

SYNOPSIS

(All times are UTC)

The 22.63m fishing vessel *Meridian* left Aberdeen on 11 October 2006 for a provisional 2 week tour of duty as one of three guard ships in the Blane Development Field about 160 miles east of Aberdeen. She had her owner/skipper and three experienced fishermen on board. On the evening of 26 October, weather conditions deteriorated rapidly and *Meridian* would have experienced storm force or stronger wind speeds.

At 2055 on 26 October 2006, a transmission from the emergency positioning indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) was received by Falmouth Coastguard (CG).

At 2102, a second transmission from the EPIRB was received and this enabled a position to be estimated about 160nm due east of Aberdeen, at the edge of the UK/Norwegian oil sectors. The CG confirmed that the EPIRB was registered to *Meridian* and began attempts to contact the vessel. Soon afterwards, a request was made to the vessels operating in the vicinity to begin searching for *Meridian*.

At 2358, control of the search and rescue operation was handed over to the Norwegian rescue services as the location of the search area was in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea. The first rescue helicopter arrived on scene soon afterwards.

The original search box areas were increased in size as time progressed and to fit the SAR services' computer drift models produced for both floating vessels and persons in the water. A number of search craft, including fixed and rotary wing aircraft, oil industry vessels and fishing vessels combined to search these boxes.

At 0113 the following day, the EPIRB was located and retrieved 6nm south-east of the location of the original EPIRB hit and, at 1430 that day, the body of one of the crew was found. During the day, search and rescue craft also located and recovered some other equipment and one of the liferafts, which was found fully inflated but empty. Although the aircraft and vessels continued searching until 28 October, nothing further was found and the search was stopped.

On 6 November 2006, an underwater search for *Meridian* was commenced by MAIB with the assistance of Talisman Energy Inc, the oil company that had contracted *Meridian* for guard ship duty. The search was constantly hampered by poor weather, and having completed an area of 86km² on 4 December, a decision was taken to stop the search until better weather could be expected in the spring of 2007.

On 21 April 2007, the search was resumed but, unfortunately, *Meridian* was not found. On 24 April, after having searched an area of 206km² with the most up-to-date electronic equipment, the search was called off.

The MAIB commissioned an independent study to evaluate and analyse the stability of *Meridian*. The analysis concluded that *Meridian* was a very stable vessel which comfortably complied with the minimum required stability criteria. Among other things, the analysis highlighted an unusually high transverse metacentric height (GM) for a fishing boat, which would have made the vessel "stiff" in heavy weather. Further research indicated that this would have made her vulnerable to suffer synchronous rolling in the sea conditions that prevailed at the time of the accident.

After considering what was known about the vessel, her crew, and the events of 26 October various possible loss scenarios were analysed. The MAIB concluded that the accident was almost certainly brought about by a combination of several factors, and a most probable loss scenario was formed. It is considered likely that as *Meridian* attempted to turn in the prevailing heavy weather conditions, she experienced synchronous rolling as she came beam on to the seas. With each roll angle getting larger, waves began depositing more and more water on deck. This then probably initiated a capsizing moment, and major flooding followed as she lay heeled over and became damaged by the force of the waves. She would have fully capsized and foundered a short time later.

Recommendations have been made to SFF Services Ltd to ensure that the lessons from this accident are included in future safety briefings to guard ship skippers and to ensure that, in future, guard ships are furnished with good quality long range weather forecasts. In addition, the MAIB has published a 2-page flyer, highlighting the accident and advising and reminding fishermen of the dangers of operating in heavy weather and the precautions to take, including gaining the best early warning of worsening weather.

Figure 1



Meridian