

by Randy Morgart

Cold and Alone on an Icy River

Friday, February 19th, the weather was better than it had been in some time with temperatures in the upper thirties and overcast. I knew I couldn't make a Saturday trip with friends and I was in the mood to paddle solo.

My plan was to launch into the Mississippi River from the gravel ramp at the Foley, Missouri access, 3.5 miles above the Winfield Lock and Dam and paddle upstream in the calm, slow-moving water sheltered from the main channel by a string of islands. On my return I could easily pop out into the main channel and return downstream to my car. I realize the risks of paddling alone. Even my wife,

who rarely paddles, had heard enough discussions that she voiced some concern about my decision to paddle solo in the Mississippi River. The Foley access is one of the closest to my home and I paddle there frequently either solo or with the St. Louis Canoe and Kayak Club. It has been a long time since I unintentionally flipped a sea kayak, and far longer since I had to wet exit, so I felt quite secure paddling in a familiar setting on calm water.

Getting my QCC 700 kayak ready to go, I stowed my spare paddle—a two-piece Euro-blade—on the front deck. I'd paddle with my mainstay Greenland paddle. My paddle float and pump were already in

the aft compartment, often stowed there during transport, and I decided to leave them there. I felt they wouldn't be needed for a flat-water paddle, although they were still available. I knew there was phone service in the area so my cell phone joined my wallet and car keys in the dry bag with basic gear I always carry. In the back hatch with that dry bag were some snacks and a sports drink in case I chose to land along the way. Over my insulating poly base layer I wore splash-proof nylon pants, a fleece pullover and rubber-soled booties with waterproof socks. A breathable rain jacket, knit watch cap and waterproof neoprene gloves completed



safety

my gear. I had a hydration pack and new camera secured to the PFD I was wearing.

At the river's edge there was an apron of ice about 3 feet wide and not quite ¼ inch thick. I used a fallen tree branch to clear a path through it. Launching into the slough and paddling near the shore brought me in sight of a few bald eagles, several pelicans and other waterfowl, most just out of camera range. The large flights of waterfowl passing high overhead were a sign that spring was on the way.

Widely scattered rafts of ice were drifting in the gentle current; I took several photos of one and even tried setting my camera on the ice for a self-portrait but was unable to get far enough away for a decent picture. Once I heard a loud ripping sound and turned to see the gentle current shred the quarter-inch ice over a

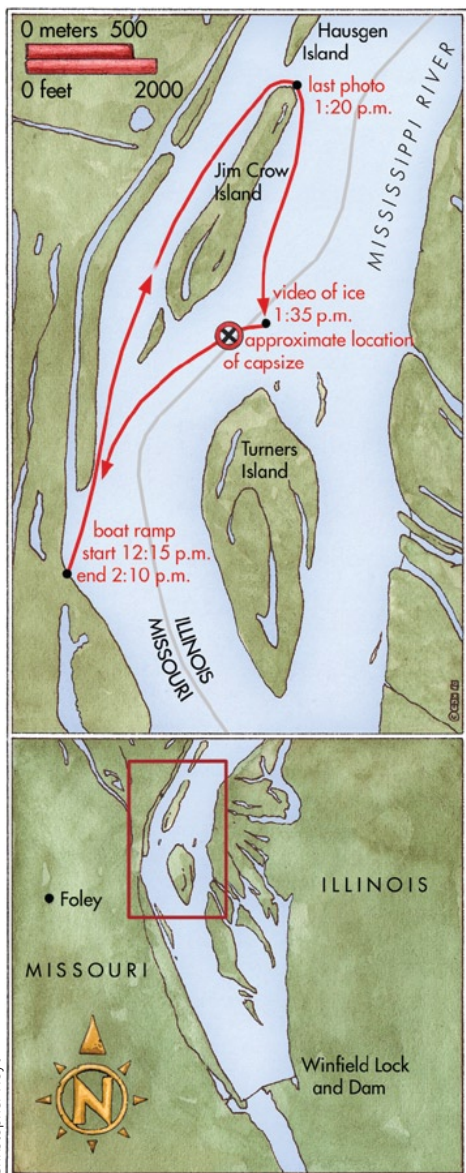
log snagged on the river bottom. A few times I heard a loud metallic racket in the distance. Not being able to determine the source, I assumed it was coming from the lock and dam downstream.

