

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY!

How can you best prevent a MOB or assist successfully in a recovery? Paul

Glatzel takes the helm...



It's early autumn, the nights are drawing in and whilst it's not late it's dusk and difficult to see. A fun trip up the coast has turned into a slog back to the slipway as the wind has picked up and it's started to rain, the wakeboarding was great but everyone is tired, cold and keen to get back. There's a shout, one of the crew realises someone has gone overboard when the RIB hit a wave at an odd angle. At 20 knots, they are well behind in seconds.

You hit the water at speed, it felt like you hit a brick wall. The cold has now hit you and you're struggling for breath, you don't know it but this is called 'cold water shock' and occurs when you hit cold water – it could kill you. Your lifejacket is a manual gas version, you're struggling to find the toggle whilst treading water in your heavy clothes, you're groggy from the impact with the water. At last you find the toggle, you tug it and the lifejacket inflates and at last you're getting your breath, you wish the lifejacket had a strobe light – you can see the boat but can they see you? You're tired but praying they can find you and bring the boat alongside in some tough conditions.

A touch dramatic perhaps, but not an unusual scenario. How it ends will be a mixture of skill and knowledge on the part of the helm and his crew – let's hope he knows what he's doing!

As Skipper you need to be able to deal with all of the eventualities that may be thrown at you. In this article we'll look at the means of dealing with a 'man over board' ('MOB') situation and look at the recovery of the casualty back into the boat too. We'll also touch on casualty management.

Before we start though a thought, the best way to deal with a MOB is to never let them enter the water in the first place – it's obvious of course but "prevention is better than cure". If someone enters the water unexpectedly from your craft then in all likelihood you have failed in your duty as a Skipper and the person in the water is now in serious danger. If you don't manage an effective and quick recovery they may die.

To prevent a MOB you must proactively manage your craft, this means: ensuring all are seated and aware of the need to hold on; that crew are briefed to request that the helm slows down if asked; that the helm drives the craft in a way that minimises the chance of accidents and communicates what he is about to do; and that the conditions that you are out in are suited to the craft and the crew. Mistakenly, many people consider MOB as a high speed issue, often though it occurs at slow speed where sudden sharp throttle movements catch crew unawares.

So what is the process for dealing with a MOB?

If you're moving slowly then turn the wheel towards the casualty to push the engine away from them. Shout "man overboard" so everyone is aware, SLOW DOWN! - take speed out of the equation so that you minimise the risk of further accidents, task a crew member to point at the casualty in the water and continue pointing until the casualty is alongside the boat; unless you are 100% certain you will immediately recover the casualty then initiate a Mayday (even if 100% sure you will recover the casualty



consider issuing a call to the Coastguard so that they are aware). You will have now turned towards the casualty and you need to assess how you will approach them. Your initial assessment must also look at whether they seem okay, if they are berating you for your dodgy driving then that's great compared to a situation where they are face down in the water unconscious. If they are unconscious you will need to get them recovered as quickly as possible – still follow the approach suggested below and take it slowly though to get it right first time.

There are two likely directions of approach.

Into The Wind:

Approach from about 4 - 5 boat lengths immediately downwind, move between neutral and forward so your speed is negligible, aim to bring the casualty to the windward bow. When close, remove all power and drift alongside casualty, grab hold of them, turn engine off, manoeuvre casualty to the part of the boat where you will recover them from.

This method suits low sided craft with good visibility around the bow, allows waves

Into The Wind

This method suits **low sided craft** with good visibility around the bow, allows waves to be taken head on and means the casualty is unlikely to drift under the boat.



to be taken head on and means the casualty is unlikely to drift under the boat. It is easy though to 'lose' the casualty under the bow and you need to be prompt moving from the helm to grab them if you are alone.

Beam On Approach:

Approach from upwind, stop dead in the water side on to the waves, drift slowly onto the casualty. Switch engine off when alongside. Manoeuvre casualty to a suitable place for recovery.

This method is suited to larger craft where the casualty would be lost under the bow, it presents a larger area to bring the casualty alongside, there is less risk of driving into the casualty, some shelter is provided to the casualty. On the downside in rough conditions the vessel will roll uncomfortably and with small craft the craft may be blown over the MOB.

You now have the casualty alongside which is great news, however there is plenty then left to do as you need to get them on board and ensure they are okay, you might need to provide some first aid too.

