

September 18, 2012



The ACA Instructor Certification Exam



It's been a while since I posted. Life got busy with some big projects at work, some home renovations, and, most importantly, being a father and husband. I went a few weeks without being on the water, but was trying to steal a few minutes every day to prep for the ACA sea kayak Instructor Certification Exam with Sam Crowley on September 14 – 16.

Earlier in the year, I wrote about the Instructor Development Workshop that I did with Sam as part of my preparation for the Instructor Certificate Exam (ICE). Based on that excellent learning experience, I was counting on the ICE being equally fulfilling . . . and it didn't disappoint in any way.

I was nervous about how the weekend was going to go, since I worked long hours for seven straight days beforehand and didn't finish a major work project until about 20 minutes before I left. I was so behind on my preparations that I literally grabbed everything from the paddling closet and threw it in the car, hoping that my gear was all in the pile, then sped to OfficeMax to print my Introduction to Navigation and Pilotage lesson plan since the home printer ran out of ink as I was trying to print the documents! That is not how I prefer to start an assessment of my skill and knowledge!

I pulled into Bay Cliff Health Camp in Big Bay, Michigan, around 8:00pm and instantly felt more relaxed. Autumn was in the air and on the leaves, plus there was an amazing sunset glow on the clouds as I came down the hill into Big Bay. A few deep breaths later, I was centered, relaxed, and ready for the ICE.



Walking into camp from the parking lot, I saw Nancy sitting on a bench waiting for the other participants. So far, only Kevin from Madison had arrived, and John and Anna (from Houghton), Ahna (from Stevens Point), and Kip (from Green Bay) were all still on their way. On the walk up to my room, I ran into Sam and Dick Silberman, both of whom had already been there for a few hours. A few minutes later, Kip arrived, followed by John, Anna, and, around midnight, Ahna. The whole crew was together for the first time at breakfast in the Big House on Friday morning.

The group had a broad mix of experience and backgrounds. John, Kevin, and Kip were all current ACA instructors of various levels and were all looking to upgrade to a higher level. Ahna, Anna, and I were all new to the ACA process and were pursuing our first ACA certifications. As a former BCU Instructor with 21 years of paddling experience, I was the most experienced on paper, but John, Kevin, Kip, and Ahna all had much more recent teaching experience. It was, without doubt, a capable and eager group of instructor candidates and we were all ready to paddle! A few of us – if

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Blog by: Jerney Vore

not all of us – were hoping for Level 4 conditions, which were required for assessment at the Level 4 certification.

Day 1 – Friday's sunrise revealed a steel gray Lake Superior and the windows in the dining hall offered a perfect view of the dark clouds that were being torn apart by Northerly winds at altitude. We started with a few classroom presentations on our various teaching topics (mine was an introduction to navigation by pilotage) and some ACA paperwork. While we did that, the winds picked up at Lake Level and the waves started to roll. Our Level 4 conditions were being delivered in short order!

After lunch, we made our way down to the Big Bay Harbor and launched. After a few games and warm ups, we left the safety of the breakwaters and proceeded to demonstrate our surfing skills in 1 1/2 to 2 foot waves on the South side of the harbor mouth. Over the next hour or so, we bounced around in the surf while the waves built to 2 – 2 1/2 feet.

Knowing what Sam, Nancy, and Dick were looking for, it was a huge confidence booster and an indicator that things were going well when they asked me to break off from the group being assessed and work with one of the other participants who was new to the surf zone. We spent the rest of the surf session practicing boat handling in the surf zone and the other participant became visibly more comfortable in the waves by the time we wrapped up.

Next, John and I were asked to lead the group from our current location to the windward side of the breakwater. We hadn't spoken about our leadership preferences ahead of time, so I jumped in – as I tend to do – and declared a point and sweep paddler, while John and I would move among the group monitoring comfort in the conditions and keeping everyone together.

