

## SYNOPSIS



On 6 April 2005, a group of middle managers taking part in a corporate team-building exercise in Poole Harbour, ended up in the water after their canoes were swamped in choppy seas. The group, comprising 8 men and women, boarded an accompanying safety boat in an attempt to escape the cold water and to aid their recovery by a passing vessel. The safety boat also capsized.

The group had joined the Brenscombe Outdoor Centre (BOC) in Corfe Castle, Wareham, Dorset on 3 April 2005 to take part in a course managed by Leadership Direct, a company specialising in corporate leadership and team-building outdoor courses. BOC was contracted by Leadership Direct to provide specialist safety instructors for a number of the planned exercises.

The group was divided into two teams, and on 6 April, one of the teams was programmed to cross Poole Harbour from Bramble Bush Bay to Cleavel Point, a distance of about 1.65 miles. The crossing was to be made by rafting two canoes together, using spars and ropes. The weather forecast for the Poole area at the time was for a south-westerly wind, force 4-5 becoming force 5-6. Despite the poor forecast the safety instructor did not raise any objections regarding the planned exercise.

The early stages of the exercise were beset by problems. A wheel fell off the safety boat trailer as it was being driven to Cleavel Point, and the ensuing delay was compounded as one of the two canoes which were being towed to Bramble Bush Bay, capsized and had to be righted. The instructor finally arrived at Bramble Bush Bay at about 0935. The exercise had been due to start at 0900. Since schedule timing was a high priority for the clients, the 30 minute delay put the instructor under additional pressure.

Because of the freshening wind conditions, BOC's director arranged for an additional instructor to be in the safety boat.

After a safety briefing, the rafted canoes entered the water between 0945 and 0950.

Although the wind was at force 5, and the sea surface choppy, the safety instructor once again raised no objections to continuing with the exercise. After embarking the canoes, the team was given instructions on how to paddle and on the transit to be taken.

At about 1020, the group lost the lee protection of the land and started to drift towards the deep water of the South Deep channel. With the elements against them, the canoes failed to make headway and the crews began to quickly tire. The instructors decided to take the canoes under tow and continue across the open water instead of taking the safer option of turning back.

Because of the towing configuration, the canoes started to yaw badly and take in water. Soon after, three large waves swamped the windward canoe, which then sank. The remaining canoe became swamped soon afterwards. The instructors removed the joining spars in preparation for righting one of the canoes, and BOC was informed of the situation by mobile telephone. As the canoe was partially emptied, the crew tried to climb back into it, causing it to capsize once again.

Meanwhile, the canoes and safety boat continued to set towards deep water. The instructors tried to prevent this by dropping two anchors. One of these eventually snagged a racing buoy, which held them at the southern edge of the South Deep channel. The situation was becoming beyond the instructors' control and BOC was informed that the group needed help. At the same time, the oil rig supply vessel, *Furzey Squirrel*, was seen and the instructor waved his arms to indicate a distress. The vessel headed towards the group and its master alerted the harbour authorities to the situation. The harbour authorities then contacted the coastguard.

Neither of the instructors nor BOC contacted the emergency services. BOC did instruct two rigid inflatable boats belonging to the centre to proceed to the area and provide assistance, knowing that *Furzey Squirrel* had been alerted and was at close quarters. Unfortunately they were operating 7 miles from the accident scene.

In an effort to ease transfer to *Furzey Squirrel*, and to warm the team up, the safety instructor decided to put the entire group onboard the safety boat. The additional weight caused the boat to swamp, plunging everyone into the water, and very soon after it capsized. Fortunately, *Furzey Squirrel* then arrived, and by 1105 the group was safely onboard the vessel. They were subsequently transferred to the Poole lifeboat and then to Poole General Hospital. None of the group suffered injury and they were discharged early in the afternoon.

The MAIB investigation found that BOC's management team had not undertaken a specific risk assessment for this exercise, so the risk of swamping had not been considered. Consequently, no control measures had been put in place to prevent it happening. The likelihood of an accident was compounded by the safety instructor deciding to undertake the crossing despite unsuitable weather conditions. Opportunities existed for both instructors to abandon at various points during the exercise, but these were not properly considered. The reason for this can be partly explained by the safety instructor's lack of experience in leading this particular exercise, and his determination to recover lost time.

Recommendations have been made to BOC, The Adventure Activities Licensing Authority and other associated agencies regarding the benefits of validating risk assessments by scenario-based training, and the need to become more influential in exercise planning when a "third party" manages the course.

Further recommendations have been made regarding the need for prior agreement of an alternative plan should an exercise need to be aborted, the importance of recognising when a "normal" recovery situation develops into an emergency and the leader's empowerment to alert the emergency services.