



# NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

## SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 24-28

### *On-Duty Boat Mishaps*

Following a 2018 fatal mishap where a Sailor was ejected from a small boat and struck by the propeller, the Navy made changes to policy for small boat operations, including personnel qualification, required briefings, and the requirement for all prospective afloat small boat coxswains to attend the coxswain course as part of the qualification program. Despite the changes, unmitigated risks remain. The annual number of mishaps, including personnel accidentally ejected from a small boat, remains unchanged over the last 5-year period. In one case, another Sailor was ejected and fatally struck by the propellers of a small boat in 2024. As NAVSAFECOM works with force providers to address gaps in performance including standard curriculum, familiarization training, and standard certification processes to name a few, there are actions you can take today that can help avoid mishaps.



In a recent look at small boat mishaps going back to 2012, the NAVSAFECOM afloat staff found (*unsurprisingly*) that the top five root causes of small boat mishaps were human-error related. Unsafe operation, excessive speed, and unfamiliar ports were the top three. As you read on, reflect on your boat driving habits and note if any of the examples seem familiar. Supervisors, consider your unit's boat operations Plan, Brief, Execute and Debrief (PBED) process. You may find areas for improvement and avoid the bad days on the water like some of our fellow Sailors.

- **LOOKOUT!** A Harbor Security Boat (HSB) was conducting a harbor sweep at night when it struck a buoy while traveling more than 25 kts, injuring all three crew and sinking the boat. Injuries included face and arm lacerations, numerous contusions and a dislocated shoulder. The cost of the mishap was more than \$1.2 million to the boat and more than \$55 thousand in personnel injuries and lost time. Speed and no posted lookout were causal factors in this mishap. —*If you don't have a tactical need to be going 25+ kts at night, don't. As for a lookout, this crew proved just why it's important to have one posted. And contrary to some Sailors' beliefs, boat throttles have more positions than full ahead and all stop. Maintain the proper and safe speed for the mission (see Navigation Rule #6 Safe Speed).*
- **♪Take the Long Way Home♪.** An 11-meter Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB) was transiting approximately 10 miles from a base to the ship when it met rough seas. At some point during the transit (*the report isn't clear on how far*), three passengers in the boat were injured due to the pounding in the high waves. The report also does not mention if the RIB turned back or continued to the ship with the injured personnel, but the injuries were significant: broken clavicle, bruised tailbone, and strained back resulted in a cumulative 59 days restricted duty and more than \$8 thousand in medical and lost time costs. —*This incident was a culmination of poor planning and time critical risk management. If your passengers are bouncing around the boat, it's time to slow down or stop and reassess the plan. If the plan is to transit passengers for 10 miles in heavy seas, then it's a bad plan.*
- **"Return of the Jetty."** After successfully leaving port past a set of jetties, a group of three small boats conducted nighttime training. While returning to port after the training, one of the boats veered off course and ran up onto a jetty, injuring several of the crew. Injuries included broken bones, contusions, head and face lacerations and a concussion with loss of consciousness. The coxswain was instructed to follow the lead boat's wake, but intentionally (*for unknown reasons*) left it and then lost situational awareness of his position on the boats' track into port. Other contributing factors were inadequate pre-mission planning, mission brief and coxswain training for transiting the channel at night. —*Coxswains should be well trained and **proficient**, not just sufficient before conducting night operations. If you are trained and proficient, the Force will be with you.*

## On-Duty Boat Mishaps

♪*Hold on, Hold on...*♪. A ship was conducting small boat operations to expose midshipmen to boat officer training. After a successful run, the boat exchanged passengers and headed out for the second session. Before performing “hard turns,” the coxswain alerted the passengers to hang on and brace themselves.



Navy file photo, not associated with a mishap.

During a hard turn to port, two midshipmen, who were sitting on the starboard side aft were ejected from the boat. They were successfully recovered by the boat’s rescue swimmer. While the two ejected midshipmen were sitting down, they were not holding on as directed. The boat officer did not brief the hard turns to the command before the training. —*Getting ejected from a boat has led to fatalities like the two tragic events mentioned earlier. “Hard Turns” aren’t a real-world scenario with a small boat full of passengers, or ever for that matter. Tactical maneuvering is a learned skill for special missions, **not** for joy riding.*

- **You’re on Your Own.** As a ship’s RIB was transferring personnel ashore, the coxswain became unsure of his location as he transited toward shore. While trying to find the location for the passenger drop off, the RIB ran aground on a submerged rock. They were able to free the RIB and complete the personnel transfer, but the propeller was heavily damaged, temporarily taking the boat out of service. Bridge personnel were distracted from supervising the RIB due to running a man overboard drill and concurrent flight operations. The report doesn’t say if there was a pre-mission brief to discuss the exact location of the drop-off point and provide navigation guidance to the boat coxswain. —*With no electronic navigation system or direction from the ship, the boat crew was left to fend for themselves. Set your boat crews up for success with clear mission briefs and supervision. It could save you from taking a boat out of the fight or getting someone hurt.*

### Key Takeaways

If these takeaways sound like a familiar read, they’re from an old “Lesson Learned” on the same topic (look up LL 19-27 Small Boat Mishaps, posted on the NAVSAFECOM website; link below).

1. **Train your crews.** Review your coxswain and boat crew qualifications in the Fleet Management and Planning System (FLTMPS). While this measure alone won’t guarantee a mishap-free unit, it’s a good start to show your commitment to your Sailors’ professional development and safety. Send your coxswains to formal schooling and remember—those petty officers are your future senior enlisted leaders.
2. **Brief the CO and your crews.** Every small boat evolution should begin with a mission brief as well as an on-station safety brief for the launch and recovery. Commander Naval Surface Force now requires a pre-mission brief to the commanding officer as well as the boat crew, passengers, and boat detail personnel. The brief must have, at a minimum: the number of passengers, skill and proficiency level of the boat crew, general scheme of maneuver, purpose of the ride, go or no-go criteria, operational risk management, and pre-planned responses for emergencies. There should be no surprises—each crewmember should know when tactical maneuvers are about to take place and should always be alert to the sea state. See Commander Surface Force fleet advisory message 171535Z MAY 19, for additional guidance.
3. **Practice with emphasis on safety.** Aim for proficiency, not just sufficiency. Capitalize on opportunities to put the boat in the water and conduct training. When it comes time to put a boarding team on a civilian vessel, you want that team and boat crew to be at the top of their game. See Navy Sea Systems Command fleet advisory message 261829Z NOV 19 for guidance on speed restrictions, proper use of the centerline lifeline, and fundamental safe operations for small boat evolutions.

*And, like we always remind you, “Let’s be careful out there.”*