After an hour of zigzagging up the slough taking pictures I reached the head of Jim Crow Island. I heard more metallic clanging, first upstream, then across the main channel. It finally dawned on me that the noise was caused by rafts of ice striking the marker buoys in the navigation channel. Thinking this would make an interesting video I headed out to the middle of the river to the nearest buoy.

While there were more and larger rafts of ice moving down the main channel, it was still no problem crossing between them. It was amazing to see how the quarter-inch thick sheets of ice moving a few miles an hour could knock the several-hundred-pound buoys about so violently. I took a video of the buoy as I drifted downstream with the ice.

I had to pick a route through the ice floes as I headed back. While there was a clear path down the left side of the river, from this distance I wasn't able to see an easy way to cross the channel to get back to the landing. An hourglass-shaped sheet of ice beside me left only about thirty feet of ice blocking an easy crossing. I decided to become an icebreaker, something I've done several times before, although usually in a plastic kayak rather than in my Kevlar boat.

Ice breaking in a kayak is fun, but you don't move very fast. You chop the paddle down to punch a hole in the ice, then using that anchor point you slide ahead until the boat's weight breaks the ice beneath it. With only six or eight feet of ice left between me and open water, I brought my paddle down to make one last anchor point; instead of punching a hole in the ice, the blade hit and skidded across it. I was suddenly upside down. I made two unsuccessful attempts to roll up and



while both attempts got my head above water, neither was good enough for me to stay upright. I'd never had a problem with gasp reflex underwater, but I was definitely gasping when I surfaced.

I bailed out and came up on the left side of the boat. My first thought was: "You have minutes to do something." I could feel the icy water on my legs. I had chosen not to wear a wetsuit, assuming I wouldn't need one for a flat-water paddle. Previously our club's coldest day out paddling had been 9° F and I had worn a drysuit that day, but the suit had worn out since then and I hadn't replaced it. Unfortunately on this day, the coldest I had paddled solo, I was in trouble wearing only a poly base layer and a fleece pullover under nylon pants and a water-proof jacket. Only my neo gloves worked well in the water. My cap had fallen in the water and I threw it in the cockpit, but I didn't notice the cold on my head.

I turned the boat upright and popped the cover off the back hatch. It was a simple matter to grab the paddle float. I had it mostly inflated before I thought to put it on the paddle. During the paddle-float rescue I put my foot on the paddle to climb in, and the boat leaned over taking water into the cockpit and open back hatch. I knew this wasn't working but didn't immediately grasp why. Thinking it was better to call for help too soon rather than too late, I opened my drybag and found my cell phone. I was afraid I would drop it into the water so I held it over the open hatch. That made it hard to see the keys to dial 911. The call to 911 failed twice; then I noticed there wasn't any signal strength showing on the screen. This was odd since I'd heard my phone signaling an incoming message shortly after launching and I'd made calls from the shore on other days.

I thought that if I could swim the boat through the remaining ice, the current would carry me toward the car while I worked on a self-rescue. It soon became evident I could not swim through quarter-inch thick ice as fast as I needed to. The thought crossed my mind that maybe I should tie myself to the boat to make it easier to find my body, but I wasn't willing to give up yet.

It then dawned on me that I had not finished inflating my paddle float. That explained the failure of the first self-rescue. I blew more air into the float and tried again. I was able to get myself belly down on top of the boat and even take a moment to slide the paddle under the bungee more securely. As I started to rotate my body upright, a wrong shift

of my weight dumped me back into the water on the right side of the boat, away from the outrigger. This was probably the low point for me. Fortunately, the partly flooded boat did not flip and dump all my gear into the water. I once again repeated my mantra for the day—"you have only minutes"—and I kept moving. Pulling my marine radio from the deck bag I struggled to control my gasping, then made a Mayday call twice and listened for a reply. Silence. Changing the power from one to five watts I tried the Mayday call again. Still no reply. That's when it really sank in that I was on my own.

Moving the paddle float to the right side I saw my pump in the hatch and put it in the cockpit. Then, gingerly climbing onto the flooded boat, I was able to get completely out of the water. I took a minute to rest. The rest of the paddle-float rescue went just as it's supposed to with one hitch, sitting up in the cockpit I realized I was on top of my pump. If I'd had feeling in my lower extremities I'm sure it would have been uncomfortable.

