



# AYE AYE SKIP!

SO YOU WANT TO GET BEHIND THE WHEEL DO YOU? PAUL GLATZEL OF POWERBAOT TRAINING SCHOOL REVEALS WHAT MAKES A WORTHY RIB SKIPPER.

**A**nyone that's into their boating has probably been bought as a joke a little cap with gold braid and 'Captain' emblazoned on it; equally, I'm sure we've all seen some really sad individuals wear them as they helm their craft down an inland waterway or out of a marina. One of the reasons we all chuckle at them (in addition to the fact they look rather stupid) is that we don't really consider them as a ship's captain, so what's the point in them wearing one.

In previous articles we've looked at subjects like passage planning and pilotage, dealing with man overboard situations, helicopter rescues and what kit you should carry on board your RIB to undertake coastal passages. But what about the role of the person responsible for all of this, the person who needs to kit and manage the boat, the person who's call it is whether to assist the Coastguard in a search or to come to the aid of a person in distress – that would be you! As the Skipper (or dare I say 'Captain with white peaked cap') you have a real responsibility to your crew, to other water users and to your vessel, but what are these responsibilities and what as a Skipper should you be saying and doing?

As a leisure boater it's very easy to underestimate the level of your responsibility and assume that, because you may have few (if any) qualifications, that the onus on you as skipper of your 6m RIB is markedly different to the Skipper of the Isle of Wight ferry who has 200 people in his care. Undoubtedly there is an element of truth in this, and in the event of an accident, the powers

that be will look more harshly at a highly qualified and experienced Skipper making an avoidable mistake than at you in your private RIB. That said, it really depends what the problem was and the key point is that irrespective of your qualifications and experience, when you put to sea as master of your vessel you are as bound by the laws of the sea as the commercial skipper – even if you don't know what those laws are! So without becoming an ultra qualified commercial Skipper, what can you do to be a good Skipper?

## PLANNING

It all starts with planning, whether it's planning where you intend to go or looking at the boat you have and how you kit it. In terms of the passage, make sure that your plan is within the capability of all of your crew – especially the less experienced boaters and children. Make sure the boat is up to the job and is equipped for the passage. Make sure that your crew understand the plan and that someone ashore knows it.

Also make sure you have the qualifications for the trips you want to make and the kit that you will use. If you have a VHF radio on board, look at the one day VHF Course, if you have a liferaft, then do the Sea Survival course. An oft forgotten area is that of First Aid – as we will look at later, you are responsible for your crew and need to be able to help them if need be – do you have even the basic skills needed to assist?



## SAFETY

A well prepared boat, with well briefed and trained crew, managed by a Skipper taking a proactive stance to crew and boat safety is far less likely to run into problems than one that isn't. As already mentioned, safety starts with planning but then the Skipper needs to ensure that the crew understand how to operate on the boat, where the safety kit is and how to use it. Not everyone finds standing in front of others explaining how everything works a particularly easy thing to do. The trick is to turn the short briefing into a more interactive session giving responsibility for key tasks to crew members. For example, show one person (in front of the others) how the flares work, agree that if it all goes pear shaped they are in charge of flares and ask them to ensure they are familiar with them and brief two of the other crew members. Another example would be to give one person responsibility for anchoring and checking the anchor gear.

By taking this approach your crew are far more engaged, the briefing is easier, and more people than just you will react in the right way when the messy stuff hits the fan. If you work with a regular crew



then rotating the areas of responsibility will help to spread the knowledge and capability around the crew. Which really is all I mean by training.....

## TRAINING

It's easy to think that training always means RYA courses and the like. Formal training though is only part of the equation and as a Skipper you should be looking to develop the skills of your crew members – particularly if you form part of a regular crew. Take a couple of examples. When was the last time that each of your crew practiced a MOB recovery in anything other than calm-ish conditions? Don't put someone in the water (it's not worth the extra risks involved) but try with the usual fender & bucket arrangement, can each of your crew approach and recover the casualty? Have you looked at the recovery of an unconscious casualty, approach that fender then look at the whole issue of getting a person who cannot help himself into the boat. When was the last time that you rigged a long tow or a side tow, have you ever spent time helming the tug with another boat alongside.... and so on. As a Skipper, your job is to take the building blocks of knowledge that training helps create, and through practice develop the skills towards expertise in a subject.