That approach worked well, and we all arrived safely, but John and I later had a great discussion about leading groups on the water. He would have preferred to do it exactly opposite of the way I did, with defined side paddlers and the two of us serving as point and sweep. I don't think approach was wrong, we both still preferred our own methods, and we both clearly articulated our preferences and thought process. Altogether, the differences in group management were far less important than our ability to explain why.

Once we arrived at the windward side of the breakwater, Evil Sam's awesome brother, Fun Sam, had us paddle within a few inches of the rusted, metal barrier in the reflecting waves and clapotis, then surf the 3 to 4 foot, confused seas. I am sure I was smiling like an idiot the entire time! After demonstrating surf landing and launching on the beach, we moved back inside the harbor for a break and a snack.

Then, it was back into the teeth of the gale for assisted and solo rescues in Level 4 conditions. I partnered with Anna, who got me back in my boat faster than any of the other pairs during our assisted rescue and who cheered me on mightily while I did my paddle float solo rescue and three required rolls in 60 seconds.

With that, day 1 ended, we all ate massive servings of homemade baked chicken, potatoes, and chocolate cake, then collapsed in our beds, exhausted, sore, and smiling.

Day 2 – dawned with a moderate breeze and waves around 1 foot. After a group pancake breakfast, we met in the classroom for a debrief of the previous day's surf and rough water session and a few teaching method and theory presentations from the Instructor Trainer (IT) staff. Around 10:00am, we left the classroom and made our way to the Harbor for some water time. Our time on the water was spent teaching various strokes and participating in activities. Each of us was assigned a single stroke, ranging from sweeps to sculling draws to bow rudders. Mine was a hanging draw, which I presented with the Describe-Demonstrate-Do and Whole-Part-Whole methodology endorsed by Sam and the ACA.

As part of each stroke presentation, we had to move the group to a new location. Because there were only a few spots in the harbor that were sheltered from the lake breeze, we ended up paddling back and forth between those three or four spots for the rest of the morning and all became quite versed at moving around the harbor! Everyone did a wonderful job presenting their strokes and we all enjoyed both the basic and advanced strokes that were presented.

Sam, Nancy, and Dick organized a number of great activities for the strokes, but my nemesis for the weekend quickly made himself known. John and his nimble, spry P & H Ares (not to mention his excellent paddling skill and experience) managed to whip his boat around every point and cut to the inside of me in every activity. No matter how perfectly I turned my Cetus MV on the various obstacle courses, he out turned and out maneuvered me every time! If it hadn't been so much fun and he hadn't been such a good friend and paddler, I might have snipped his skeg cord during lunch.

Speaking of lunch, after we finished our morning teaching demonstrations, we ate at the harbor and returned to the water for videotaped stroke modeling. We all took turns performing sweeps, draws, high and low braces, forward paddling, reverse paddling, sculling braces, power forwards, low brace turns, and all other manner of paddle strokes. I like to think my modeling is pretty smooth and went into the video session with confidence, especially after practicing Sam's particular modeling preferences over the summer.

Little did I know that my easy, relaxed approach would lead to the most ridiculous mistake of the taping session! Anyone who has watched me paddle knows that Dave Ide's preference for a cross-bow rudder infected me in spades. I regularly throw in cross-bow rudders, draws, and even forward strokes in my paddling, usually linked to a series of other strokes to accomplish whatever my momentary goal happens to be.

What I've never done before Saturday was perform a nearly-perfect, cross-bow, out-of-water recover draw while modeling for a video camera. It was quite a feat, but it's off-side grace was interrupted mid-stroke when I realized that this was supposed to be an ON-SIDE, out-of-water recovery draw . . . The sting was a bit sharper, since I'd just performed a very nice, correct stroke on the left and managed to blow it on the right. I was less than happy with myself, but the IT crew forgave me the indiscretion when we reviewed the videos later that night over fresh pizza, more chocolate cake, and really, really great cookies.

