



Search me

It's late afternoon on a blustery winter's day. The light is fading and you're heading back from a great day out in the RIB...

You're five to six miles offshore, as this route gives you the best passage to clear a headline where it always kicks up a bit. Now choose one of the following scenarios: i) Ahead of you, you see a small, fast, fisher-type craft bobbing around. As you pass 100 metres off you feel uneasy: there are fishing lines out but no one seems to be on board. You go in closer, the boat is empty. ii) You are racing along, it's pretty calm, then you hit a wave and catch some air. You land it with a bump and carry on...wow, that was fun! Fifteen minutes later you glance round to chat to your crew – they're not there! iii) Ahead of you, you see something in the water: it's a windsurfer. As you get closer you realise it's actually a windsurf board and sail but no sailor.

Okay, you're never going to encounter all three scenarios,

but a quick trawl through the news section of the coastguard website (www.mcga.gov.uk) shows just how common such situations are. Boat long and often enough and inevitably you will one day come across one of them. Faced with any of these situations there's a pretty obvious sequence of things to do (at least, it is always pretty obvious until the adrenaline and anxiety kick in!). Firstly, and most importantly, contact the coastguard on channel 16. Technically it could be a Mayday Relay call, but in truth it doesn't really matter, as once you've spoken to the coastguard they can decide on what priority to give the incident. A really easy mistake to make here is to forget to make the call and start to have a look around yourself – get assistance rolling, then you can start to look for the casualty(ies).

Chatting to the coastguard

will take a few minutes, as they will want to establish key facts like position (give it both as a latitude and longitude and a description of your position – they should agree!), the boat name and any other bits and pieces. The team in the coastguard ops room will be rapidly making decisions to request the launch of lifeboats (they can't insist a lifeboat is launched, but contact the relevant station's launching officer to request a launch – rarely, if ever, refused) and, of course, a helicopter if at all possible. As you are a few miles offshore, depending on exactly where you are in relation to the lifeboat stations, it could easily be 20–30 minutes from the time of your call to the time a lifeboat arrives 'on scene'. This time could be critical to the people that are missing; indeed, if they have been in the water a little while before you arrived, then

...there is no point having a separation between your search lines so that a person could be between the lines and be 'lost' in the middle.

it could easily be the difference between life and death.

So, at this point, the fact that you can start to execute a search for them in a logical and structured way may make all the difference. While you might find them by blatting around in a fairly unstructured way, it makes real sense to apply some thought to the situation and create a plan which you can then execute. This will only take a minute or two and can massively increase your probability of finding them.

which later), since if they need to swim to keep afloat they will also lose warmth more quickly and be more likely to dislodge trapped air from their clothing, which may be affording them some support.

Having survived their initial period in the water, the person then faces the onset of hypothermia. Hypothermia doesn't tend to kick in for about 30 minutes for the average person, even in quite cold water. The cooling of the body leads to the body shutting down, increasing the chances of the casualty drowning, and ultimately leading to a point where the individual will die. How long this takes depends on many factors, but the onset of hypothermia for someone in the water increases the chances of them drowning, reinforcing the earlier point that most people drown in the water rather than die from hypothermia itself.

So, skipper, what part do you play in all of this? As we have addressed in previous articles, your job is to keep your crew and yourself safe, well and happy when on board your craft. At a very simple level, a great way to prevent drowning is to not let anyone fall in in the first place! Obvious, of course, but often the simplest solutions are the best ones! If



The cooling of the body leads to the body shutting down, increasing the chances of the casualty drowning...

someone is going to be at risk of falling in, then make sure they are properly kitted. In any weather in a RIB, a life jacket is a must, as the support it gives you if you go in accidentally is critical. As we have already addressed, cold-water shock can hit anyone really hard and not having to worry about trying to stay afloat massively increases your chances of survival. Like any item, life

jackets come in all shapes and sizes, but there are some standard accessories that you should consider adding to them. Crotch straps prevent a life jacket riding up round your ears if you do fall in, while a hood to cover your face could prevent you ingesting water in rougher seas – your body will naturally turn to face the waves, increasing the chances of you drowning. On the life

jacket that I use in rougher conditions, or when alone, I've added a personal flare and a GPS-based personal locator beacon. If there is any chance whatsoever that you will ever be afloat at night, then fit a light and leave it on the life jacket.

We often go out in RIBs when perhaps we should be tucked up with a mug of coffee in front of the fire watching a rugby match. If it's rough and cold, then a drysuit merits serious consideration to increase survival time if you did go in; however, I find that the major benefit is that, in contrast to

LIFE JACKETS - AUTOMATIC OR MANUAL GAS INFLATION?