## MANAGING THE BOAT

Being a good skipper doesn't necessarily mean that you do the driving, what better way to manage the boat, assess what is going on around you and develop your crew than give them time at the helm. After all, look at the bigger ships, the Captain is the one standing back and taking the overview, managing his resources to achieve the task in hand with the added benefit that those he's delegated to are further developing their skills. The RNLI do the same with the Coxswains, often stepping back, letting others helm and taking an overview of what they are faced with. Equally though, don't always delegate the mucky jobs – a Skipper who gets his hands dirty and leads from the front is far more likely to engender respect than one who always finds himself busy at those key moments.

## WATCHING OUT FOR YOUR CREW

You grab the steering wheel and the throttle and you're off! You're fine and having a great time, but what about your crew? They are probably either holding on in fear of their lives or have disappeared over the back without you knowing it. A good skipper is thoughtful, understands the capabilities, skills and fears of his crew and creates a happy purposeful team that can cope with any eventuality thrown at them. By developing his crew's experience and knowledge, he furthers their interest and capability in a safe way.

The Skipper also needs to know of any medical conditions affecting his crew, it is unlikely that they will openly volunteer information so there's a need to ask them individually (and privately) whether there's anything he needs to know. It doesn't stop



Don't forget that as a Skipper you are expected to know and fully comply with the 'Rules of the Road' - irrespective of whether you have ever read them!

Set up a communication system with adults on board that if they are uncomfortable at any stage they either tell you or tap you subtly on the shoulder. The use of a subtle signal can be less embarrassing for them in front of other crew.



there though, a good Skipper is looking for signs that all is not well, for example a crew member that needs toilet breaks more often than appears necessary might be concealing a medical condition that you should know about and could affect their and the rest of the crew's safety. Be vigilant.

## MANAGING YOU

In our working lives we've all seen managers who are cool calm and collected in the face of a challenge. Equally, I'm sure that we've all seen plenty who dissolve into a quivering wreck every time they need to make a decision. A good Skipper realises that the buck stops with him and how he manages and carries himself will have a big influence on the trust and belief his passengers and crew will have in him. Always be aware that others will take their lead from you, do things well and they will follow, be sloppy and they will be sloppy too.

We've already touched on one of the key areas for a Skipper - the ability to rapidly and rationally make the decisions that will affect the safety and enjoyment of the vessel and crew. Such responsibility is never more obvious than when you become part of an incident and need to take the decision of whether to assist or not. You have a clear responsibility to offer assistance to others in distress and of course in this situation you would interact with the Coastguard to decide what assistance you can usefully (and safely) provide. It can get a bit more tricky though when you start having to make judgement calls as to what help you can be.

For example, you may respond to Pan Pan for a vessel broken down and drifting towards danger; do you offer to take the tow or do you stand by the vessel and be prepared to assist if the danger escalates. Your decision will be the result of a number of factors – how immediate is the

danger to the other vessel and their crew, is your vessel capable of providing assistance, are you and your crew capable of the task, is anyone else better placed to render the assistance needed. A difficult series of questions to answer in the heat of the moment when the natural temptation is to take the gung-ho approach and ride in guns blazing to the rescue. A good Skipper makes an impassionate and objective appraisal and decides accordingly. When I'm faced with such a decision I always think back to a video I saw where a RIB from a rescue service went in to pluck an obviously dead diver from the water amongst breaking waves near some cliffs. The Skipper decided to go in, the waves caught the RIB turned it over and all four on board died. Of course it's easy with hindsight but the 'rescue' was unnecessary and in a similar situation again a Skipper may hopefully decide not to go in. Remember that no one will thank you for taking on something beyond your capability and endangering more people - often the really big decision is to say no.

So in summary, what makes a good Skipper? In my view a good Skipper has experience and competence, is careful to always prepare well, is vigilant and questioning and couple these traits to a passion for boating, but at the same time he can be dispassionate when it comes to making decisions that will affect the safety and enjoyment of his crew and passengers. Good Skippers realise that they alone have responsibility for their vessel and that abdicating responsibility for decision making is not an option. However, they also appreciate that boating should be fun and enjoyable - and so run a happy ship.

So Skippers, maybe that chap with the Captain's hat showing who was in charge was not so silly after all - but then again he still looked naff!

**Paul Glatzel**