A couple attempts to reach the pump convinced me the flooded boat was too unstable to risk pulling the pump out. It was under my right hip on the seat and the float was now on that side. I'm not sure of my thought process at the time but I didn't feel I could get it out without shifting my weight to the left and capsizing again to that side. I knew I couldn't survive going in the water again. Deciding not to remove the paddle float, I very gingerly retrieved my spare paddle. The three inches of water in the cockpit didn't help with the cold I felt or my stability. Working through the remaining ice was uneventful and soon I was in open water.

Paddling back was a slow, methodical process. I remember trying to reach the pump once or twice and was stopped by the boat's lack of stability. I remembered a chemical hot pack in my jacket pocket. I felt around but it was under my PFD and I wasn't willing to tempt fate by trying to get it out. I did take a moment to drink from my hydration pack. I hadn't realized till then how thirsty I had become.

It was about one half mile to the car and for the last several minutes I noticed my vision getting dark around the edges and a roaring in my ears that almost covered the usual river noises. I don't really remember shivering much during the paddle. Pulling into shallow water and attempting to dismount resulted in landing on my butt in six inches of water. The next attempt got me on my feet and I dragged the boat ashore. I immediately went to the car and got it started.

Before long I had wet gear spread out all over the landing. My PFD and wet clothes were scattered on the ground, the roof racks and roof of the car. I changed into dry clothes but I didn't remove my soaking briefs. I don't know why, but that certainly caused me to take longer warming up.

Back in the car I got a couple drinks of Gatorade but I was soon shivering violently. I found a chemical hot pack and stuck it to my shirt near my armpit. Weighing my options, I knew I couldn't load my boat and I wasn't willing to leave it unattended.

With my cell phone now working and slightly damp, I called my friend Mark. He lives nearby and we often share rides to and from trips. As soon as I spoke Mark asked what was wrong with me. Hearing I'd taken a swim and needed help loading my boat was all it took to get him on the way.

A few minutes later a car with two men and a pickup with another guy pulled up. Seeing the debris field between the car and the water and taking one look at me, the pickup driver came over and asked if I needed help. They all offered to load my boat, so with minimal instruction and even less real help from me they pumped it out, put it on the roof rack, tied it down and helped me pick up the scattered gear. I was still shivering violently, so the pickup driver urged me to get back in the car, saying he'd stay till Mark got there. Most people on the river are decent, hardworking souls. These guys were some of the best.

Within a few minutes Mark arrived and the pickup driver left before I could properly thank him. Looking over the situation, Mark took my Gatorade and began heating it on an alcohol stove he'd brought with him. I have to say hot grape Gatorade tastes terrible, but it felt really good!

Sitting in my car Mark gave me another hot pack and found that I had turned the car's blower on high but hadn't turned the heat up. He dialed it up and that helped warm me, but not nearly as much as the warm drink. Fortunately, Mark had put it in a spill-proof cup or I would have worn it. He still had to do a lot of coaching to get me to drink. I tended to just hold the warm cup, pant and shiver unless told to do otherwise.

The warm drink worked its magic quickly. Even though Mark had offered to follow me home and help unload, by the time we reached the highway I told him I could make it on my own and we parted ways. I had nagging thoughts that someone may have heard my Mayday call and started an unnecessary search,

safety

so I phoned the lock and dam to make sure someone knew what happened. The lady who answered the phone told me they only monitor Channel 12 for lock operations and do not monitor Coast Guard Channel 16. No search had been initiated.

When I got home I put together a timeline from time stamps on the camera and cell phone. The 911 calls weren't completed so they didn't register in the phone log.

About 12:15 – Launch
12:21 – First photo
1:20 – Last photo at the head of Jim Crow Island
1:35 – Video of buoy
2:21 – Called Mark
3:40 – Called lock and dam

Time was a very relative thing that day, but I'm estimating I spent about ten minutes in thirty-something-degree water. Assuming I dumped about ten minutes after the video and called Mark about ten minutes after landing, that leaves sixteen minutes to paddle from near the head of Turners Island to the ramp just over one-half mile away.

Lessons Learned

I had filed a float plan. My wife knew where I was going and when I planned to be back. However, given the limited survival time in cold water, a float plan may have only indicated where to look for the body. The single best thing that I did was never give up. Every time one attempt failed, I moved to the next. While I was making calls for help I was thinking of what to try next. I knew even if a call for help got out, I had to get back aboard my kayak. Staying in the water till help arrived would have been fatal. Paddling upstream first is always a good idea. Whether you're tired, hurt, or just late it's always best to have the easy downstream or downwind leg at the end of the day.

