



[Operation Drywater is critical year-round](#)

Aug 3 2012 in [Seamanship](#), by Vincent Pica



Operation DryWater was launched in 2009 to raise awareness about the dangers of drinking and boating. Photo courtesy of Joseph Carro, U.S. Coast Guard Boating Safety Division

Operation DryWater, an annual campaign focused on enforcing drunk boating laws, was carried out June 22 to 24 in communities across the U.S. Though the campaign has been a success, it's important to remain focused on the underlying issues as boaters are out on the water enjoying the remaining weeks of summer.

Are We Tough Enough?

Speaking for myself, I just don't think we are. Drunk driving, whether that be in a car or in a boat, is one place where I actually feel the legal penalties are too lenient. If a person, uninfluenced by booze, drove a car or a boat recklessly and hurt or even killed someone, they would get a more severe sentencing in many jurisdictions than doing the same thing while drunk — “under the influence,” as the legal description goes.

I think it should be the opposite. If you had the forethought to take a drink or two before driving,

you had better be thinking of the consequences. But that is just me.

In past ages, drinking and still being able to drive, whether that be a car or boat, might have been considered a badge of honor in certain circles. Today, thank goodness, it is considered reckless lunacy. And the factors that impact alcohol impairment are even more pronounced on the water than on land.

Oh, That Swaying Feeling

Often when I come in from a boat ride with the family, some of the more lubberly members of the family say, “I can still feel the swaying!” If they happen to jump in the shower, it really gets intensified and they joke that they had to hold on to the shower wall to keep from tipping over!

This is clear evidence of the dramatic impact the marine environment has on the body’s sensory perception system. While boating, we are confronted with conflicting information from the eyes, feet and inner ear. The horizon is constantly moving — up, down and sideways — as the boat moves beneath our feet. Our conscious brain has no problem with intellectualizing this. But the unconscious part of our brain is getting sensory overload. This can result in reactions ranging from slight queasiness to absolutely debilitating nausea.

The marine environment is full of stressors — the sun, glare and vibrations, to name a few. Stressors intensify the effects of alcohol, drugs and some medications. They can cause fatigue, reduced coordination, weak judgment and slow reaction time. And forget about the vision of the St. Bernard saving you from the cold by giving you brandy. Alcohol makes the body more susceptible to the effects of cold water, not less.

Not surprisingly, all of this adds up to boating accidents. U.S. Coast Guard data shows that in boating deaths involving driving under the influence, more than half the victims capsized their boats and/or fell overboard. Over 1 in 5 boating deaths are linked to the use of alcohol.

The Law

Every state in the U.S. prohibits the operation of a boat while under the influence of alcohol. The U.S. Coast Guard, as a federal entity, enforces a federal law that prohibits Boating Under the Influence (BUI). This law pertains to every vessel, foreign or domestic, operating in U.S. waters, as well as U.S. vessels on the high seas. Penalties may include fines, jail, and impoundment of boats and, in some states, the loss of boating and/or driving privileges.

Real Risks VS. Real Consequences

Essential boat-operating skills adversely affected by alcohol or drug use include:

- Peripheral vision

- Night vision
- Inhibitions
- Ability to distinguish colors
- Cognitive abilities
- Judgment
- Balance
- Coordination
- Reaction time

Boating under the influence of alcohol or drugs could cost you:

- Someone else's life
- Your own life
- Your driver's license
- The time, expense and shame of an arrest
- A fine
- Boat repairs from an accident
- Property damage from an accident
- Medical treatment

Back in 2009, **Operation DryWater** was started in partnership with the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators and partner agencies. It is a national weekend of BUI detection and enforcement aimed at reducing the number of alcohol-related accidents and fatalities, and fostering a stronger and more visible deterrent to alcohol use on the water. Zero tolerance is of course the posture, then and now.

Put simply, booze kills.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing...”