

At-sea rescue made possible by the activation of a personal locator beacon

Earlier this year, two local fishing boats with failed engines were rescued by the Tuvaluan authorities on two separate occasions. Both rescues were made possible by the successful use of a personal locator beacon (PLB) – a device provided to local fishermen as part of a “safety grab bag”, which includes life-saving equipment distributed by the Tuvalu Fisheries Department (TFD). The first incident occurred on Nukufetau Island on 27 February, while the second took place on Funafuti Island.

In both instances, the boats were trolling for tuna when problems arose. In the first incident, the lone fisherman (Lonese Natano) from the island of Nukufetau drifted for more than 24 hours. In an interview with fisheries officers, Lonese, who was a sailor in his younger years, stated that the problem began on his way back to the island. The propeller on his outboard engine had become disengaged, most likely due to wear and tear, and this subsequently led to the loss of propulsion. At this point, he was a mere 100 meters from the breakers and the sun was setting quickly.

Lonese admitted to being well aware of what the problem was but nightfall prevented any useful attempt to fix it. Realising there was little he could do other than wait until daylight, he began tying together all of the fishing lines on board together to make one very long line. He weighted the end of this line with a piece of metal that he carried onboard before dropping the line into the water. The piece of metal and fishing line acted together as an anchor and anchor rode, which was extremely helpful because it allowed him to take the time to fix his engine. With the island still within sight in the early hours of the next day, he pulled in his makeshift anchor and anchor rode and started heading back to land at a very slow speed.

But his problems were not over yet. About midday, all his fuel reserves were exhausted and the island was still at some great distance away. Without panicking, the improvised anchor and line was dropped once again. He waited patiently until 16:00, but with no luck, he decided it was time to activate the PLB that was part of the safety grab bag equipment he carried onboard. He activated it for only 15 minutes, but it was enough time for the New Zealand Maritime Surveillance Authority to receive the distress signal, and to issue an alert and warn the Tuvalu Police Department about the situation.

The Police Department requested the assistance of a local passenger boat, *Nivaga 2*, which was directed to the location of the distress signal. At 18:00, only a couple of hours after the distress signal had been activated, *Nivaga 2* found and picked up Lonese who was about three to four miles from shore.



In both incidents, the propeller was the faulty part. This picture of Lonese Natano's propeller was taken after the boat was rescued (image: Semese Alefaio, TFD).

The second incident involved two Funafuti fishermen. Semi Saaga and Foe Taalava went trolling offshore of Funafatu, one of the Funafuti Islets, at 08:00 on 28 February 2017.

The incident began at 16:00 when they left the fishing grounds to head back home. Their outboard motor propeller broke down because their fishing line had become wrapped around the prop when they started the engine. They tried contacting help using their walkie talkie until 18:00, but got no response. They then activated the PLB from their safety grab bag. The two men agreed to take turns keeping a lookout for help while their boat drifted.

The two fishermen's families reported their failure to return to the police in the hope that the police would look for the two fishermen late that evening. By then, however, the Tuvalu Search and Rescue team had already received a message from New Zealand and was taking action. The *Te Mataili* (Tuvalu's Patrol Boat) found the two fishermen 7.5 miles away from the island at 23:00.

Safely on land, one of the fishermen described the incident and explained how handy the grab bag had been. He recommended that every fisherman should have

¹ See a more detailed account of the rescue operations on page 20 of this issue.

² <http://www.tuvalufisheries.tv/2017/03/fishermen-adrift-for-15-hours-and-the-convenience-of-grab-bags/>



Sea safety training session for fishers from Vaitupu Island, Tuvalu (image: Semese Alefaio, TFD).



These grab bags have been distributed to fishers from Nukulaelae Island, Tuvalu, after a sea safety training session (image: Tupulaga Poulasi, TFD)

one and carry it for every fishing trip, just in case of the unexpected.

For some islands, it is mandatory that a grab bag be onboard for every fishing trip, and this is being strictly enforced through the appointment of a fisheries warden in charge of regular checks.

One problem is that there are not enough grab bags for every fishing boat operator in Tuvalu. TFD, the agency responsible for the fisheries Sea Safety Program (SSP), reported that the current number of grab bags already procured and distributed to local fishermen is 168. This number represents about 44% of the total number of fishing vessels (boats and canoes) in 2016. Current grab bag donations were received from the Pacific Community

(30), the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) II of the United Nations Development Programme (82), and the New Zealand Aid Programme (56).

TFD was extremely grateful for the donations, and disclosed that such donations have been a great boost to its SSP, both in terms of delivery and the positive impacts they have had in relation to search and rescue operations, as demonstrated by these two recent rescues.

Traditionally, SSP is executed through radio outreach programmes but this has changed since the introduction of grab bags, for which more practical training has been introduced. The focus of practical trainings has been on the correct use of all life-saving devices, including the grab bag, as well as basic sea safety and at-sea survival training. SSP trainings are carried out by local fisheries officers on an island-by-island basis.

In addition to addressing the issue of insufficient numbers of grab bags, TFD is hoping to improve communication between local fishing vessels and the islands. All of these efforts have direct bearing on the national search and rescue plan, which has been in draft form since November 2016 and should be finalised soon.

For more information:

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