What I did wrong: Not listening to my wife. Even if things go well, that's always a bad idea. Going solo is not necessarily wrong but when you do, it has to influence every decision you make from then on. Going into the navigation channel was probably OK; my decision to cross the channel between ice floes was questionable. Deciding to break through the ice was definitely a bad choice. Getting among ice floes at any time can be dangerous. If the ice had jammed up on an island or sandbar, the current would

have crushed the floes together. Being caught in its midst would be dangerous for a person in a boat and almost certainly fatal for a swimmer.

Not dressing for immersion in 30° water was a critical mistake. I didn't then own a drysuit, but even my wetsuit would have kept me much warmer. Proper cold-water immersion wear would have led to better composure, fewer mistakes and a quicker self-rescue. I wear a wetsuit when paddling whitewater where the odds are good I will roll and probably swim, and the protection it offers makes a big difference.

Several weeks after the incident a friend pointed out a sale on semi-dry suits. My wife insisted I get one, so I did. I wasn't going to repeat the mistake of not listening her.

Doing a radio check before launching would have told me no one in the area was monitoring Channel 16. The lock tenders monitor Channels 12 or 14 and while they have no capacity for rescues, they could have called 911 for me.

I hadn't been practicing rolling last summer as much as usual. In the ice I think I rushed and overpowered the Greenland paddle. The paddle works best for me with a very slow sweep and more of a gentle knee lift than a hip snap. I feel my roll is less reliable with a Euro paddle but with it I complete half of my rolls in cold whitewater. All of my failed rolls have been in shallow whitewater where I'm bouncing off rocks and can't seem to get set up properly. In the past I have sometimes dealt with an unsuccessful roll by switching to a sculling roll, which may have worked in the ice had I thought to try it.

I demonstrate paddle-float rescues at our club's safety clinics but because it's a technique I feel confident with, I don't regularly practice it. More practice may have helped it work the first time. Leaving the paddle float and pump where they were stored in the back hatch was another critical mistake. Had I placed the pump and float in their normal position on the back deck, when the first reentry attempt failed, the kayak's buoyancy would not have been compromised by water getting into the open rear compartment. Had the pump been secured in its place it would have been available to clear the cockpit after my successful reentry. Without the pump under me I would have had my weight lower in the boat and therefore would have been more stable. Getting the water out of the kayak would also have restored its stability.

I survived the day more intact than I had any right to expect. I had two palm-sized bruises on my right thigh, perhaps

from sliding out of the thigh brace during the wet exit, and right calf probably from the coaming. I also had some numbness of the skin in my midsection. My doctor said it was inflammation of the nerves. It's almost totally gone and improving. He also said my darkening vision was possibly low blood pressure brought on by shock or hypothermia. He explained that during initial submersion all the blood vessels constrict, forcing blood into your core. As hypothermia gets worse you lose the ability to constrict the vessels and they relax, dropping your blood pressure—the same effect that shock has. The doctor thought that dropping blood pressure would have caused the roaring in my ears.

I think about that day a lot and it will definitely influence my decisions on future trips. Two days after the swim my wife and I went to see the movie *The Wolfman*. One of the characters was in an 1880s mental institution and as part of his "therapy" he's strapped to a chair and lowered into a tank of ice water. That was hard to watch and caused me to tense up enough that my wife asked if I was OK.

Time can take on new meaning as quickly as a kayak can flip. Resting on a warm beach we can while away a few minutes with barely a thought. Submerged in icy water gasping repeatedly as your body reacts to it's warmth streaming away in the current, every thought races past and you try to grasp their importance and cling onto the thoughts that will help you. Our comprehension of the river can change just as quickly as we make the transition from kayaker to swimmer. Sure it's just a flat-water paddle—so what if it's colder than last time I was here? It's easy to dismiss these concerns because we have no intention of swimming. But we can't control the water, and that's part of what draws us to it. When we make that sudden transition from kayaker to swimmer, the outcome hinges on choices we've already made, maybe days before, when we were on land, warm and dry. Good decisions should come and go instinctively. But you will ponder a poor decision for the rest of your life, be that decades or minutes. **SK**

Randy's video of the river ice colliding with the buoy can be viewed at: www.seakayakermag.com/Resources/links.htm

Randy Morgart works for the Federal Aviation Administration and has been kayaking since 1997 and canoeing since 1972. He is the vice president of the St. Louis Canoe and Kayak Club.