

Text for article on MAIB investigation into the death of a skipper

A man bought a second-hand boat from a company based in Hamble. Nothing unusual in this, except that he had not sailed for 15 years, and was returning to his old hobby. The new owner was aware that his skills were rusty, and when the company he bought the boat from offered him the services of a delivery skipper, he was happy to accept. He agreed to accompany the delivery skipper on the delivery voyage so that he could get used to the boat while under the guidance of an experienced man.

The boat had been stored ashore for the winter, and on a windy March morning was launched the day she was to be sailed to her new home in the West Country. The delivery skipper and the new owner had checked the boat over, fuelled and stored her, before sailing to catch the tide through the Needles Channel. The weather forecast was for force 5-7 from the east, and they set off motor sailing with just a small jib hoisted. Both men were wearing foul-weather clothing and lifejackets with safety harnesses.

The passage down the West Solent was uneventful, and the skipper used the comparative calm to plan the voyage. On passing The Needles, the skipper ensured that the owner put his safety line on and clipped to a strong point, but he did not attach his own. Half an hour later, the engine overheat alarm sounded and the engine was stopped. They continued under jib alone. Night had now fallen, and about an hour after the engine was stopped, the lights went off. The delivery skipper went below, and managed to restore power by overriding the low voltage trip on the electrical distribution panel. This was a temporary fix and lasted for a little under an hour until the power failed again, leaving only the indicator lights on the VHF radio and the compass illuminated.

Both men were now sat on the port side of the cockpit. The skipper was steering and the owner was sitting astern of him, dozing. The owner was startled by a shout, quickly followed by the skipper's body hitting him as he went overboard, knocking the owner out.

The owner came round, and found himself alone in the boat. He could see a light, which he realised was the skipper, about 40m astern, and he threw the horseshoe life buoy towards it. He then tried to turn the boat back towards the skipper, but due to the direction of wind and weather, and the sails he was carrying, he could not turn up-wind, so he tried to start the engine. With no battery power, this was impossible. Realising that he needed help, he tried to use his VHF radio. There was just enough power to allow three transmissions, which raised the alarm and allowed the coastguard to triangulate his position using VHF DF. The yacht and the owner were found 3 hours later, and shortly afterwards the skipper's body was recovered.

The MAIB investigation identified a number of safety issues which had a bearing on the outcome of this accident:

1. Safety Line - the distractions of the mechanical and electrical problems, combined with the effects of seasickness, must have all contributed to the skipper not using his safety line. The use of a safety line would have prevented his loss overboard.
2. Survey – The survey carried out for the company that sold the boat was reassigned to the new owner. This was not a full survey, and was designed only to assist in making a provisional valuation of the yacht. The survey did not incorporate an inspection of the engine, sails, navigational equipment, electronics/electrical equipment, or safety and lifesaving equipment.. A full survey before sailing might have highlighted the poor state of the batteries.

3. Electrical power – When the battery voltage dropped below 10.5 volts, an audible alarm should have sounded, but this alarm had been disconnected. The automatic low voltage trip did activate and cut the electrical power. It was this that the skipper overrode to provide some electrical power for a short period after the first power failure. With a better understanding of the power supply system, the operation of the low voltage trip might have provided an indication of the nature of the electrical problem.
4. Electrical system – There were two batteries fitted to the yacht, one for domestic services and one for engine starting. Both were charged from the engine alternator, and there was an isolating switch fitted between the two batteries. This was to allow emergency starting of the engine using the domestic battery. This isolating switch was of poor construction and badly fitted, which meant that it could remain in the on position, even if the switch was in the off position. This meant that the two batteries could be unknowingly connected in parallel, allowing a damaged battery to draw power from an undamaged battery, draining both.
5. Battery condition – In general, the condition of the batteries was poor, with the domestic battery holding charge for only about 1 ½ hours. Once the batteries were inadvertently left in parallel, the domestic battery soon drained the engine battery.