



TOWING

made

SIMPLE

Paul Glatzel provides a valuable lesson on the matter of towing at sea. Simplicity is the key...

So there you are - a great day skiing, blasting about on your RIB, or perhaps you are undertaking a passage and you hear your VHF burst into life: "All stations! All stations! All stations! This is Dover Coastguard, Dover Coastguard, Dover Coastguard! Any vessel able to assist a 25ft motor cruiser with engine failure, drifting in the vicinity of North Foreland, with a tow to Ramsgate, please respond Dover Coastguard, over." Do you or don't



Position the 'tug well aft of the towed vessel and 'nose in'

you? A cold beer beckons if you get back quickly but hey, there's someone out there that you can help and RIBsters are known for doing all they can in these situations, so you get on the radio and offer your assistance.

As we all know, RIBs are great, versatile boats and are in service around the world as workhorses, rescue and safety craft. They are perfect for towing other vessels but, of course, you do need to be sure that you and your vessel are up to the task. In this article we'll look at the things to consider in the early stages of responding to an emergency, and then how to set up and undertake the tow, both in open water and into and around marinas.

When you respond to the call, one of the first things the Coastguard will ask you is about your position and your craft; they'll want to know if you are near enough to help and whether, realistically, you are suited to the job in hand or if a call to the lifeboat is needed.

You too should consider these same issues. Are you sure that you, your boat and your crew are capable of helping? A two-hour

tow for you and two mates who are all experienced and up for the challenge is one thing; the wife and kids in two hours time may not appreciate your generosity quite as much! Equally, is your craft up to it? Has it got suitable tow points? Has it got the power and fuel (plus reserves of both) to cope with the extra strain you are going to place it under? Have you got the lines you need and are they strong enough? (The shock loading you can place on lines and tie-off points can be considerable even in calm seas.) And what about you? Are you up to it? Do you know what to do? Can you tie the knots you need to? Can you rig an alongside tow and can you then control the new (double-sized) boat you now have? Your insurance company would (probably!) always be sympathetic if something went wrong when you were saving someone's life, however if you were operating unnecessarily beyond your capability, and that of your boat, they may not be quite so easy-going.

A great (and true) example of when someone was out of his depth (in a very well-meaning way) was an acquaintance who was new to boating and who responded

to such a request for a tow. He got the vessel with its crew behind him on a tow and proceeded with them back to their marina. Being a great guy, he responded positively when the crew on the speedboat asked him to tow them back into their berth inside the marina (rather than leaving the boat outside on a mooring) and proceeded into the (very tight) marina. When I asked him whose insurance would have paid up if he'd pranged the £2m boat, moored just inside the marina, with his tow, he went slightly pale and soon realised that, as great as his assistance was, he'd gone a fair bit beyond his remit. In short, a good skipper appreciates where his/her limitations should lie.

Having responded to the Coastguard's call, you make your way to the casualty vessel. When you arrive on the scene you will most probably be the eyes and ears of the Coastguard, so tell them you are there and they will ask you to clarify any areas they are unsure about; calls are often made on mobiles with imprecise details so they may want more information about the vessel, the number of occupants, the problem etc. Be careful, though, and don't proceed straight to the casualty. Assess the area. Is it safe to approach? Is there suitable depth? Is it a lee shore (wind pushing casualty to the shore) situation? After all, it helps no one if you too become a casualty!

One of your first decisions will need to be the type of tow that you intend rigging. To tow another vessel you have two options:

- 1) An in-line (or 'long') tow, where the vessel is towed behind your craft.
- 2) An alongside tow, where you raft the vessel alongside you.

When in open and potentially choppy water, an in-line tow is generally best, whereas if you are intending moving the vessel into a marina or alongside a berth, the manoeuvrability that an alongside tow gives you is key. In many towing situations you may start with an in-line tow then transfer the vessel to be alongside you as you reach a safe haven.

