

Marlinespike Seamanship

By Ted Walsh

Knives

A good knife is a pretty indispensable tool to have on a boat, or anywhere else for that matter (ask Judy how she got out of the bathroom at work when she accidentally got locked in). There are plenty of styles and types of knives to choose from without even touching on multi-tool knives. Whatever type of knife you prefer, however, there are some basic truths about knives that are worth a quick review:

First, a knife should always be handled with care. There are numerous ways to get hurt on a boat, cutting yourself with your own knife should not be one of them.

Second, keep your knife sharp. This might seem counterintuitive to the first item, but the reality is a dull knife is more dangerous to use. More force is needed to make the blade do what you want it to, which leads to slips and losing control of the blade.

Third, a knife is first and foremost a tool. If your knife is so valuable, or so precious that you are afraid of using it, then it should be left at home. Put your heirloom in a glass case and carry something that won't make you cry if it falls overboard. I repeat it is first and foremost a tool.

Fourth, well-used knives wear out; it is okay to replace them. The type I carry with me all the time wears out and gets replaced about every three years.

Fifth, it is okay to have more than one. Judy carries a folding Navy issue knife with marlinespike. I carry a two-blade Swiss army knife pretty much all the time. We also have several aboard our Friendship, a large fixed-blade sheep's foot knife for heavy rigging work, and two different sizes of folding rigging knives in the rigging bag and in the make-and-mend bag.

Sixth, dropping a knife is a bad idea. Dropping a knife overboard is also a bad idea.

This brings up the topic of lanyards and there is no hard-and-fast rule here. The problem with knife lanyards is that they tend to get caught on everything as you move around the boat, which in itself can be a dangerous situation. Lanyards can also get in the way when you are working and make knife work more difficult. On the other hand going aloft, out on the bowsprit, or hanging over the side without your knife on a lanyard is asking for trouble. Just as we have several different kinds of knives on board, so too we have several different lanyards on board and can whip one up in a hurry too if needed. (A future marlinespike will be devoted to knife lanyards).

Seventh, did I mention that dropping a knife is a really bad idea? When you are not using it, your knife should be kept in such a way that it couldn't fall out of a sheath or pocket onto a deck or someone's foot.

A few notes on knives in general:

Folding knives: these should have a good stiff spring. A good spring is critical to not having the knife accidentally close on your fingers. If the spring gets soft, get a new knife. The best folding knives lock open and lock closed. What I like best about folding knives is that they fit in a pocket making them harder to drop.

Sheath Knives: the sheath is as important as the knife. No matter what type of blade or handle you prefer, the bottom line is, if you can't get it back into the sheath without stabbing yourself, it's not safe to use. If the knife falls out of the sheath, it is dangerous. One more thing on sheath knives, it should have a hole in the handle to attach a lanyard. If it doesn't, leave it at home or use it for cooking.

Serrated blade or straight blade: this is mostly a question of use and preference. A serrated blade is better for cutting through a line in a hurry but a straight blade will make a cleaner cut without pulling apart strands.

