

Over and Out

... how NOT to handle your RIB

Darkness was not far away late on a 1992-1993 winter's afternoon as I ran my 6.0 metre RIB 'Rhubarb' (red tubes!) backwards and forwards across Poole Bay as I practised for the Frostbite Race shortly to be held in Poole Bay. I was revelling in the moderate seas that were slowly increasing as the light was fading. I don't really know what caused it ... momentary inattention, probably over-enthusiasm and inexperience, but I was aware in an instant of the extra large, steep breaking wave in front of me, one that shouldn't be taken at 40 knots in a 6 metre RIB.

Flying through the air was really quite enjoyable for about 3-4 seconds before I hit the water and surfaced to see my upturned Rhubarb about 10m away, disappearing in the troughs of the 1.5m seas before rising high on the next crest. It seemed like ages, but two minutes of panic swimming is probably all it took to reach the upturned boat and to sit on the hull, clutching the twin outboard legs. The wind and tide were now taking me away from land and into increasingly uncomfortable conditions. Seas that had been great fun had now turned grey and extremely cold at 16.00 on a February afternoon. I stood on the hull for 15 minutes holding onto the outboards and waving my arms – hopeless at a mile offshore.

"Right", I thought, "Have to help yourself". I had flares, VHF radio, thermal blanket, drink and chocolate with me – all in the console, under water. I fastened my crash helmet to the outboard leg, removed my buoyancy aid and dropped into the water to dive under the boat and then stopped. "Hold on", I thought, "I'm warm, dry, conscious and ALIVE! If I dive under the boat something may come loose and fall on me, I might get snagged on something under the hull, the flares might have fallen out and the 1-2m rise and fall of the boat might smack me on the head, and all this in the darkness which I would now find under the hull.

I climbed back onto the hull which I could hardly see and thought, "My wife Maggie won't raise the alarm as tonight I'm off to the AGM of the local yacht club and I'm always late anyway"

My dry suit and thermals were keeping me warm, although my toes were cold and the Force 4-5 wind was taking me ever further offshore. I couldn't see the waves coming but I could hear them, even through my helmet. I would hear a subdued roar and see the effervescence as the crests tumbled towards and over me.

I was determined not to doze off, I started to sing and talk to myself, telling jokes and singing Beatles songs whilst sitting in the cold, being swept by seas and hanging on for dear life as the wind took me towards Peverill Ledge Race. "What's this", I shouted out loud at around 20.30hrs, navigation lights to seaward, only 100m away. I foolishly stood up to wave and shout, splosh...I was in the water, holding on to a lucky grab of the lifelines as successive waves rolled over me.

The lights were now only 20m away and I saw the figure of a man carefully walking forward and looking my way as his boat rose and fell to each breaking sea. It became clear it would be foolhardy to bring the boats alongside in such seas and it was pure ecstasy to see more navigation lights heading towards me at speed. The police launch Alarm had picked up my rescuer's call to the Coastguard and had found us both by radar.

Rhubarb and I were towed into Salterns Marina to be met by the manager James Sydenham who had responded to my telephone call from Alarm for help and he had turned out late at night to lift Rhubarb in their hoist. RIBs are far more stable upside down than they are the right way up and I had to swim yet again to deflate one side of tubes to allow the hoist to suck Rhubarb away from the water without tearing the tubes off. As the boat came clear, the engine alarms started to sound, the outboards were saved (and so was I) by the engine kill cords which had been attached to me. James

then set to on the engines, washing them down and immersing them in oil... both engines were running fine the next morning, saved by his expert attention, thank you James, much appreciated, I'll try not to bother you with such a thing again.

(But, I DID need to bother James again, see the article on our Poole to Cherbourg Record run in 2011, it's in the Endurance section of www.hotlemon.com)

The lessons I have learned:

Drive to the conditions, throttles go both ways. Keep an eye on the sea at all times...even in smooth water the next wave or unexpected wash may have your name written all over it. Ensure that someone ashore knows your proposed timing.

Wear a good life jacket, a dry suit or immersion suit and have a VHF radio and mini-flares **ON YOU**. Even in mid-summer I now always wear my breathable dry suit which undoubtedly saved my life, I had bought it only a week beforehand at the insistence of a far more experienced RIB driver... thank you Alan!

Hope for a dose of good luck... Rhubarb would have blown away if she hadn't inverted and I wouldn't have written this!

Mike Deacon

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