

## MAN OVERBOARD!

**At 9.05 a.m. on a Saturday in early 2002, the writer's telephone rang.** It was the Exuma Park Warden in The Bahamas relaying information via an interesting route. The Caribbean Weather Net in Tortola, BVI had called any vessel in The Bahamas on SSB; a yacht in the Exuma Park had responded. They relayed a "Mayday" received from a frantic lady, saying that her husband had fallen overboard between the northern Exumas and Nassau about 20 minutes earlier. The lady had said that she was unable to handle the yacht, then on a heading 321° for Nassau, with 21 miles to go. The Bahamas Air-Sea Rescue (BASRA) rescue coordination centre in Nassau had also been telephoned.

The wind that morning was SE-SSE between 12 and 20 knots – ideal for a sail from the Exumas to Nassau, but not back the other way! No actual man overboard (m.o.b.) position was known, but from distance and heading, the writer and the Park Warden separately calculated and agreed a likely 1 mile square, about 8 miles west of Ship Channel Cay. Tide time and local knowledge about its flow indicated a probable drift eastward from the calculated m.o.b. position.

Many of BASRA Nassau's volunteer lifeboat captains and crew were already assembling aboard both lifeboats for a morning's "punch list" of jobs aboard. They were immediately alerted to the "Mayday" situation. The Park Warden advised that a seaplane was available from his area. OPBAT (the US DEA's operation in The Bahamas) and USCG Miami were telephoned for permission to call out one of their local helicopters, which was quickly given.

Both BASRA vessels were under way by 9.30 a.m. after topping off fuel and collecting further equipment. They soon reported rough conditions when clear of New Providence.

The relaying yacht was by then able to talk direct on SSB with the m.o.b. yacht and report to the writer. A description of the m.o.b. yacht was given to BASRA's boats. The primary objective, of course, was to try to find and rescue the gentleman, described as 67 y.o. and "not fit". No information was available about how he had fallen overboard, so it was assumed that he might have suffered a heart attack or some such and be unable to help himself. He was said to be wearing only dark shorts and possibly a tan t-shirt (no lifejacket).

The secondary, but earlier objective was to find the yacht and put crew aboard to help the lady. Two other yachts in the general vicinity offered assistance. BASRA's 25 ft. Boston Whaler, "Uncle Ben", was faster and, in spite of the rough seas, first to find the yacht. When they came alongside, nobody was visible, until their shouts brought **two** ladies on deck. After clearing some lines from over the side, a crewman was put aboard at about 10.30 a.m., now about 15 miles from Nassau. The yacht was sailing on autopilot under two headsails. It then emerged that the wife was suffering from early stages of Alzheimer's disease, with her sister aboard to help her, but with no

knowledge of sailing. It was the sister who had managed to coax the wife into making the original "Mayday" call. This also explained their lack of ability with the yacht. It was pure luck that their SSB radio was still tuned in to the weather net's frequency and that the relaying yacht was too. The crewman made no alteration of course and eventually sailed right into the east entrance to Nassau harbour. Without the crewman's help, the ladies would likely have struck land!

Conditions on the Bank were very sloppy, with short, breaking seas, making spotting a single person in the water, dressed as he was, extremely difficult. The helicopter was on scene soon after 10.30 a.m., together with the seaplane, both aircraft conducting coordinated search patterns. By 11.00 a.m. both BASRA vessels were in the area. At one point, they thought they heard a shout, stopped all engines and listened carefully – nothing heard, so the active search resumed. As minutes and hours slipped by, BASRA personnel in Nassau were becoming more and more doubtful of success. The larger and more stable lifeboat was by then the "on scene command". Further consultation re tide and the likely drift of a person in the water, indicated a 2-hr. drift eastward from the m.o.b. position – but how accurate was that? At about 12.30 p.m. the helicopter was asked to conduct a 5 mile square search, with the estimated m.o.b. square mile midway along its western side.

*Nothing seen... nothing seen.....* Then, at 1.15 p.m., a hail to all assets from the helicopter: *"Survivor spotted, will return to relocate"*. Mental cheers from all concerned. They found the person again, a diver was dropped, who helped pick up the gentleman at 1.30 p.m., about 3 miles east of the calculated m.o.b. position. Both lifeboats had immediately headed for the position, but, although only 100 yds. from it, still could not see the man in the water, due to the rough seas. The helicopter landed shortly thereafter at Nassau Airport, with only 20 minutes' fuel left and transferred the survivor to a waiting ambulance and a checkup in the hospital.

*How had the gentleman fallen overboard?* He had gone forward on deck, probably slipped on some spilt diesel fuel, falling on the lifeline, which broke. He had grabbed the side of the boat, shouted, with no response from below, had to let go, failed to catch the towed dinghy as it slipped by and watched his yacht sailing on by itself – *a bad moment!* When picked up, he said he could have floated on for a few more hours, having lasted nearly 5 hours by then. He had seen the aircraft, so had hope of being rescued.

It was an impressive case for all involved. BASRA's boats were at sea for over 8 hours; coordination between all units involved was exemplary and a tribute to the skills and ability of both volunteers and professionals. That is what BASRA is all about and typifies the philosophy of all the Caribbean region's voluntary SAR organizations.

***They deserve your financial support. However careful, you may be next!***