

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Swim Test Your Gear Every Time You Go Out

By [Moulton Avery](#)

K.P. - A Very Close Call & Miraculous Rescue January 29, 2012 - Thomas Point Light, Chesapeake Bay, Maryland

This is an excellent and candid first-person account of a near-death kayaking incident that occurred on the Chesapeake Bay near Annapolis, Maryland. It takes courage to publicly confess making a mistake that almost killed you, and KP deserves our respect for writing this personal account so that others could learn from his experience.

KP's Story—I'm a 48-year-old man who's been paddling for more than 15 years. I've also been a sailor since I was a kid, having grown up with a father who was a career Coast Guard officer. I'm comfortable on and in the water. I paddle almost every week, year-round, and often solo. I've taken numerous paddling classes and have paddled in all kinds of conditions in lots of places. I've done multi-day kayaking trips, ocean paddling, flat water and moderate whitewater. I have (what I thought was) a pretty decent roll and I know a few different self-rescue techniques (though I hadn't practiced in several years). My kayak is a Necky Looksha IV HV and is constructed of kevlar and fiberglass. It's a great boat. I've had it for 12 years.

On January 29th I decided to take advantage of the sunny day and the warm-for-winter temps and drive from where I live in Washington, DC, to near Annapolis and paddle out to Thomas Point Light. This is a short paddle — about four miles round trip from my put-in. I've done it 4 or 5 times, and I've sailed in the area countless times.

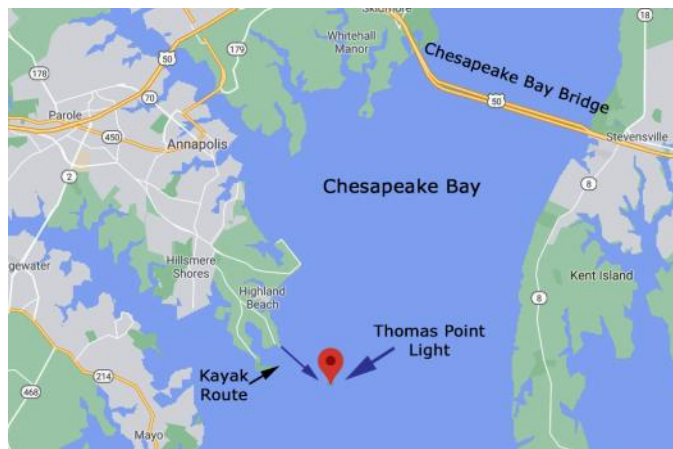
I launched around noon. The weather forecast was for mostly sunny skies, highs in the low 50's, and winds out of the south at 10-15 knots (though building throughout the afternoon.) A small craft advisory had been issued for 6pm and into the night. I expected that, even with some goofing off and photo taking, I still wouldn't be on the water longer than two-and-a-half hours (i.e., back by 2:30pm.) I was wearing a dry top, neoprene gloves, and I used a skirt (of course). I had no hood, dry or wet pants, or boots (I know, I know -- I will get back to this). I did have a PFD on.

It was a lovely day, but breezy as expected. I would be paddling southeast so the winds were off my starboard bow. I had a nice paddle to the lighthouse and dealt with a bit of chop just fine. I took some pictures. The winds were definitely building and the growing waves began to make me uncomfortable with having my nice Nikon camera out. I didn't want to get it wet so, with it hanging around my neck and waves splashing the boat, I paddled to the lee side of the lighthouse and then under it to hold onto a dock piling while putting the lens cover on, getting it back in its dry bag and strapping it to the deck. I drank some water, took a phone call(!) and then took off for the paddle back. Everything was fine.

By this point the winds had built to probably 15-20 knots, gusting higher. The tide was going out (against me) and the winds were off my port stern quarter. With the wind and the tide going different directions -- combined with being right over a shoal -- the waves were a bit bigger than usual, but still nothing I found alarming. I've handled worse and was actually enjoying the surfing down waves while also noticing the waves were steeper than I was used to. Right around the shoal near the lighthouse the sea was in a bit of a confused state. The wave direction wasn't totally consistent. While on the crest of a wave focus-

Coordinators Note: Here is a story that has been published previously, but is very relevant to paddling in January. I like this story because it had the potential for tragedy but has a happy ending. This article was taken from Moulton Avery's National Center for Cold Water Safety web site. <https://www.coldwatersafety.org/post/rule-4-case-3>

Paula Hubbard



(Continued on page 13)

K.P.'s Story(Continued from page 1)

ing on balance, I reached back on the port side to brace with the paddle when suddenly water wasn't where I expected it to be. The paddle was still in the air where I expected resistance and I capsized to port.

