

MAN OVERBOARD

Prevention and Reaction

Paul Glatzel looks at the all important matter of preventing a MOB and if the worst happens, what to do.

WORDS PAUL GLATZEL | PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL GLATZEL



The recent publicity surrounding kill cords generated a really valuable focus on the need to wear them and on how best to attach them to the person driving. While there is no question that kill cords are an essential safety item, the focus on the kill cords themselves tended to overshadow two other key areas – preventing people exiting the boat in the first place and what to do if it does happen and you are left on board.

As we know, a kill cord kills the engine in the event that the helmsman is ejected from the craft and stops the boat running away or circling back on those in the water. Even if the helmsman is wearing the kill cord, other people on the craft can still be thrown out and be struck by the boat or the propeller, so it is important to remember the responsibility the helmsman has to prevent this situation occurring.

So why do people get ejected from boats? The most obvious and probably the most common reason is simply travelling too fast for the prevailing conditions. People in a craft at higher speeds are susceptible to sudden jolts from wave impacts which can throw them upwards and sideways out of their seats with a real chance of leaving the boat. These up, down and lateral forces are massively increased if the helmsman is steering a path through the waves, as the lateral forces may become far greater. Simply slow down and the problem is overcome. A vessel travelling at higher speeds and turning will exert a lateral force on those on board the craft that 'throws' them out of the boat as the boat almost skids round the turn. This can seem great fun until the moment that a wave suddenly

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stops this skid but the people carry on and are flicked out of the boat – bear in mind, too, that they are flicked into the path of the propeller on the outside of the turn. Again, slowing down will probably prevent this issue, as will widening the turn.

A skipper's job is to assertively manage his/her boat; this includes making sure that everyone is seated and using handholds and, if fitted, foot straps. Being seated, though, is just a part of it, as the seat needs to be a safe place to sit – sitting in or near the bow of any craft at higher speeds increases the risks as the vertical movement of the craft at the bow is most pronounced. Towards the stern this movement is far less. It is easy for a skipper to blame their passenger or sea conditions for the fact that they fell out or were injured, but in reality it is almost always the skipper's fault.

Often overlooked is the fact that just about as many people seem to fall out of craft at slow speeds as at higher speeds. In marinas, crew will often be at the bow of a craft, tending lines or standing on a bathing platform, and are susceptible to the skipper suddenly engaging too much throttle, toppling them overboard. As we will see in later articles, you can bring a craft alongside and moor it without the need for people on an exposed bow or leaping off onto a pontoon. Again, it is a matter of the skipper exerting control, communicating effectively and demonstrating competent driving.

So, in summary, it is down to the skipper to assertively manage those on board, to communicate clearly, to ensure they are positioned appropriately in the boat and to drive the vessel in a way that is appropriate for the conditions – a 'safe speed'. Accidents can and do occur but in reality most are preventable.

So what should you do if you experience a man overboard (MOB) from your own craft or come to the assistance of someone in the water?



Before looking at the specifics of boat handling, direction of approach etc., it is worth emphasising the very real risk to the life of the person in the water due to the effects of cold-water shock, drowning as they gulp in water and hypothermia. The RNLI, RYA and coastguard ask that if you experience an MOB or come across someone in the water you treat it as an immediate Mayday situation and should instantly issue a DSC distress alert (by pushing the button under the red flap on your VHF) followed by a voice distress message. The small investment of time this takes at the outset ensures that resources are heading your way and you will be in a position to assist, rather than being called later when things may have got worse.

Let us imagine that you are helming your boat at 20 knots and someone goes overboard. Hopefully someone else on board notices, or perhaps the exiting crewmember shouts or screams as they depart. A practised sequence of steps (which almost all occur at once) should then be followed: 1) A crewmember shouts 'man overboard' and immediately points at the casualty – don't stop pointing until they are alongside the vessel; 2) The driver steadily slows down in a straight line*, then slowly turns the boat and assesses the situation; 3) The MOB button on the GPS/chartplotter is pushed to mark a position near where the MOB occurred; 4) A

distress alert/Mayday call is issued; 5) If possible, lifebuoys are deployed to the person in the water; 6) The skipper positions the boat ready to approach the casualty.

