

Safety Bulletin 06 of 2019

Head injury sustained as a result of falling overboard a 3.9m inflatable boat

This Safety Bulletin is issued following an investigation report issued on 30 October 2019.

The report identifies the findings from an investigation into a head injury caused by contact with a propeller guard, which was sustained by an individual when he fell overboard a 3.9m inflatable boat (the 'boat'). The investigation identified that a lack of operational communication between the coxswain and the injured party ('IP') was a significant contributory factor to the incident, as was the positioning of the IP immediately prior to a turn.

Summary of events:

On Friday 26 July 2019, two individuals went to sea on the boat. One individual was at the helm (the 'coxswain') whilst the IP was sat on the starboard sponson holding on to the bow rope handle with his left hand. The wave height was around 0.5 to 1m and the waves were breaking cleanly around 5 to 15m off the shore, with a period of 7 to 10 seconds between breaks. It was dry and overcast, with a force 1 wind from the west.

There was no discussion between the coxswain and the IP with regards to the coxswain's intentions. The coxswain and the IP carried out a number of parallel runs, 'punching' through several waves for around 5 minutes.

After a short period, one wave caught up with the boat and there was an option to turn away from the wave or punch through it. There was no communication between the coxswain and the IP as to the intention, however the IP anticipated a turn to starboard and so positioned himself so that his torso was leaning out of the boat. He was sat on the starboard sponson holding on to the bow rope handle with his left hand; both of his feet were in the foot straps and his right hand was extended over the starboard side of the boat. Instead of turning to starboard as the IP had anticipated, the coxswain turned the boat to port, into the wave. The combination of the force created by the turn and his positioning meant that the IP had insufficient strength to hold on to the bow rope handle and he consequently let go after a short time and went overboard. After entering the water, the right-hand side of his head struck the propeller guard as the boat continued with its turn to port.

The IP was given first aid and was driven to the nearest accident and emergency department where he received five stitches and was discharged after about an hour.

Recommendations to commercial inflatable and RIB operators:

1. Revise your boat operations risk assessment;
2. Include the hazard of man-overboard and identify the consequences, remedial action and risk scores;
3. Consider the risk of a person contacting a revolving propeller in your risk assessment and consider fitting propeller guards to the outboard engines as necessary;
4. Ensure your coxswains hold appropriate qualifications.

Recommendations to commercial operators and leisure users of inflatable boats and RIBs:

5. Ensure all persons on board effectively communicate at all times with particular attention to changes in course and speed but also including instances where very experienced crew and passengers have a good understanding of each other's abilities and intentions;
6. Ensure all persons on board are holding on securely and as appropriate to the boat.