

SYNOPSIS

At 1138 (UTC) on 3 February 2007, the high speed ferry *Sea Express 1* and the general cargo vessel *Alaska Rainbow* collided on the River Mersey in thick fog. The collision holed the starboard hull of the ferry, causing her to list and trim significantly within seconds. However, there were only minor injuries to passengers and the vessel remained afloat. There were no injuries on board *Alaska Rainbow*, and the damage to this vessel was minor.

Alaska Rainbow had anchored in the vicinity of the Bar Light Buoy at 0030 on 3 February, and had remained at anchor until 0830. She was bound for Birkenhead Docks, which required her to transit the Alfred Lock. The pilot boarded once the vessel was off the Bar Light Buoy, at 0918. Two tugs were attached before the vessel arrived off the lock. Here, the pilot turned the vessel to stem the tide and await the scheduled docking time, and for the visibility to clear enough for a safe approach to be made.

Sea Express 1 left Douglas, Isle of Man, at 0850, bound for Liverpool Landing Stage in the vicinity of Alfred Lock. On board were 274 passengers, 20 crew and 58 cars. This included a trainee captain who was to berth *Sea Express 1* in Liverpool as part of his assessment for type rating examination. At 1033, as *Sea Express 1* approached the Bar Light Buoy, the trainee captain made contact with Mersey Radio (VTS), who passed the positions of other traffic and advice that visibility in the river was poor. No mention was made of *Alaska Rainbow*.

Sea Express 1 proceeded inwards, reducing her speed over the ground to about 7 knots. At 1138, in the vicinity of Alfred Lock, *Sea Express 1* took action to avoid *Alaska Rainbow's* forward tug, which had suddenly appeared out of the fog directly ahead. Seconds later *Alaska Rainbow* appeared, and *Sea Express 1* took further avoiding action. However, this was too late, and *Sea Express 1's* starboard quarter and *Alaska Rainbow's* bow collided. The collision tore a large hole in the starboard hull of *Sea Express 1*, immediately flooding the engine room and jet pump room. This caused an electrical blackout and the loss of both starboard engines, effectively disabling the vessel. The captain of *Sea Express 1* notified Mersey Radio 40 seconds after the collision and, following a subsequent request for tug assistance, *Sea Express 1* was towed to the Liverpool Landing Stage, where the passengers were disembarked.

Mersey Docks and Harbour Company and Isle of Man Steam Packet Company Limited have taken a number of actions following the accident, particularly with respect to VTS operations, pilotage training and the allocation of bridge team duties in preparation for type rating examinations. Additionally, as a result of its analysis of the accident and the ascertainment of its causes and circumstances, the MAIB has made recommendations as follows:

- Isle of Man Steam Packet Company Limited is recommended to:
 - Review its safety management system with particular respect to its instructions on the use of radar and bridge team procedures for conducting external communications in the event of an emergency.
 - Ensure that its passenger safety instruction card is appropriate for the type of lifejacket to be found under each passenger seat for which the card is provided.

- J.G. Goumas (Shipping) Co. S.A. is recommended to ensure that its masters are given clear guidelines which detail the importance of effective dialogue with pilots and identify the need for the ship's bridge team to be proactive in providing support to pilots and to challenge decisions taken by pilots at an early stage so that, when required, effective corrective action can be taken to prevent accidents.

- Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) is recommended:
 - To complete its review of compliance with the requirements of the Port Marine Safety Code (PMSC) with particular reference to VTS operations, pilotage best practice and emergency procedures.

 - Following satisfactory completion of its review into PMSC compliance, invite the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) to conduct a PMSC verification visit to the Port of Liverpool.

 - Review the Mersey Channel Collision Rules with respect to sound signals required by vessels manoeuvring in close proximity during periods of restricted visibility.