and drowning." For reasons that we will never know, Rhino came out of his boat and was separated from it. He may have tried to re-enter, but his paddle float was not removed from its storage site. He didn't have a roll.

There were contusions indicating some sort of struggle. What caused his capsize? What caused the contusions?

Speculation: Tom Hancock was also on medication for high blood pressure. (Oh, I guess we Navy guys don't like to talk about things like this. Maybe I should have mentioned that earlier.) The autopsy results indicated significant narrowing of the coronary arteries by atherosclerotic plaque. It is possible that a heart attack was the initial event in a series of cascading problems. It is possible that the shock of the

cold water suddenly filling his unzipped drysuit set off a heart attack. The autopsy does not state this as a cause, however. There are enough potential contributing causes remaining, and Tom's still dead.

Lessons learned. Navy guys always like to leave "lessons-learned" after an important event.

- Know your limits; learn to recognize and manage risk. Does this mean that solo paddling is wrong in and of itself? No. It means that, for many people, it may be a bad idea. Personal and ambient conditions need to be considered when committing to a solo paddle. Training, experience, weather, water temperatures, available equipment, personal health and conditioning. All these need to enter the risk management equation.
- Know your equipment. Know what to wear for given conditions. Tom is said to have been told that he needed thermal insulation under his drysuit. We don't think he ever took a cold water paddling clinic or workshop. Did he know what it's like to suddenly plunge into 45 degree water with no protection for his head or neck? Did he think that he could close off his drysuit if he really needed it? Did he even know it was open?
- Know yourself and your paddling partners. Do you have a medical condition that could be life threatening? Does your paddling buddy? Do you know what to do if someone shows symptoms of a heart attack, of a reaction to a drug or a food substance, of convulsions, of respiratory problems? Of all people, "the Rhino" knew himself. He had to because he was by himself. He went out alone, arguably not as well prepared as he should have been, and he put himself in harm's way. And he lost his final battle to stay alive as a result.

Those are the lessons learned. They're hard lessons for us, hardest of all.

Dedication: For "Rhino" and his family. Use them, think about them this winter or this spring when the air warms up quickly-- and the water doesn't. Use them on your next club trip. Add this to your personal risk management equation--and use it. "The Rhino" would appreciate it.

Special Thanks: Thanks should go to Officer Ken Tranchita of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources for his cooperation and assistance; to Chuck Sutherland for his continued and dogged interest in the safety issues which confront sea kayakers and especially to Kim Hancock, daughter of my friend "Rhino" who provided some of the important personal information needed to make this story a valuable lessons-learned for our sea kayaking community.

2000-01-15