

Inflatable Safety

by Capt. Gary P. Joyce



I found myself one very cold early spring morning as the only civilian at a three-day Zodiac Maritime Academy rescue and tactical operations class, learning and doing all kinds of things in Zodiac rigid-hulled inflatables (RHIs or RIBs: rigid inflatable boats) with over two dozen police, fire and U.S. Navy personnel.

While much of what we were taught at the school was of little value to the recreational boater (although I bet you'd like to learn how to board ships and other neat stuff while underway), the safety lessons, geared by the instructors for the sometimes extreme conditions and jobs these SAR personnel have to perform, had kernels of information that can be of use to those who use inflatables recreationally. Some of this information should be part of your safety routine regardless of the boat you drive, but for the purposes of this article, I'll be speaking specifically about inflatables.

Getting Going

Without belaboring this, trailering an inflatable is no different than trailering any other craft, although the boat, if inflated, is more susceptible to road wind than a "hard" boat. This is less true of a RIB than a "soft" inflatable, but true nonetheless. Suffice it to say: make sure your craft, if not in a package form, is tied down properly and make sure your vehicle is rated for the appropriate gross trailer weight (GTW), defined as the weight of your trailer, boat, motor and all the gear in the boat. When launching, have a painter attached. There's nothing worse than watching your boat - inflatable or otherwise - start the day off with-



Since you won't be needing tactical performance on the Great South Bay, perhaps this 50 Evinrude powered inflatable is a saner option.

out you.

Regardless of whether you trailer launch, are beach bound or moored at docks, there should be a checkout routine before you start your motor. This needn't be anything that anyone might even notice you doing, but it should be done before you start the motor.

Check the transom plate and motor bolts - a simple, easy look, touch and feel takes care of that. If everything is fine there, move on to the things that hold the air and make inflatables inflate, the tubes and their valves. Check all valves to ensure they are operational.

According to Jerry Weisberger, one of our instructors at the academy and one of the very earliest pioneers of the RIB concept (I think it would be fair to say he's sort of the "father" of the production RIB), one of the most consistent problems, something you'll be happy to know is a problem with the likes of special ops teams as well as plain ol' you and me, is improper tube inflation.

The pressure under which inflatables operate

is very low (on the order of two to three psi; check your manual), but under-inflation allows the tubes to flex too much, causing, among other problems, handling difficulties. Since inflatable tubes have over-pressure valves, overfilling an inflatable is less a problem. All good inflatables come with a pressure gauge, and it takes but a few minutes to check tube pressure. We trained in Zodiac's "wild thing," the CZ7, a 21-footer that is the civilian version of the special ops H-733 Zodiac. Every morning started out with the crew (us) hooking up the foot pumps and doing the pump dance until we heard the over-pressure valves release.

Depending on the configuration of your boat, you may have to go through the four-minute bilge exhaust fan step, check the aluminum outboard bracket for water infiltration, check oil reservoirs (for two-strokes), etc., etc., in other words all the checks you'd do with any boat. If you have a regular dinghy-style inflatable (inflatable keel and tubes), then you'll need only to check the motor mounts, tube pressures and do an equipment inventory (necessary safety items, paddles, etc.).

Two Big Safety Factors

This is short and sweet. First, you have a kill strap and kill switch on your motor. Do not leave the dock, beach, whatever, without having it attached to wrist, ankle, thigh or neck (just kidding on the latter). That's a no-more-discussion topic. Wear the kill lanyard, period. You're about six inches off the water, and in the case of the dinghies, don't think you're in a "real" boat. Wear the kill lanyard. Second, wear a PFD.

Mustang Survival co-operates with Zodiac at the school, so it was my first chance to wear and use Mustang's excellent auto-inflate PFD. They are completely unobtrusive ... and even better, work as advertised. Regardless of type, from auto-inflate to traditional orange Class II, if you're in an inflatable, wear a PFD.

Operations

We were punching the CZ7 along in 30-knot winds at 50-plus mph, and some of the benefits of the RIB come into play in a big way at these speeds, with these loads and with the maneuvers we were performing. The soft collars around the hull mitigate the shock of rough water landings while increasing the payload to near four times (about average for an inflatable) what a similar

hard boat can carry. They also are more forgiving of mistakes - the number of which this operator surpassed, unfortunately. I wouldn't have wanted to have been in a regular fiberglass boat for that particular maneuver, of which I hope few will speak about, and you will never read about!

Regardless, the key to safe operations of an inflatable is being aware of the affects of wind, current and sea conditions on the boat. Obviously, a dinghy-sized inflatable is limited in the weather it can handle - images of Navy SEALs pounding through the surf notwithstanding. They call it situational awareness, and it means being aware of what is going on

around you insofar as weather, traffic, your skills, your passengers' comfort and safety, the observed skills of other boaters around you, etc. If you're taking out a small boat, you have to factor all these conditions into its operation.

The aforementioned may seem like it ought to be common sense, but that particular commodity is far too often in short supply ... especially when the fun's awaiting.

MOB (Man Overboard)

This isn't necessarily applicable only to inflatables, but we learned some interesting MOB drills in the class that I consider invaluable and will share with you.

What I may lack in height, I seem to have put on over the years in, shall we say, girth. That is to say I am no lightweight. The men I was working with were some very in-shape young guys and all of us - regardless of who was trying to pull whom into the boat - had some serious trouble trying to accomplish that on a solo basis. In other words, one well-built, in-shape, used-to-doing-this person on a low freeboard inflatable has trouble getting an inert person into the boat. It was accomplished, but it wasn't easy.

Now translate that to your not as well-built, in-shape, et al, boater trying to do it in an inflatable, never mind a typical, tall freeboard boat, and you'll understand why it gets nearly impossible.

Methods used. The first two are the simplest, requiring a length of line that can be threaded under the arm, across the front of the chest, and under the other arm, forming a loop with the MOB in the center. If there are two people, each holds a



Zodiac with E115 Evinrude

loose end and pulls; if it's one person doing the pulling, you pull both ends. Brace with your knees and pull with your legs (if you like your back!). Two people, obviously, are better than one. You will be able to accomplish this in an emergency and with an inflatable. Doing it from the height of the gunwale on a hard boat is pretty much out of the

question unless you and the second person in the boat are Governor Arnold or former-Governor Ventura.

We learned a method at the school that isn't covered in *Chapman's* or anything else I've read. It's called parbuckling and is worth describing - and practicing - whether you own a hard or soft

continued on page 12

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continued from page 11

boat. Naturally, it's easier in an inflatable, but I think it's probably the easiest way to get a person into a boat regardless of type.



A smaller RIB with twin 90's is a mighty fast craft

With this method, you must have two people in your boat and two lengths of line capable of extending from the boat's interior down and around the person in the water and back up to a fixed point on the boat. While holding the person's head up as he or she lies prone in the water, loop the forward line around

the chest area with the arms inside the line. The aft line is looped around the legs at approximately thigh level. The line starts at a fixed point, is wrapped around the MOB, and then back up to the rescuer.

With the person nearest the MOB's head controlling the lift, both rescuers pull. What happens? The MOB simply rolls up onto and into the boat. The rescuer at the head controls the speed of the pull (the MOB's head will go into the water if the leg area is pulled faster than the chest area), but this works remarkably well. It is, however, worth a practice run.

And that's about it for inflatable safety. Just remember: no matter your boat's size, it is a boat, not a toy. And I've got to say - an inflatable is just about the most fun boat around.



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