Almost a 'Deadman's' Handle

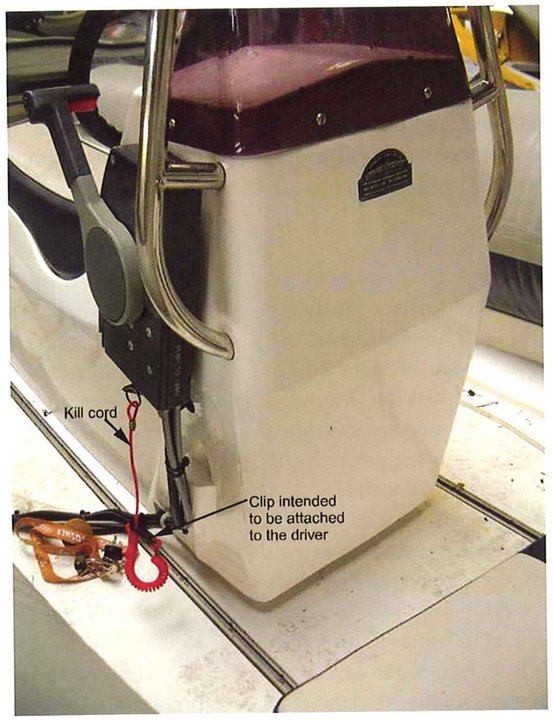

Figure 1 – Photograph showing console and kill cord

Narrative

As a 4.5m RIB with three teenage occupants approached the beach to pick up a wakeboard, it passed a line of markers indicating the boat was entering an area in which a 4 knot speed limit applied. The driver reduced speed to about half throttle, and commenced a slow left-hand turn. During the turn, the console on which the driver was sitting, and to which the steering wheel was mounted, detached from the deck (Figure 1). The driver was unable to maintain his balance, and fell over the boat's port side and into the sea.

The RIB immediately turned sharply to starboard, and a passenger who had been sitting on the rubber tube to the driver's left was thrown into the water. He was immediately struck by the RIB's rotating propeller. A few seconds later, the remaining passenger panicked, and jumped out of the boat, leaving the now unmanned RIB to circle in a clockwise direction, at a speed of between 10 knots and 15 knots. While circling, the RIB passed sufficiently close to the driver, who was assisting the injured passenger, for its propeller to rip his fleece top. None of the RIB's occupants were wearing buoyancy aids.

Fortunately, the accident was seen by another powerboat in the vicinity, which managed to pass a line to the people in the water and tow them clear. The injured passenger sustained deep lacerations to his chest and left side (Figures 2 and 3), and was taken to hospital by air ambulance. He remained hospitalised for 3 weeks. The RIB, escorted by a local lifeboat, circled for about 30 minutes until it finally beached in an area which had been cleared of many other, varied activities by local authority officials. The flares carried on board the RIB were found to be out of date.

Figures 2 and 3 – Injuries to passenger

The Lessons

1. Had the kill-cord fitted to the RIB been used, the injuries caused by the propeller would have been avoided. A RIB driver does not expect to be thrown from his or her boat, and therefore it is not difficult to see why some drivers might see the wearing of kill-cords as unnecessary, or even as an insult to their ability. However, this accident shows that the unexpected does happen, and that people do get seriously injured as a consequence. It is common sense to use the kill-cord; it is foolish not to.

2. Although many boats' fittings and accessories might appear to be secure, this should not be taken for granted. Wear and vibration take their toll over time, and can result in catastrophic failure of some fastenings, particularly on high-speed craft. Periodic inspection of these items takes little time, and increases the probability of the detection of loose items in time to allow remedial action to be taken and potential accidents averted.

3. Speed limits are usually imposed for several reasons including the prevention of wake damage, and the reduction of the risk of collision in busy areas of diverse activities. Disregard for such limits is potentially dangerous, not only for the vessel in question, but also for the other water users in the same area, which includes swimmers, divers, and young children paddling, who are unable to move out of the way quickly should the need arise.

4. A buoyancy aid is of no use whatsoever unless it is worn. On this occasion, it was fortunate that the injured passenger did not lose consciousness. Had he done so, his chances of survival without a buoyancy aid or lifejacket would have been considerably reduced.

5. Thankfully, most boat owners never have to use their emergency flares in danger. However, all flares must be periodically checked and renewed when past their "use-by" date. Otherwise they may fail to work, when needed.