



National Center for Cold Water Safety

Failure To Inflate PFD

Dr. Ken Mirman's Story

Retired physician Ken Mirman was boating in Maine. While stepping from his 21-foot Bayliner into a plastic tender for a trip to shore, he fell in the water. This is his account of that incident:

“My immediate thought was "I have to get out of this water quickly". My tender floated away. I had the sense, presumably good sense, not to try to retrieve it. I simply grabbed onto the Bayliner. I was wearing a manually inflatable PFD. As you mentioned in your talk, I did not think of inflating it.

I worked my way to the stern to board the boat. At this point I thought "how am I going to get in?". I considered trying to step on the motor (a stern drive). The boat has a setup for water skiing. I decided to lift one knee up to the platform while holding onto a rail. I was unable to lift myself into the boat. Fortunately, the boat had a towing ring in the center of the stern and I have a long wingspan. I grabbed the ring and with some difficulty was able to get aboard.

Upon reflecting upon my experience, I realized I did not inflate my PFD. I now wear a fully automatic one. Also, it dawned on me that directly beneath the platform, there is a small pull out ladder. All I had to do is pull it out and use it to easily board the boat. I concluded that I didn't think about it because I never board the boat using the ladder. Of note, I often boat alone. I had previously owned an inflatable Zodiac and had rigged a nylon step to make it easier to reenter. Subsequently, I did what you have suggested: **Imagine the Worst That Could Happen and Plan for It.**"

Case Note: it's not uncommon for people to fail to inflate a manually activated PFD (Lifejacket). When the water is cold, the physical shock and mental disorientation caused by sudden immersion make rational thinking very difficult or impossible. Subsequent drownings occur because the victims either gasp when underwater and never resurface, or experience swimming failure and drown due to lack of floatation – even though they're wearing it.