

## SYNOPSIS



On 24 November 2008, a Royal Naval officer fell into the River Thames at Gravesend Reach when transferring from the frigate *HMS Westminster* to the class V passenger vessel *Princess Rose*. The vessels were making way at a speed of 4 knots. The officer was quickly recovered by the Gravesend lifeboat, which was following the two vessels; she was then taken ashore, where she was treated by paramedics.

The officer was climbing down the pilot ladder when the painter connecting *Princess Rose* to the warship parted. As the passenger vessel drifted away from the transfer position, the lower rungs of the ladder became trapped in the boarding access. Consequently, the bottom of the ladder was pulled away from the warship's side to an angle of about 40° until its lower spreader gave way under the increasing tension. As the bottom of the ladder ran free, the officer fell off and, although she managed to momentarily hold on to a manrope, she soon lost her grip and fell into the water.

Factors which contributed to the accident included: the sea conditions were marginal; the painter was too short and lay at a steep angle; the bottom of the ladder was taken through the boarding access on to the deck of the passenger vessel; and the wheelhouse of the passenger vessel was left unattended during the transfer. These factors could have been avoided had the risks involved in this operation, which is inherently dangerous, been assessed and appropriate procedures developed.

Since this accident, the Royal Navy has closely scrutinised the transfer of passengers to and from warships by commercial vessels while underway, and has issued detailed direction and guidance to its fleet. It has also issued an advisory notice to all surface warships regarding the rigging and use of pilot ladders, and has included the lessons learned from this accident in its training syllabi.

A recommendation has been made to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) to provide guidance on the conduct of passenger transfers between vessels when making way, and the movement of passengers to and from vessels which are not secured to a quay. Further recommendations have been made to City Cruises intended to improve the safety of its boat transfer operations through risk assessment, the development of procedures, and the provision of training for its crews.