(* RYA training in this area previously advocated that in the event of an MOB the helmsman turned towards the casualty in the water to move the propeller(s) away from them. Slowing down in a straight line is now the preferred method as, on balance, the risks of a sudden turn at speed outweigh the likelihood of the casualty passing through the propeller, given that they are usually likely to be well behind the craft. At slow speed, though, if you can turn towards the casualty, then do so.)

In the variety of RYA books addressing MOB situations you will see powerboats adopt two possible directions of approach to a person in the water. While other procedures may work, these two methods have been proven in a variety of conditions, and are simple and easy to remember.

Approach 1: Directly into the wind. Start six boat lengths downwind, stop the boat to eliminate forward momentum, then go into/out of gear to step up towards the casualty. One boat length short, a final moment in gear will bring the casualty alongside the boat. (See MOB Approach 1)

Approach 2: From upwind and drift on to the casualty. Start three boat lengths to one side of the casualty and two boat lengths upwind. With minimal forward momentum and the wind directly on the beam, aim for a point about two boat lengths directly upwind of the casualty. Use forward/reverse to maintain an angle of 90° to the wind. The wind will rapidly drift the craft towards the person in the water. (See MOB Approach 2)

Approach 1 works for smaller open craft with access in the bow area. Approach 2 will also be effective for these craft, but for sports boats with limited access to the bow area, the drift down method is the only practical choice. Being beam-on to the waves/wind carries some risks, but in my experience the seas need to be pretty big to cause any major issues.