Have you ever considered how to get a person into your craft if they can be of no or limited help? In a RIB you could just drag them over the side if they can assist you and there are a couple of you – our preferred method is to drag them over the side with them facing away from you, keeping their feet floating away from (rather than under) the boat and their lifejacket out of the way. You could deflate a tube and roll them in, alternatively you might have a specialised recovery device they can lay in and be recovered into the boat – the orange netting

ENGINE OFF OR ON?

As Skipper you need to judge whether turning the engine off is safe. If you are near a lee shore or shallow area you may choose to keep the engine on to avoid creating further problems. You must be very sure of your own capability to take this approach and should be an experienced helm.



Beam On Approach

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CASE STUDY:

Earlier this year on a very cold winter's day we overheard what amounted to a Mayday call from a yacht that had just recovered two of its crew from the water. They had been in the water for 10 minutes and the first anyone knew of it was the request for assistance after the recovery. The Coastguard tasked the helicopter and they were lifted hypothermic to hospital. They were lucky. Had the yacht put up an immediate Mayday call when the people entered the water we and the Inshore Lifeboat would have been there within 5 minutes of them entering the water – this could have made all of the difference. Immediately you suffer a MOB, issue a Mayday unless you are 100% certain you will immediately recover the casualty. Even so, still make the Coastguard aware.



MAYDAY:

The Coastguard and RNLI are 100% happy for you to initiate a Mayday if someone goes overboard – after all, their life is in danger! They can subsequently downgrade the call if you recover the casualty safe and well. What they don't want is to get a call after 10 – 15 minutes when you've failed to recover the casualty and they are in a far more perilous state. DSC Radios come into their element in this situation, press the red distress button to send an alert to the Coastguard indicating distress and your position (of course always ensure the GPS is on so the DSC unit constantly receives a position) if you have time then you can follow the DSC alert up with a voice call.

you find around building sites works just as well as a DIY cradle system.

In larger craft with higher freeboards recovery can be extremely difficult. On motor cruisers the bathing platform provides an obvious entry point but care has to be taken to prevent the casualty being battered in rougher seas. Consider recovery into a dinghy lowered from the bathing platform or alongside the craft, alternatively simply tether them to the craft and await assistance from a more suitable vessel (like a RIB). The key point here is work out on your craft – or any craft you step on to – how you will get someone back on board – before you need to do it for real.

They're now back on board but you're not yet in the clear. They may be hypothermic and need warming up. If they are in a RIB then you need to get them ashore asap or perhaps lifted via helicopter. If they've been in the water a while then they may suffer from 'hyrdostatic squeeze', removing them vertically from the water could allow blood to rush from their heart to their extremities causing cardiac arrest – lie them flat in the boat with their feet above the height of their head in both cases. If they've inhaled any sea water then they could suffer from 'secondary drowning' many hours later – get them to hospital immediately. Clearly first aid for casualties is a big subject in itself, always speak to the Coastguard – they can speak to Doctors for specialist advice – and consider a first aid course. Make sure though it addresses water related problems as the RYA one does.

I'm often asked whether you should have a manual gas inflation lifejacket or an automatic gas version. In my opinion unless you need to enter the water on purpose with your lifejacket on then it's always an automatic. An unconscious casualty in the water with a manual version on cannot inflate the jacket and so, by definition, doesn't have a lifejacket on. Automatics only very occasionally go off accidentally and the price and inconvenience of rearming them is insignificant compared to the benefits of having the protection afforded by them.

In summary, having a person in the water unexpectedly is one of the gravest situations you can face. First and foremost prevent it, if it cannot be prevented then let's hope you can rely on the practice that you have put in to ensure that you make a rapid and successful recovery.

Important note: DO NOT place people in the water to practice with. These photos are for illustration and on RYA courses students do not enter the water.

[Paul Glatzel](#).

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TIPS:

If someone goes overboard, then as soon as you notice press the MOB button on your GPS unit. The Coastguard can use the Lat & Long of the position and the time to help them predict where the casualty might be.

Fit all lifejackets with lights permanently, if there is even a small chance you will be out at night.

Practice MOB with your regular crew – don't wait till a life may depend on it. Make sure that in your crew briefing you tell people to shout loudly (if they can) as they go overboard.