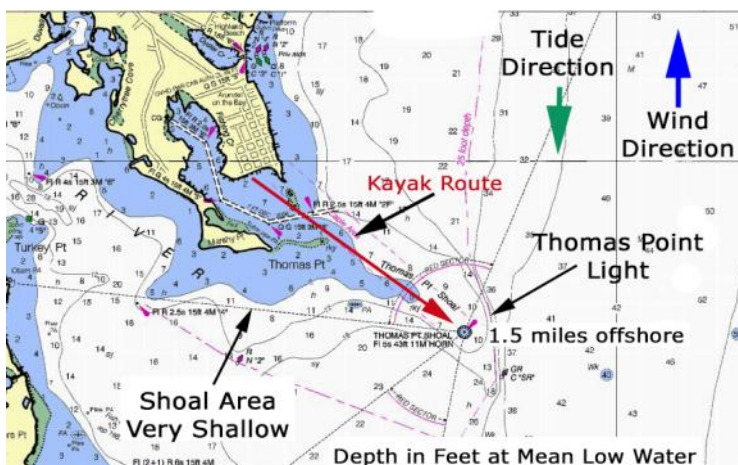
I immediately attempt to roll back up as waves were tossing around the boat and me. I was not successful and then attempted two more rolls. I really wasn't even getting close. I decide to exit the boat to attempt self-rescue using the Ladder technique.

I got to the rear of the kayak and began crawling to the cockpit and got knocked over by another wave. I was realizing I was in serious trouble because the cold water was quickly sapping my strength. I tried another self-rescue and was once again knocked over. I didn't see any boats on the bay. I knew I was in a really bad situation.

I wasn't far from the lighthouse—a couple hundred yards at most. I thought my best chance was to swim for it and to try to climb up on its dock. I began swimming and immediately realized I could not swim the kayak upwind in those conditions. I wasn't making any headway at all. So I made a quick decision to let the boat go, even while knowing that "stay with the boat" is almost a mantra for problems at sea. I didn't think that was an option because of the cold water and being nearly two miles from shore.



Tricky currents around Thomas Point Light



Water depth in the blue shoal area is 2-6 feet at low tide.

So I let the boat go and the wind quickly took it. I'll never forget that moment when the thought hit me, "I'm floating alone in the Chesapeake...in January."

I began swimming on my back toward the lighthouse. I was making minimal headway against the winds and the waves. The cold water was causing great pain at this point, and my ability to swim was rapidly leaving me. During those few minutes I knew I was facing death. I was angry at myself for doing this to my father. Just a few months earlier we had lost my mother to cancer -- his beloved wife of 51 years. I remember thinking that at least they'll know where to look for my body because I had emailed a float plan to him and my sister that morning.

I was swimming as hard as I could with whatever strength I had left and decided to roll over off my back for a second to check to see that I was at least still pointing at the lighthouse. I saw a boat up ahead! It was a classic white Chesapeake Bay fishing

boat. I learned later that she is the *Audacious*.

I began yelling. They couldn't hear me and it appeared, at first, that it would just cruise by me when I realized they were actually slowing down to pull up to the lighthouse. I kept yelling but was growing worried that I wouldn't be able to even yell much longer. I was exhausted. Then the boat pulled up to the dock (positioned exactly as in that photo) and someone jumped off the boat with a line to secure it.

He was now facing me and I yelled again with every ounce of energy I had. He heard me! He looked up, waved and immediately jumped back in the boat and headed my way. I wasn't going to die!

There were two men and two women on board. They had to literally pull me out because I couldn't help them at all. I weight 200 pounds, was soaking wet and almost dead weight from exhaustion, and the boat was rocking around because of the conditions. It was really hard for the two guys to pull me up by my PFD, but they were champions and managed to get me on board with some serious effort. I estimate that I was in the 40F water for about 15 minutes.



The *Audacious* docked at Thomas Point Light on a calm day.

(Continued on page 14)

K.P.'s Story (Continued from page 13)

They got me inside the small cabin and began drying me off and warming me up. While I was in there they retrieved my kayak and paddle, which must have been a half-mile downwind at that point. My camera in a dry bag was still secured to the deck, which is why I have the photos.

I'm not being overly dramatic when I say they saved my life. I have no doubt that this is true. They were on the water that day—the ONLY boat in the area at that time—to do their annual winter check on the lighthouse. In all the years I've paddled and sailed near Thomas Point Light I have never seen a boat pull up to it. The long odds of them being there at that exact time and within earshot defy description.

Mistakes I Made—I was clearly complacent and over confident in my skills. If there are other paddlers out there, no matter how experienced, who might be taking on needless risk like I did, I hope this story will change their behavior.

- I should not have been paddling solo in the winter on open water like the Chesapeake.
- I should have been wearing pants, shoes, and a hat made for cold-water immersion. I couldn't find my wetsuit pants that morning and went anyway.
- I should have had a submersible VHF strapped to my PFD, as well as flares and/or a smoke signal device.

Solo winter paddling in open water and not wearing pants/shoes/hat for cold-water immersion were total rookie mistakes. "Dress for the water, not for the air." I know this and ignored it. I nearly paid for my mistake with my life.

Other lessons: I must work on my rolls and self-rescue techniques every year, and practice in conditions closer to what could be expected in a real life emergency.