I'm often asked which I recommend - manual or automatic gas inflation life jackets. My view, and that of the vast majority of instructors, is automatic, unless you are very very sure that you need a manual version. As I see it, unless you are going to be entering the water on purpose, an automatic life jacket does the job for you with no downside. As touched on elsewhere, cold-water shock is debilitating and could lead to you failing to be able to deploy your manual life jacket, as also would be the case if you banged your head on the way out. Two common fallacies often quoted to advocate manual lifejackets are: i) Automatics can go off when they get damp. In my experience

this is simply not true - and I have about 80 which spend their life wet. While the older salt capsule-based life jackets were susceptible, the versions made for the last 5-10 years do not suffer in this way; ii) If you get trapped under an upturned boat it would be better to have a manual life jacket on. While there may be some truth in this, the simple solution is don't helm your RIB in such a way that there is any chance that it will turn over. Also, I'd much rather have an automatic on to address the more likely scenario of a standard MOB (falling off a boat or pontoon) than what should be a very unlikely occurrence (the boat going over).





We often go out in RIBs when perhaps we should be tucked up with a mug of coffee in front of the fire watching a rugby match.

Assuming you have adequately kitted yourself and your crew, you still need to take a really proactive stance to ensure you prevent things going wrong. On one level this is about managing and keeping an eye on the boat, but also, particularly, on the people on board. In rougher and colder conditions where wind and spray combine to chill those on board, are they getting cold? Are they showing signs of hypothermia?

Hypothermia is the cooling of the body below its normal temperature. The signs of hypothermia include: shivering, less dexterity, an apparent slowing of reactions and speech, pupils dilating, unconsciousness. To help a hypothermic casualty, replace wet clothes with dry ones, get them in a thermal bag (another person with them helps), and

RYA ONE DAY FIRST AID COURSE

The RYA's one day first-aid course is a great course taught by instructors who are already RYA boating instructors, ensuring the focus of the course is a realistic approach to applying first-aid techniques in a water-based environment.

give them warm drinks and carbohydrates. Do not give alcohol and seek urgent medical attention. If you are recovering someone from the water that you suspect is hypothermic, they should be recovered horizontally to prevent a rapid rush of blood away from the core area, which could give rise to cardiac arrest.

In summary, there is much you can do to ensure that your RIB is a safe and happy place to be. As a skipper, you must take a very proactive stance to ensuring the safety of your crew and boat, and know what to look for to spot the symptoms of issues such as hypothermia. Do make sure you have fun boating, though!

Paul Glatzel is an RYA Powerboat Trainer and is author of the RYA Powerboat Handbook. He is based in Poole. www.powerboattraininguk.co.uk

If there is any chance whatsoever that you will ever be afloat at night, then fit a light and leave it on the life jacket.

all the waterproofs I've ever owned, they actually keep you properly dry, whereas with even the best waterproofs the water manages to sneak

in somewhere. Helmets, too, like the Gecko, are well worth investing in for those playing when it is a bit colder and rougher.

THE INCIDENT PIT

I was introduced to the idea of the incident pit on an instructors' course and believe the concept to emanate from the world of diving, but it is hugely relevant to all walks of life - not least of all, boating. As a general statement it could be said that accidents that occur as a product of one unique event are unusual, and more often than not it is the cumulative effect of many seemingly minor things that lead to an incident. Imagine a large pit. As you walk towards the pit you start to walk down a shallow gradient. At any time you can stop, turn round and walk back the way that you came. As you walk on, though, the gradient gets steeper, and returning gets increasingly difficult until you cannot climb back up and inexorably slide towards the bottom of the pit. Take the example of a man overboard in rougher seas. You decided to go out in a force 6 and it was the first time

you'd used the RIB this year. You were a bit unsure about the engine but thought it should be fine. You decided waterproofs would be fine whereas perhaps drysuits would have been a safer bet. Your crewman had only been boating a few times and never in seas like these. You're blasting along; you've got the steering wheel and throttle to hold onto - your crew hasn't. You misjudge a wave and your crewman is pinged out of the RIB. Getting back to him is tough. You're alongside and kill the engine; he's struggling and panicking. You finally get him on board but you can't restart. You'd forgotten to charge your VHF, so you can't call for assistance. Your crewman collapses... Addressing any one of these seemingly small issues might have made the difference - the cumulative effect could be catastrophic.

BOOKS

The RYA Sea Survival Handbook is worth a read if you are keen to learn more generally about the subject, but if you really want to understand the mechanics of surviving at sea, then the book to buy is Essentials of Sea Survival by the acknowledged experts in this area - Michael Tipton and Frank Golden.