

CRUISING WORLD

Geoff Hales

TIDY TENDER OR VERSATILE SURVIVAL CRAFT?

The British-built Tinker inflatable fits both bills.

The Tinker line of inflatable boats – the Tramp, Traveller and Star Traveller – are remarkably good yacht tenders. Not only do they power well with a small outboard, but with an optional sailing rig they are smart performers ideal for exploring a new anchorage or teaching youngsters to sail.

Two years ago I was idly reading a Tinker brochure with other thoughts in mind. The boat had always impressed me because of its clever design and its acceptance by such national authorities as the Trinity House Lighthouse Service and the British Design Council.

But on this particular occasion I was pondering the idea that the Tinker could be used as a last-ditch survival boat –complete with its optional survival package including inflatable survival canopy, CO2 inflation equipment and drogue –that could actually allow a crew to sail toward their best chance of rescue. I wondered if it would work and decided that I had better find out rather than just think about it. So, during a particularly cold spell last winter a friend and I spent quite a long time in one and proved that, in reality, the principle could indeed work well.

A Worthwhile Experiment

What I thought was the end of the experiment, however, proved to be only the beginning. A while later, Jock Henshaw, whose company built the Tinkers to the late Fred Benyon-Tinker's designs, met with experts from the National Maritime Institute (NMI), a British Government nautical research bureau.

They suggested that in a survival situation the boat's drogue should be streamed from the side of the boat rather than from the bow. Most of us would agree that, since the Tinker is "boat shaped" (unlike ballasted life rafts, which are circular), the bow deployment was a normal, seamanlike procedure. But the NMI argued that their tests showed that a boat (or a life raft) was at risk when the wind could get under the hull. The possibility of capsizing then increased dramatically. They reasoned that, with the boat laying across the wind, or beam on, the boat's narrow beam and slightly raised floor between the hulls would make it very difficult for the wind to get underneath.

Tank tests proved them right. But Jock planned and then achieved further improvements. The early, frame-supported canopy has since been replaced, as noted, by an inflatable type, which has four times the buoyancy of either hull. The accompanying photographs show the initial trials of the inflatable-type canopy in the rough, open sea. In the open ocean trials, along with myself, Jock had the assistance of Graham Adams, whose life raft railed (by continually turning over and finally starting to disintegrate) after his yacht sank last year. Graham barely survived but his companion did not and, since then, he has been trying to educate yachtsmen and persuade them to consider their safety seriously and not just hope it is a problem that will never concern them.

My desire to participate in the trials was based largely on the fact that I thought it would be good experience in case I ever had to go through it in earnest. Silly as it may sound, I found the experience highly enjoyable (probably because it was so easy and everything felt well under control). I expected claustrophobia and perhaps even sheer fear when we ultimately inverted the Tinker (I like being on the water, not under it) but neither sensation occurred, for reasons that I will explain.

Although the earlier NMI trials showed there was virtually no chance of a drogue-assisted Tinker capsizing, we practiced this extensively. Our reasoning was that with a normal life raft that has capsized, the act of getting out, righting it and getting in again in time to stop the raft from capsizing once more, seems to be at the heart of survival. It's obviously an exhausting process that few people can repeat very often before giving up the effort as being non-productive and a waste of energy.

We found that with two people aboard, the Tinker could be rolled over onto its roof if one leaned hard enough against the canopy. The two inhabitants were still supported clear of the water by the air in the canopy and, in fact, it was almost too comfortable to be considered a survival experience. The biggest discomfort was in turning one's head at the right moment to ensure that any water which had collected inside the boat did not land on one's face during the inversion! Whereas with a raft one would have been trapped inside and forced to struggle out to right it, with the Tinker it was simply a matter of leaning against the floor and back she went. We later found that one person could also do this unaided. The effort involved was very slight and the reboarding struggle totally avoided.

Even so, by the nature of the design, the boat is easily boarded. The Tinker bow, although designed with good sailing performance in mind, provides an ideal boarding platform. It is low and very easy to slide oneself onto (or to pull someone else aboard). It would, therefore, be reasonable to assume it has inadequate buoyancy in bad weather, but it proved otherwise. Because it is quite wide, there is ample buoyancy to support a 200-pound man. In tests, the combined weight of a (simulated) unconscious survivor and the person pulling him aboard did not put the bow under.

What more could one ask? Perhaps the one major item would be that for yacht clubs that require a life raft aboard when racing, the Tinker would be considered an adequate alternative, or even an improvement. This, happily, has happened. On the evidence of the NMI tank tests and after seeing the new inflatable canopy, the Royal Western Yacht Club of England decided that a Tinker was acceptable as a survival means for the 1984 OSTAR. So, last August, three competitors, including myself, set off from Plymouth, England, with Tinkers aboard.

I have summarised the arguments with regard to life rafts below and these will explain why I chose to go with a Tinker.