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Blog by: Jermei Vore

We finished the day on the water with an assessment of our abilities to teach rescues. We all practiced some, while others were just demonstrated by the candidate being evaluated. Other candidates presented T-rescues, Eskimo bow rescues, paddle float rescues, and towing, while I described and demonstrated a re-entry and roll. My oops moment of that exercise was attempting to say, “Now, I’ll somersault backwards into the cockpit and roll up,” while actually doing just that. I think what the group actually heard was something more like, “Now, I’ll somersaul-glub-glub-glub.”

I rolled up without any issue and finished my sentence, but it provided a bit of comic relief for the afternoon, I think.

Once again, we all slept well after a huge dinner, a video review, and a bit of attempted star gazing with the Bay Cliff telescope. We also had to say goodbye to Kevin, who left for a business trip and wasn’t able to finish the weekend together.

Day 3 – We were almost done! After breakfast, we had a short classroom session on ACA paperwork, waivers, and liability, then made our way back to the harbor for scenarios. I. Love. Scenarios! As a flight instructor and training developer, they’re my bread and butter. I had been looking forward to this all weekend!

Each of us received different scenarios and everyone did very well at handling them. I’m not going to list the other candidates’ scenarios for brevity and to keep some of Sam’s secret torture methods secret. I will, however, explain mine.

As I took control of the group, I checked for basic safety items like fastened life jackets, properly fastened skirts, grab loops, and hatches. We then quickly talked about rafting up, on-the-water signals, and group control. Then, off we went! I quickly noticed that one of the participant’s had some unsecured deck gear trailing in the water and that another was using poor forward paddling form. Both of those items were corrected in the first 60 seconds of the scenario and I started moving among the group to keep them on speed, on course, and in a tight group.

Dick, meanwhile, had apparently forgotten to take his medication that morning and was being quite boisterous and goofy. Without hopping on his deck and shaking him by the PFD, I tried to rein him in a bit and keep him on track and course.

As I was paddling by Sam and Nancy, Sam capsized in mid-sentence. Perfect! I can do rescues! “Everyone stop and raft up, please!” I shouted. A few folks kept paddling, so I was reaching for my whistle when I saw that Sam was still in his boat! Aw, heck. A power forward, hard draw on the move, hook his boat with my paddle, and a Hand of God rescue brought him upright less than 10 seconds after he went over and, in true Sam style, he finished the sentence he had been working on!

We turned the scenario off for a moment to debrief, during which I made it very clear that my next move would have been to raft Sam with another group member and tow the raft to shore for medical treatment. That decision was declared correct, but vetoed, and we continued. About two minutes later, Dick jubilantly capsized and I called the group together again. Most of the group chose to heckle and taunt him. Some even decided to splash him with their paddles. While I was

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holding my paddle vertically and asking for everyone's cooperation, John (remember my nemesis, John?), also capsized right next to me and proceeded to flail toward my boat in a panic.

By the time I could get my paddle back in the water, he had ahold of my bow and was trying to climb on my boat. I paddled backwards as hard as I could, but he managed to hang onto the bow toggle with one hand while I firmly told him he had to let go. The group was now heckling Dick, John, and me, but I was actually having fun. I hollered at John while trying to shake him loose, then remembered that this was a scenario and I had other folks to watch, too. I took a glance toward Dick to see that he was still floating face up and, in that split second, John saw his opportunity. He vaulted onto my front deck and started riding the bronco.

I saved the first near capsize with a high brace on the right. I saved the second with a big high brace on the left. Then, I was expecting to go back to the right and John went left. I tried to save it with a late high-brace scull, but went over. I tried a roll on the left and missed. I set up on the right, consciously waited for the boat to stop moving and my hands to clear the water, then rolled and drove my right knee into the side of my knee tube as hard as I could, knowing that John might be on the upturned hull and that I had to roll him off.