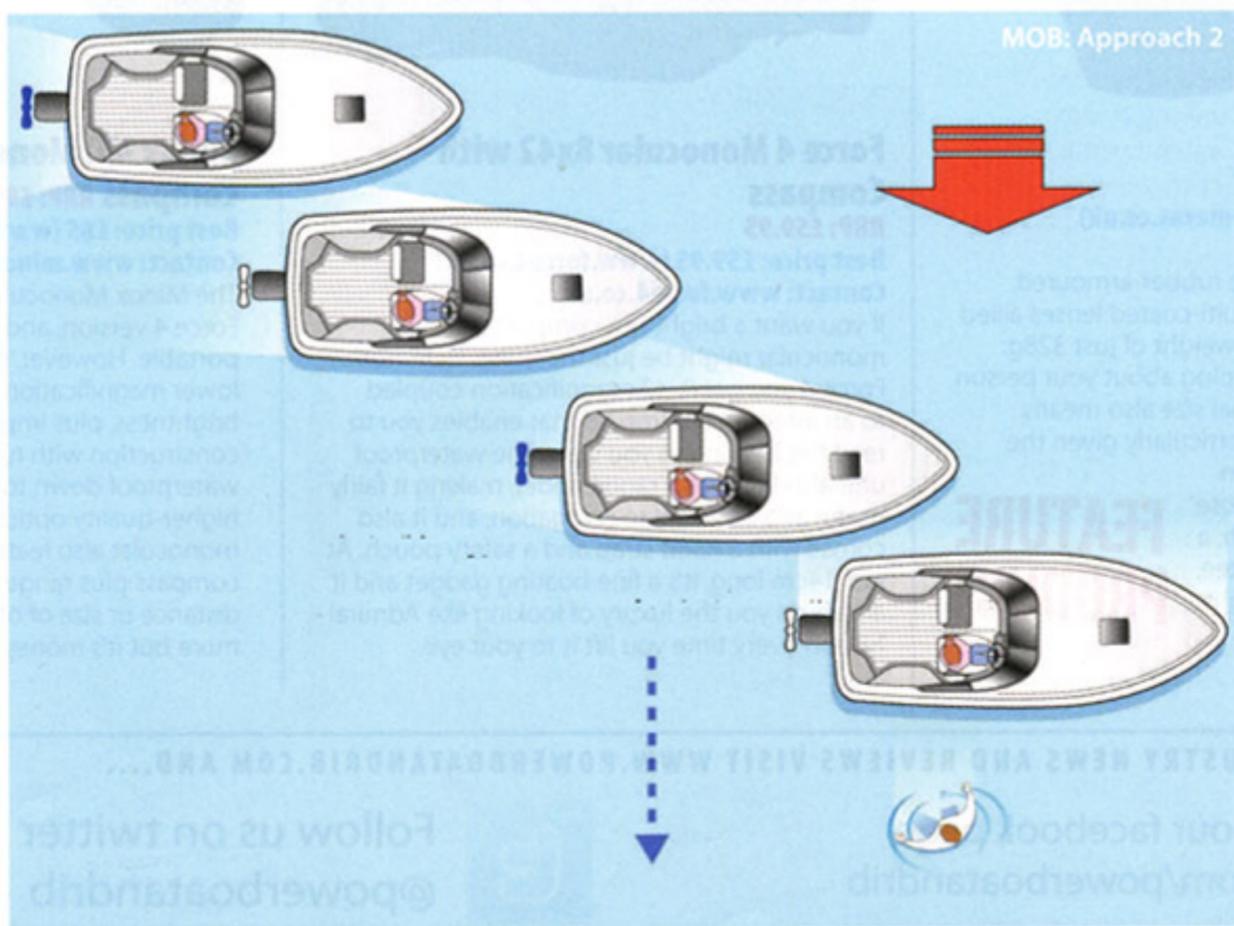
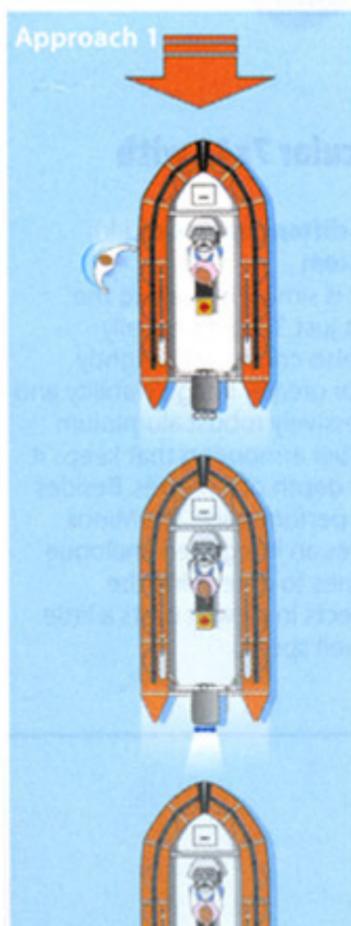
Once contact with the casualty is established, in both cases switch the engine off to eliminate the chance of causing them serious injury with the propeller.

Recovery methods will vary from boat to boat and we will look at this in a future article. With the RNLI and possibly a helicopter en route, they may be the best means to help someone from the water and will ensure suitable medical help is on hand to assess their medical position.

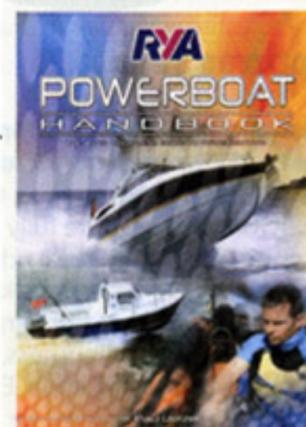
If you ever have to deal with a person in the water it will be a stressful and adrenaline-filled experience. Conducting regular fun practice sessions with your crew and family will make all the difference and will dramatically increase the chances of a quick and effective recovery of the person. (Use a weighted fender, though, and do not practice with a real person!)

So, as a skipper, wear the kill cord and take an assertive position when it comes to ensuring the safety of those on your boat. Have fun boating!

Paul Glatzel is an RYA powerboat trainer and wrote the RYA Powerboat Handbook. He runs Powerboat Training UK in Poole. www.powerboattraininguk.co.uk



MUST HAVE



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