The Problems with Life Rafts

If one were to list his reservations about life rafts, the following items might be included:

- Risk of overturning in heavy seas, trapping the occupants
- Difficult to right when capsized
- Difficult to reboard, due to height above water and because with the weight at the lee end, the chance of the raft capsizing is increased due to wind lifting the exposed windward end
- Very difficult for one occupant to provide sufficient weight to stop the wind from getting beneath the raft and flipping it over (unless it is a one or two person raft)
- Susceptible to tears and leaks in bad weather
- Expensive maintenance with no guarantee that when it is actually released from its canister it will work

The Tinker Alternative

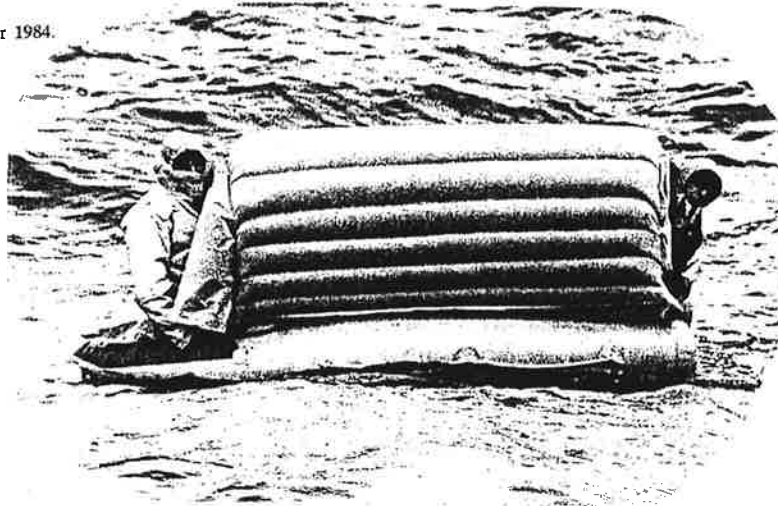
No one can guarantee to have solved all these problems but the Tinker design has greatly reduced the risk of most of them occurring at all. For example:

- Tinkers use an NMI-drogue that cannot tangle, and which has a much better chance than the other models of keeping tension on the line, thus holding the boat more securely.
- Because the drogue is streamed from the side of the "boat-shaped" craft, the weather side cannot lift and the wind cannot get beneath it, except in extreme conditions. Tank tests supervised by the NMI have shown that life rafts capsize in much lower winds than Tinkers.
- The Tinker inflatable canopy has more buoyancy than the four-compartment hulls (complete with their solid floor), so in the event of capsizing there is enough buoyancy for at least two people to sit on the "roof" and be clear of the water. It is easy for one person to right the boat by simply leaning against the floor from inside the boat.
- In contrast with the difficulty in climbing over the side of a life raft, it's easy to climb into the Tinker over the bow which, though low, still has ample buoyancy to support one person.
- Because the Tinker (with canopy easily removed) is also your every-day dinghy, you know how it works and that it was recently serviced – when you last used it.
- The Tinker takes perhaps 10 minutes to convert from a tender to a life raft (this should be done as part of the routine preparations for going to sea), so it is little effort to practice in warm, pleasant conditions whenever it suits you.
- Although not inexpensive, the Tinker costs less than a typical inflatable dinghy and life raft. It has won a Yachting World magazine One-Of-A-Kind Rally and a Design Council Award. Tinkers are used, 12 months of the year, by the Trinity House Lighthouse Service, which says a lot for construction and reliability.
- If you take the sailing rig when you abandon ship, once the storm has abated you can sail towards your best chance of rescue.
- In the happy event that you do not need to use it as a lifeboat, you still have a first-class inflatable, power and sailing dinghy.

Personally, I feel the Tinker is the ideal tender for cruising yachts because it fills so many needs so well. Each model comes with a five-year guarantee. For complete information contact: Henshaw Inflatables Limited, Bennetts Field Trading Estate, Wincanton, Somerset BA9 9DT, England.

A marine consultant and sailing writer, Geoff Hales of Great Britain started the 1984 OSTAR aboard the 29 foot Prout catamaran, Quest for Charity. He was forced to withdraw with a badly leaking hull soon after the start, but happily did not require the services of his Tinker tender.

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Postscript – when Geoff Hales wrote the above article for *Cruising World* in 1984 little did he know that in June 1991 he would have to use his Tinker Tramp in a real life drama when he and Andrew Webster were taking part in the Azores and Back Race. 250 miles from the finish line they lost the keel from their boat "Minitec" and subsequently spent 6 days in their Tinker Lifeboat – thankfully they were then rescued by the Portugese Navy. Geoff said "I had done the sea trials but this was for real and the Tinker performed beautifully" A full article detailing this adventure is available from Henshaw Inflatables on request.