

## PS Reader's Letter Sparks Tether Recall

**P**ractical Sailor reader Mike Cunningham recently wrote us about a failure that occurred to his safety tether while he was going through a safety check of his gear. The tether features a quick-release snap shackle at the harness end and Kong hook at the boat end. (See photo.) His recounting of the failure follows:

"I found a serious problem with my tether with Kong hook, which is an otherwise excellent tether," wrote Cunningham, who sails a Freedom 30 out of Stockton, Calif. "The release grip is the triangular rubber type on a webbing lanyard. What is hard to see is that the lanyard is attached to the snap shackle pin with a split ring. While testing one of my tethers the other day, I found the snap shackle to be a bit sticky—as would certainly be the case after a few days at sea. When I pulled hard on the lanyard, the split ring elongated, deformed, and then simply opened up, leaving me with the lanyard in my hand and a snap shackle pin that had not moved even a little.

"This would have been an utter disaster had I needed to get out of the tether in an emergency and did not have a knife to it cut it away. In my opinion, the split rings should be replaced with something far more substantial such as a fixed stainless ring or some such."

*Practical Sailor* has expressed concerns regarding the durability of these split rings in the past, most recently in the September 2009 article on tethers. Cunningham's tether description fit that for an older West Marine tether we'd tested, so we forwarded Mike's letter to the corporate offices of West Marine. Although it turned out that Cunningham's particular tether was not from West Marine (the actual source is still unknown), the company responded by issuing an immediate and total voluntary recall of its similar tether (Model 9553512) on June 30.

West Marine Executive Vice President Ron Japinga replied to our letter with the following note: "We agree that the split ring should be constructed so there is no chance it can become elongated under load. Fortunately, to date, we are currently unaware of any known reports of injury or mishap relating to the tether."

Japinga said that the company had alerted the appropriate regulatory agencies of the potential safety issue and that West Marine had traced the failure cause to an incorrectly sized split ring. New West Marine tethers will have a smaller diameter (12 millimeters) split ring than the older models. Customers who have a tether with the large split ring can return the product to West Marine for an upgraded model. More information is available at West Marine's website, [www.westmarine.com](http://www.westmarine.com).

"The safety of our customers is, and will always remain, our primary concern, and we will work with our supplier to ensure that the necessary modifications are made to improve the

quality of this product," Japinga said.

West Marine's tethers have been PS top picks in several past tests (January 2007, May 2009, September 2009, and December 1999).

While we prefer the quick-release snap shackle at the harness end of a tether, it's obvious that there is not yet an ideal harness attachment, one

that won't release inadvertently, yet is easy to release in an emergency.

The quick-release snap shackle is one of the few devices on the market that allow a wearer to quickly release himself from his tether under moderate load. However, when it is under high loads—in the case of a person wearing a tether being dragged behind a boat, for example—the amount of force required to open a snap shackle is significant. Engineers at Spinlock contend that the finger-pull-lanyards that open the snap shackle are too short, making it almost impossible for a person to grip tightly enough to release the shackle when it is highly loaded. Cunningham's experience shows that even if you are able to give the lanyard a good yank, the split ring might give way before the shackle opens.

Other companies offer tethers without a snap shackle at the harness end. Plastimo's elastic tether (model 40153) uses Gibb snap hooks at both ends. The Gibb hooks are harder to operate than a properly functioning quick-release snap shackle, and they can't be unhooked while under load.

Plastimo's 40153 tether earned *PS's* recommendation in the 2007 test. Spinlock sells a small razor-sharp cutting tool to sever its tether.

There are several tether manufacturers that use the split ring like the one that failed in Cunningham's tether. If you already have a West Marine tether that looks suspect, you should return it to West Marine for an upgrade. The ring should sustain about 60-pounds of pull without deforming, the most force a person could reasonably apply using a finger pull. If it is not a West Marine tether, inspect it for proper functioning and if you suspect a potential problem, contact the maker or replace it.

Cunningham's experience highlights the need for sailors to regularly inspect their safety gear. With tethers, checkups should include close scrutiny of the hardware and stitching. In our 1999 test of 17 marine safety tethers, 47 percent of them suffered stitching or hardware failures during our tests, and most of those failures would have caused the wearer to lose contact with the boat.

Cunningham's story is also a reminder that no matter the type of tether used, crew should always have a knife within easy reach to cut themselves free should the tether fail to disengage when needed in an emergency.