Having decided which it is to be, you need to prepare your boat and lines, so make sure that you take command of the situation and tell the people on the other boat what you intend doing and what you want them to do. Hopefully you have a really long line of a suitable strength on board (at least 12mm diameter, more likely 16mm for towing); your anchor line may do the job, or you may have to join a number of mooring lines together (use two bowline knots to join them). On your craft you will need to rig a system to centralise the tow directly behind your vessel. One method is to rig a bridle between the d-rings on the transom of your

Keep good lines on board



Eye bolts make good strong points



craft, that the towline can be tied-off to, with a bowline. (If you intend doing lots of towing, you may choose to make up a permanent version with snap shackles on for rapid deployment). My preferred method though, if possible, is to rig a line from one d-ring with a bowline (loop) of a suitable length in the end of it so it sits just back from the boat at the centre. As the photos show, take a turn around the d-ring then tie-off this line. This allows you to let it in or out as necessary. Then feed your towline through the loop ready to be passed to the disabled vessel. At your end of the towline, take a turn around the d-ring and then secure in your craft. (We'll come back to this a bit later.)

Tip:

Tip: Don't feel obliged to return the vessel all the way to their home marina/slipway if it is too far. Returning them to a safe area where they can arrange further assistance may be all that's needed.

You are now ready to attach your line to the disabled craft. Ideally, if they have a d-ring on their bow, then I'd attach here as it is their strongest point. If not, get them to rig a short bridle around their forward cleats to centralise and spread the load, and tie-off to this with a bowline; if necessary, spread the load further still by getting them to rig tight lines from their aft cleats to the forward ones. The benefit of this approach then becomes clear as you can easily vary the length of the towline by either paying out or shortening it from within your vessel – far more difficult if you have tied-off permanently to their d-ring and your bridle. You may need to adjust your short line with the loop in the end (through which the towline runs) to ensure the pull is central.

The amount of line you need depends on the conditions but is unlikely to be less than 3-4 boat lengths, otherwise the towed craft will be too close and is in danger of running

into you. In rougher conditions, match the length of the towline to the distance between the wave crests as it ensures that both the towing boat ('tug') and disabled craft are more likely to be both on crests or in troughs at the same time, reducing snatch loading. If it is feasible, you might hang a weight from the centre of the towline to reduce snatch loading but this is often more ideal than practical.

SALVAGE

For every article on towing there are 20 on salvage. In short, whilst claims for salvage on your vessel, if you did need a tow, are highly unlikely, they are nonetheless possible, so at the outset agree a salvage contract. Something like: "we'll give you some money for fuel/buy you some beers when we get in" will do the trick. As you move off, keep the speed down until you can judge your optimum speed which, at best, is likely to be 4-8 knots. Keep a good look out and maintain regular contact with the Coastguard to let them know how you are doing. Another benefit of my preferred method of rigging the tow becomes apparent here in that, if you needed to dump the towline, you could do so from within your craft easily and quickly. A side tow looks slightly more difficult to set up but, in practice, is very straightforward. Tie the craft together, with the engine of the tug slightly aft of the disabled craft. Secure with fore and aft lines, plus springs, running from the bow area to the back end of each boat. If possible, angle the tug slightly nose in to the disabled craft - a suitably positioned fender can do the trick. What you now have is a wide twin-engined craft with only one engine working. Use this to your advantage and remember that, because of the leverage this gives, you can easily turn the nose of the tug towards the disabled craft, pushing it round rapidly. Likewise, you can push the back end of the disabled craft round with the tug's stern easily, but you'll struggle initially (usually until momentum builds) to turn the other way.

Forward and back springs are key



A strong A frame is useful



Tip:

Don't wait until you really need to tow to learn how to do it – work with a friend's boat (or a training school) to practise and hone these techniques.

Of course, don't forget what to do if it is you who needs the tow. You know how to rig the tow and can assist the tug in doing so, but do ensure that you are happy that they have the capability to tow you. If in doubt, stay where you are and ask for further (different!) assistance.

Tip:

With a side tow, leave the steering turned towards the direction in which it is most difficult to steer. This has the effect of making this turn potentially easier without actually affecting a turn in the (easy) other direction.

In summary, we've looked at two types of tow and some of the sundry issues that go hand in hand with undertaking one. Do make sure that you get out there and use this knowledge as towing is a very satisfying skill to be able to use properly. Happy and safe towing!

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Long tow setup: The white line leads to the tricken vessel. The length of the tow line can be varied from within the 'tug' by easing out the white line.