There were two problems. First, John wasn't on the boat anymore and I didn't need to roll that hard. But the bigger problem was that I was paddling my new, large cockpit Cetus, not my trusty ocean cockpit Nordkapp with the knee tube. My knee, therefore, drove right through the middle of my spray deck and my forceful roll popped me right out of the boat.

I was swimming. With a panicked paddler. And another goofy, un-medicated paddler. During my assessment. Oh, no.

John kindly grabbed my hat, which was sinking on the other side of my boat, and showed mercy by not trying to climb on top of me. Instead, he swam toward Dick and started goofing off with him. I rocketed to the bow of my boat, did a lift and flip to drain the water, shot back to the cockpit, and cowboied back into the boat. I don't think I was in the water for more than 60 seconds, but it seemed like a year. Apparently, as I was getting back in my boat, I told the group that they were all jerks. I'm pretty sure that was aimed at the real group who organized the snafu, not at the pretend scenario group!

Now, I was in my boat, not coming out again for any reason, and it was business. I took off my sunglasses so that John and Dick could see my eyes, then demanded that they do the same thing. I made them both look me in the eye and told them that this was Lake Superior and it was time to be serious. They cracked a few jokes, so I took advantage of my genetic gift and lowered my voice into "Dad Mode". They listened. Thank God, they listened.

The rest of the group started rafting together, as well, except for Kip, who was chasing down John's boat and paddle. "KIP! GET BACK WITH THE GROUP!" ... wait ... he's emptying the boat properly ... "KIP! Keep doing what you're doing and bring John's boat to me, please. I'm buying you a beer when this is over!"

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Meanwhile, John was listening, so I had him get off the hull of Dick's boat, hold his hands over his head and gently use one to grab my bow toggle then started back paddling to meet Kip. I had Kip push John's boat to me, keeping John, the formerly panicked paddler, away from all other members of the group, and got him reconnected with his deck lines. Now that he had an external source of positive floatation, I told him I'd be back and went to Dick, who had been in the water longer, was older, and probably less able to handle the long stretch floating in Lake Superior. I also thought I'd heard John and Dick comment about Dick having an open drysuit zipper, which, thankfully, wasn't the case. As I guided Dick through a heel hook rescue, which he tried to do with the wrong foot before I corrected him (that devil), Nancy and Sam had mercy on me and called Scenario Off.

Ugh. We'd just had an assessment with lucky L4 weather conditions on day 1, but I was thinking I'd just blown it in the scenario on the third and last day.

But then, as Dick and I separated from each other and paddled over to the rest of the group for the scenario debrief, he squeezed my shoulder and quietly said, "Nice job. I'm proud of you, Jeremy."

My heart started to beat again. "Really?" I asked.

"Really," he said. "You did well."

As it turns out, he was right. I ended up with a Level 4 Certification which, I think, was the result of a pretty solid showing, despite a swim and an accidental cross-bow draw. I also learned a lot, both from our ITs and from the other members of the group.

Like the IDW, this was one of the best learning and teaching experiences of my paddling career and I'm in awe of the paddler and mentor that Sam has become. It's funny to think that we were originally certified as instructors together in the mid-90's, considering that he's come so much farther than I have. It's also humbling and makes me want to work hard to learn the way he has, even if I do have a long way to go.

Paddling with Nancy and Dick is also an amazing experience, since they both have such strengths and valuable feedback. I wouldn't always do things the same way they do, but they both offer ego-free, genuinely helpful advice whenever I'm able to listen. The future of the IT world is secure if folks like them are in the line.

The real stars of the weekend, though, were the other candidates. We had candidates with just over a year of experience. We had candidates who were still in their teens. We had candidates who were already instructors and who are new to the instruction scene. And every one of us walked out with an ACA Instructor Certification. Not all of them were Level 4, but every single candidate left the assessment with an instructors' certification. If this is the future of paddling, it's a very bright one, indeed.

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