Safety First

The Kill-cord

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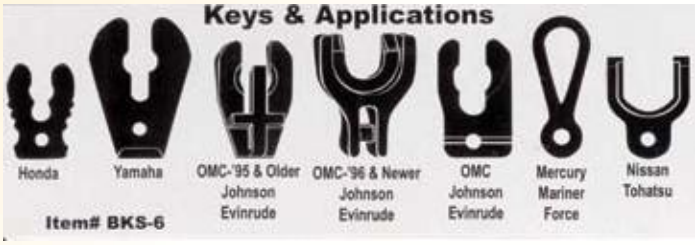
Last month we looked at the single most important piece of safety equipment we use when going afloat – the Lifejacket or Buoyancy Aid. This time, an item often overlooked and possibly for power boat users one of the most vital safety devices onboard – the killcord.

The killcord is a simple lanyard that attaches to an engine cut out switch at one end, the other being secured to the driver. If the driver looses control and is thrown across or even out of the boat, the killcord stretches and then pulls away, flicking the cut-out switch and turning off or "killing" the engine. The killcord is usually a coiled spiral plastic or woven lanyard with an inner core; one end has some kind of snap hook to connect to the driver, and the other a more specialist connector that comes in a variety of shapes according to the design of the particular engine manufacturer's cut-out switch. Some engines have a simple toggle switch arrangement, while others may have a spacer or ring that works at the key hole of the engine itself. Killcords are most frequently used on boats with outboard engines, but may also be installed in other open boats where there is any risk of the driver loosing control.

The main issue surrounding killcord use is one of convenience and habit. Many powerboat drivers do not use the killcord because it restricts their movement around the boat, and is somewhat troublesome to be continually attaching and un-attaching the cord. It's not seen as important, drivers have great confidence that they have not crashed or fallen out of their boat before, so will not do so in the future. However, all it takes is a single accident and lives can be lost simply because the driver did not wear the cord. It's a little like seat belts in cars – the killcord is a proven life saver, and yet time and time again is never used by drivers.

DRIVERS
SHOULD USE
THE KILL-CORD
AT ALL TIMES
WHEN DRIVING
駕駛員當航行時
必須扣上安全死火線



Here at ABC we have recently reminded powerboat drivers to wear the killcords when driving any ABC open boat. It's not a weather dependant safety device either; the killcord should be worn at all times, only disconnected when absolutely necessary, for example when stopping at a jetty, when picking up a buoy or when dealing with a capsized dinghy.

Lessons to be learned use your killcord!

While it is not intended to scare power boat users and over-dramatize the issue, mention of a few recent accidents can highlight how serious this issue is.

At the 2000 Southampton International Boat Show, a 5.4m RIB was being demonstrated at high speed. A driver unfamiliar with the boat took over, and did not attach the killcord. Following a sharp S turn, all three occupants, including the driver, were thrown overboard and the unmanned RIB started circling at high speed. Two of those in the water were picked up by a second boat, but before it was able to recover the third person, it was hit by the run-away RIB, which then ran over and fatally injured the person still in the water. The out of control boat was eventually rammed, boarded and stopped by members of the local Inshore Lifeboat.

In March 2005 a man and his daughter were thrown overboard from their RIB while traveling at high speed on Loch Lomond in Scotland. Because the killcord was not attached the RIB kept on traveling away from the people in the water and it took some time for the remaining crew, the elder daughter, to get the boat under control and return to the scene. Despite her best efforts, both father and younger daughter were not seen again.

In St Aubin Bay in the Channel Islands, a high powered RIB raced out of control after its occupants, a father and daughter, were thrown into the sea. The RIB narrowly missed crashing into several moored yachts before traveling several miles in open water at speeds of up to 35 knots. It eventually crashed into rocks at Elizabeth Marina. Both passengers were rescued by a passing yacht.

During a training session at Athens prior to the 2004 Olympic Games, the Austrian Racing Coach fell out of his RIB into the sea after being hit by an unusually large wave from a passing ferry. He was wearing a buoyancy aid and his killcord, but it was around his wrist and slipped off when he fell from the boat. The RIB continued, unmanned, at approximately 25 knots into the Saronic Gulf, and after about 10 minutes theboat was intercepted by the Greek Marines. They decided the best way to stop the boat was to open fire, and their first shots broke the steering rod, sending the RIB racing off at random directions but generally towards the Mistral race course area. Further gunfire eventually stopped the boat, with shots through the sponson, engine and fuel tank? somewhat surprisingly the boat didn explode!

Killcords save lives! Consider the following points:

- Should the killcord be used at slow speed? Yes! Incidents have occurred with boats moving very slowly; a crew member getting on to or moving around the vessel has tripped, fallen against the throttle and caused a sudden unexpected burst of acceleration, causing the whole craft to dramatically speed forward with serious consequences.

- Should the killcord be used in very calm weather, with very flat, open water? Yes! Even with no waves or wash, a powerboat at speed can hit a substantial and unobserved floating but submerged object, causing the whole craft to stop or dramatically slowdown, and all crew members may be thrown forward or out of the boat.

- Where should you attach the killcord? Some drivers make a loop and slip this over their arm. However, this may result in the cord easily getting caught around the steering wheel, and there have been occasions when the cord has slipped off as drivers have been thrown from their boat. You should attach the killcord around your leg, or to a secure point on the side of your lifejacket or buoyancy aid.

- Wearing a killcord is at first troublesome, but you should place as much importance on it as wearing your lifejacket. Get into the habit and encourage any powerboat driver you see to do the same.

- Make sure the killcord is not worn out and that the inner strengthening core is still intact. You should make a habit of testing the killcord and the kill switch to ensure that it functions correctly; simply start the engine, pull the cord out, and make sure the engine stops.

- Always carry a spare killcord in your boat: if the driver is thrown overboard he will take the killcord with him, making it difficult to re-start the boat easily to go to the rescue!

The UK Marine Accident Investigation branch publishes reports on marine accidents ? have a look and see how your personal boating can be made safer:
http://www.maib.gov.uk/home/index.cfm

The Hong Kong Marine Department also issues reports on incidents that have taken place in Hong Kong Waters:
http://www.mardep.gov.hk/en/publication/ereport.html

The British Sub Aqua Club offers detailed advice on the killcord, and includes photos of a run-way RIB with its crew in the water:
http://www.bsac.org/page/282/kill-cord.htm