Your Boat Stinks!

By Robert Janger

I'm sure people thought that, that my boat smelled bad. Oh sure, I would fill it up with chemicals and it would be OK for a while but then someone would flush one of the heads and the aroma was enough to knock a buzzard off the pump out boat at 400 yards! Add more chemicals and hope for the best? It was time to flush this problem!

In this article we'll talk about odors that originate in the sanitation system, what causes them (yes, that, but so much more) and I'll tell you what I did to get rid of them.

It's Called the What?

We all call it the HEAD, at least when we're on the boat. In my case, I was taught to call it that on my first day in the Navy (more than a few years ago) and to this day, I still refer to it as the head, regardless of where it's located. But do you know why it's called the head?

Back in the days, well before indoor plumbing, the "facilities" were nothing more than two holes in the bow of the ship, or rather the "head" of the ship. The idea here was that incoming waves would wash the bow and eliminate the sewage. Timing was everything as you could easily get more than you bargained for, depending on the size and direction of the waves. You can bet no one was reading the National Geographic in there! As technology improved, the "facilities" moved in-board but the name was retained.

I Needed Help

Since I didn't know shinola about what was making my boat smell bad, I turned to my usual tool of choice, the internet. Several searches and a couple of forums later, I found someone who knew what they were talking about: Peggy Hall, the headmistress.

Peggy has written a book called "Getting Rid of Boat Odors", which I purchased from Amazon for around $15.00. It was good investment and it told me everything I needed to know to take on the job.

According to Peggy, sewage contains both aerobic bacteria (needs oxygen) and anaerobic bacteria (functions in an airless environment) but only the anaerobic bacteria produce foul-smelling gasses. If you allow the aerobic bacteria to overpower the anaerobic bacteria, you eliminate the odor.

Up and Out

First stop, the hose that runs from the bottom fitting on the holding tank to the deck fitting where you pump out the contents. Start with the tank empty. (You did pump out the holding tank first, right?)

Remove the hose from the deck fitting and then at the bottom of the holding tank. You're working in tight quarters here and things can get pretty disgusting. To eliminate some of the foul odor, I temporarily capped off the tank fittings and old hose ends with tape. I used shrink wrap tape (because I had some onboard). Whenever I completed a hose replacement, I immediately removed that hose from boat. I made my connections to the deck fitting first. Depending on location, it may be easier to remove the deck fitting to make the connection. If you do, be sure to seat it back down to the deck. Now make your connection at the bottom of the tank. Examine your clamps while you're at it. Replace any that are corroded.

I used liquid soap on all the fittings. The soap helps the hose slip over the fittings and when it dries, it seals the connection in place.

Also be prepared to replace other things that break in the process. I accidentally snapped off a thru-hull fitting trying to get a vent hose off. That meant a run to the marine store.

Allow Me to Vent

Second stop, the vent hoses. Some well-meaning but un-informed person had put a loop in the vent lines near the thru-hull. This was all wrong! Gases were being trapped inside the tank and air was not being allowed to enter. Vent lines should be short, straight and nearly horizontal with no more than a 45 degree rise.

Whoever installed those lines probably thought they would prevent sea water from entering the holding tank but air and gases need to move out of the tank and fresh air needs to enter in order for the aerobic bacteria to thrive. Make sure these vents are clear. Creatures like to build little nests in there, especially over the winter. I found evidence of this in one of my vent lines. Here's a tip. Whenever you wash your boat, squirt some water down the vent lines to keep them clear. If the water backs up, it's time to investigate.

Within 3 hours of replacing the vent lines, most of the foul odor on my boat had cleared.

Getting in Line

You didn't need to be a chemical engineer to see that the hoses in my boat were permeated. They ran in various shades from light tan to dark brown and were a greasy, sticky mess. Yuck! Twenty years of tough duty will do that! Not to mention that they were spliced in a couple of places. It's also a 13 foot run from the aft head to the holding tank and most folks don't know to flush the onboard toilet long enough to clear the line. Under the best of conditions things can go bad in a hurry. Use a single run of hose from head to tank.

A lot of folks think that because their boat is new, their hoses are fine. Just let some sewage set in the hose and you've got the start of a problem. Discoloration is not always the key. Peggy says a simple test is to clean off an outside section of the hose in the area where the odor is the strongest. Wet a clean rag in hot water, wring it out and wrap it around the hose. When the rag has cooled, remove it and smell it. If you can't smell

anything on the rag, that hose is not permeated. Once a hose has become permeated it cannot be reversed. It's replacement time!

You'll need to take precautions when removing the old head hoses. There will most likely be liquid in the hoses so cap both the ends when you disconnect them. I also plugged the holding tank fitting until I was ready to reconnect the new hoses. Have a contractor garbage bag handy so you can get the old hose into something immediately. Now get that hose off the boat!

This is a good time to clean that area where the hose was laying. I used Spray Nine to clean and disinfect the area and it took several applications and rinses to remove the residue.

I found it was easier to push the hose into place from the head side rather that trying to locate the opening from the engine room. It works best with two people but if you're doing it alone you'll need to run back and forth a few times to push, then position the hose, then push, etc. Connect the hose on the head side first, and then connect the hose to the tank.

Test your connections. Flush the head a few times and check for leaks. If all is well, move on to the next head/tank installation.

When you're finished, have a drink. Maybe have one for each head and take a deep breath now that it's over. M-m-m-m-m-m, smell that fresh air!

It's A Wrap

Overall, this is a crappy job so you might want to bring a change of clothing to the boat in order to cleanup before you leave. Definitely go straight home. Or you can do like I did, stop at the grocery store on your way home after swapping out the head hoses. It was amazing! Even though the store was very crowded, people were so kind and courteous that one by they left the checkout line that I was standing in, allowing me to get through almost without waiting. Even the clerk was unusually quick! For some reason, she couldn't help me get out of the store fast enough!

Well, that's it for this time.

Smell ya later!

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