

# Kayaker's voyage to Florida starts with rescue off Maine coast

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By Edward D. Murphy



Joseph Mullin sits in his room Monday at the Motel East in Eastport with his sea kayak. Mullin's kayak flipped Sunday off Down East Maine and he had to be rescued by the Coast Guard. He plans to paddle down the East Coast to Key West, Fla., to raise money and awareness for efforts to prevent suicide by veterans. Photo by Edward French, The Quoddy Tides

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Joseph Mullin, 66, had to be rescued by the Coast Guard off Washington County on the first day of his planned trip to Key West to raise awareness about veterans' suicides.



By [Edward D. Murphy](#) Staff Writer

Joseph Mullin's post-retirement adventure got off to an inauspicious start Sunday when the kayak he plans to paddle down the East Coast flipped, leaving him to be rescued by the Coast Guard after an hour in 40-degree water off Washington County.

Undaunted, Mullin, a 66-year-old disabled veteran from Wareham, Massachusetts, plans to set out again Wednesday – stormy weather is forecast for Tuesday – on the next leg of a trip that he hopes will eventually carry him to Key West, Florida, in about eight months. Oh, and he won't be stopping there: Mullin plans to continue to paddle on from the Florida Keys to Texas to visit a daughter.

Coast Guard officials said Mullin's preparation saved him and his venture Sunday afternoon, when he used a portable marine radio to contact them after his heavily-laden 17-foot kayak was flipped by a wave and he was unable to get it turned upright. Mullin, who was wearing a dry suit and equipped with a locator beacon and a strobe light, suffered mild hypothermia, the Coast Guard said, but his fate might have been much worse if he hadn't been as well prepared as he was.

"I've got more safety gear than you can shake a stick at," Mullin said Monday from a motel in Eastport, where he's waiting out the weather after Sunday's mishap.



STAFF GRAPHIC | MICHAEL FISHER

Coast Guard officials said Mullin is an example of good preparation for such an intense journey in open water.

“We were very pleased with the precautions he took,” said Chris Berry, a civilian search-and-rescue coordinator with the Coast Guard. “In the past, we’ve had a lot of cases this time of year – the weather gets warm and the people get out there, but the water temperature hasn’t caught up.”

Mullin said he went to get checked out at a hospital after he was brought to shore in Cutler, because his body temperature had fallen to 94 degrees. He also was given an IV to counteract mild dehydration.

“The doctor came in and said, ‘Your blood tests were excellent,’” Mullin said. “I said, ‘I have no doubt.’”

## **PADDLING FOR A CAUSE**

Mullin’s kayaking trip is both a post-retirement voyage – he ended a job Friday as a “plumbing pro” in a Lowe’s home improvement store in Massachusetts, then drove up to Maine Saturday with a friend – and a mission to highlight Mission 22. The group is dedicated to raising awareness about and ending suicide among veterans, which it says are taking their lives at a rate of 22 a day because of post-traumatic stress disorder or injuries suffered while in the service.

Mullin is a disabled veteran who served in the Naval Air Reserve as a jet mechanic for a helicopter anti-submarine unit from 1970-74. He said he was injured while helping another reservist change a transmission on a staff car and the vehicle started to shift off the jacks it was on. Mullin said he grabbed the rocker panel underneath the driver’s side door and was able to lift the car high enough to allow the mechanic to get out from under the car.

But in doing so, Mullin ripped all the ligaments on the last five vertebrae in his back and also injured his wrists, elbows and shoulders.

Those injuries require him to adapt for kayaking. Twisting at the waist, like most kayakers do, would stress his lower back too much, Mullin said, so he paddles in a way that keeps his back straight. He also uses a paddle that lessens the stress on his shoulders enough to allow him to keep going for hours.

Mullin has spent more than a year training for his trip and hopes to put in 30 to 40 nautical miles a day as he heads south.

He said the preparation and focus on safety is built into him from years as a volunteer diver for the Quincy, Massachusetts, police, helping to retrieve things underwater for the department – “vehicles, evidence, bodies,” Mullin said.

When kayaking, he packs plenty of gear to summon help if he needs it and dresses “for the water temperature, not the air temperature,” so he’s prepared for an unexpected plunge into the water.

Sunday looked promising, Mullin said, with clear skies, calm seas and a wind that would be at his back.

“I thought, who could ask for anything better?” Mullin said.

All that preparation was tested almost immediately after he started out about 1 p.m. at a beach next to West Quoddy Light, the easternmost point in the U.S. He paddled for an hour before deciding to stop for lunch.

He flipped over as he was heading into shore to eat, but Mullin said he walked the kayak in and redistributed the weight on the craft before heading out again.

However, as the afternoon went on, the wind shifted into his face and the seas rose, he said.

Mullin started to turn the kayak toward shore, “then a wave hit, and over I went,” he said, about a mile out from a

cove called Bailey's Mistake.

## BEACON OF HOPE

Plunged into the water, Mullin said he contacted the Coast Guard on the marine radio, gave them all the information he had, which unfortunately didn't include a lot of details on where he was.

Mullin told the Coast Guard that he had a locator beacon and he turned it on so they could get a better fix on his location.

Mullin said he only got cold during the last 10 minutes or so of his hour-long wait for the Coast Guard to reach him. He kept swimming with his overturned kayak to keep warm, he said, and spotted the Coast Guard boat before his rescuers saw him. Using the marine radio, Mullin said, he guided the boat toward him and climbed aboard.

After his stint at the hospital, Mullin checked into an Eastport motel, getting permission from the front desk clerk and housekeeper to bring the kayak into his room.

Monday, he went to the Coast Guard station to retrieve a few of his things, including his shoes.

On Wednesday, he plans to reconfigure the load on the kayak – he said it was too top-heavy Sunday, and that's why he couldn't flip it back upright. He's hoping to reach Bug Light in South Portland by May 12 and is still waiting for word from the city on his request to be allowed to sleep in the park.

He hopes his stop in South Portland, and other stops on his journey south will attract attention for his cause, named [Atlantic Coast Sea Kayaking Expedition 2017](#). He has set up a webpage where he's chronicling his voyage and directing people to the Mission 22 site for donations.

"This whole trip is not about me, not about what I'm going through," he said. "I want the trip to be more about why I'm doing this."

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