I want to publicly thank my rescuers Henry and Chris Gonzalez, and Captain Howard and Cathy Lewis. Henry is the lighthouse keeper for the Thomas Point Lighthouse and vice-president of the [U.S. Lighthouse Society](#). Howard is the owner and skipper of Audacious, and I understand he lends his time helping out with the lighthouse."

Lessons Learned—This trip was far more dangerous than KP realized when he left shore, and his admittedly complacent attitude was due to non-eventful previous trips, his long familiarity with area, and his lack of personal experience swimming unprotected in 40F (5C) water.

Swim-testing his gear would have vividly demonstrated to KP that that he was not dressed for the water temp. Using the [Sea Conditions Rating System \(SCRS\)](#) developed by Tsunami Ranger Co-Founder, Eric Soares, would have given him a more realistic perspective about the level of risk he was undertaking.

Paddling solo greatly magnified the risk. It guaranteed that in the event of trouble, he would be completely on his own. Any attempt at self-rescue would be unassisted, much more difficult, and with a higher probability of failure - particularly in rough water. His skills were rusty. Regular rolling and self-rescue practice in rough conditions would have improved his technique.

Shoal area: A shoal is a shallow area surrounded by deeper water. Depending on things like current, wind, and wave conditions,

(Continued on page 15)

Public Service Announcement: Dry Suit Repairs—Professional and Local

By Cragg Howard

Do you have a dry suit in need of repair? Broken Zipper, torn or worn out gaskets, punctures? Contact Patrick Donovan. "Pat", a First Responder in the DMV, former Deep Sea Diver and owner of Donovan's Diving Services in Centreville, MD, is professionally trained, as well as licensed and insured, in dry suit/wet suit repairs. Pat offers reasonable rates and quick turn around times from someone who knows first hand the importance of staying warm, and/or dry, when immersed in cold water.

Give him a call at (410) 490-4400 or email him at DonovansDivingServices@gmail.com.

There are many other online or mail-in gasket and leak repair services for dry suits and tops. In particular, if you have a Gore-Tex™ Kokatat dry suit, you can send it back to the factory for evaluation and leak repair for about \$50 (not including gasket repair). If the fabric has delaminated, you may be eligible for a replacement suit free of charge. This does not apply to non-Gore-Tex™ materials and may not be similar on other brands. See <https://kokatat.com/support/warranty-repairs>

Paddle Safe!



K.P.'s Story (Continued from page 14)

shoals can quickly change from tame to extremely rough with breaking waves. As this nautical chart clearly shows, there's a reason why a lighthouse was built 1 mile off Thomas Point: The area between the light and the point is very shallow with a mean low water depth between 2-6 feet for his entire route. Tidal range in the area is approximately one foot. The photo at the top of this page shows the confused conditions and steeper waves around Thomas Point Light on a relatively calm day. Conditions were a lot more intense when KP started paddling back to shore.

Wind and Tide: Conditions on the water were deteriorating rapidly. Waves are created by wind, but their height can be amplified when the wind is blowing in opposition to the current. When his trip began, the wind speed was 10-15 mph; 60-90 minutes later he estimated 15-20 mph and gusting higher. The Small Craft Advisory predicted winds of 25-38 mph within several hours. When he started back, the wind direction was also in opposition to the tidal flow, resulting in much steeper waves and rougher water. Wind was from the south, so the fetch was essentially unlimited for the Chesapeake Bay.

Thermal Protection: His thermal protection was totally inadequate for 40F (5C) water. Without the addition of warm clothing, a drytop provides about as much insulation as a shower curtain. To protect you in the water, a drysuit or drytop must be watertight, not excessively burped, and have sufficient warm clothing to insulate you from the cold. It is not enough to simply "wear a drytop".

Although it delayed cold shock, KP's drytop did little to protect his upper body from the increasingly debilitating effects of cold water. Also, unlike 40F air, which feels cold, 40F water feels like it's burning your skin. This is why KP reported that it was "causing great pain" as he struggled to swim towards the lighthouse.

Loss of Strength: No protection for his lower body made the situation even worse and further compromised his ability to swim. Loss of strength happened very quickly. "I was realizing I was in serious trouble because the cold water was quickly sapping my strength". "The cold water was causing great pain at the point, and my ability to swim was rapidly leaving me".

No head and neck protection very likely contributed to his repeated failure to roll both because contact with the water was painful and cold water entering his ear canal would have been disorienting.

Concerns About Overheating: Many paddlers make the mistake of underdressing when the air is warm and the water is cold. KP was clearly underdressed and didn't have sufficient clothing under his drytop to protect his torso. See the article and video [Keeping Your Cool In The Heat](#) for more information on this topic.

No Margin For Error: Regardless of a paddler's level of experience, 40F (3C) water isn't just a little more dangerous than, for example, 55F water. It's far more dangerous. If the paddler is solo, as KP was, the risk simply cannot be overstated. As many incidents have demonstrated over the years, those are circumstances in which even a small miscalculation like missing a brace and a roll can get you killed.



This isn't overkill for 40F (4.4C) water.