

MAIB SAFETY BULLETIN 2/2002

The loss of one crewman with
the sinking of the fishing vessel

Radiant

about 45 miles
north-west of the Isle of Lewis

10 April 2002

Issued May 2002

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This document, containing Safety Recommendations, has been produced for marine safety purposes only. It is issued on the basis of information available to date.

The Merchant Shipping (Accident Reporting and Investigation) Regulations 1999 provide for the Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents to make recommendations at any time during the course of an investigation if, in his opinion, it is necessary or desirable to do so.

The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) is carrying out an investigation into the sinking of the fishing vessel *Radiant* on 10 April 2002 and the loss of one crewman from, apparently, the failure of his lifejacket to inflate properly. The MAIB will publish its report on completion of the investigation.

While abandoning *Radiant*, the crew experienced problems inflating their lifejackets. This Safety Bulletin is for the attention of all mariners who wear inflatable lifejackets and recommends that they **check that the gas cylinder is firmly tightened into the release unit.**



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Background

While fishing to the north-west of the Isle of Lewis, *Radiant* snagged her port net on a seabed obstruction. Attempts were made to free it but, in the process, the winch stopped. Within five minutes the vessel capsized and sank. The wind was force 6, the sea was rough, and it was dark. The details of the capsize are being investigated and will be covered in the report.

Two types of lifejacket were carried on board; the fully approved SOLAS lifejacket for use in emergency, and an inflatable working lifejacket which met EN 396 criteria. The lifejackets that feature in this Bulletin were the latter type. It was the owner's policy that anyone working on an open deck should wear an inflatable lifejacket.

The Accident

This Safety Bulletin concerns the abandoning of *Radiant* and the lifejackets being worn by her crew.

Soon after the winch stopped, the vessel started to list heavily to port, prompting the six-man crew to muster on the starboard side of the wheelhouse. The three deckhands who had been working on deck were, in accordance with company policy, already wearing inflatable lifejackets. Both the skipper and the engineer donned theirs while the mate, who had also been working in the wheelhouse, realised that his was stowed below. There was insufficient time for him to collect it and he was forced to abandon ship without one. Such was the speed of events.

Before abandoning the sinking vessel, the five crew wearing lifejackets tried to inflate them manually by pulling the release toggles rather than waiting for automatic inflation on taking to the water. Only one of the five lifejackets inflated.

Three of the crew managed to board the starboard liferaft but, as *Radiant* capsized, it turned upside down. They all ended up in the water and tried to board the upturned raft. During this process one of them disappeared. Once the others had managed to board the upturned raft, they tried to locate their colleague, but without success. The missing man was one of those whose lifejacket had failed to inflate. He was never seen again.

While on the upturned raft, one man managed to inflate his lifejacket by blowing into the oral tube. The liferaft was eventually righted and the five survivors managed to board it. They were rescued by helicopter after the coastguard had been alerted by transmissions from the vessel's Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB).

Lifejacket Inspection

The accident raises a question about the effectiveness of at least one type of lifejacket being used at sea. Realising the importance of finding out what happened without delay, 2 of the lifejackets used in this accident were recovered. Together with 14 others of similar type, 5 of which were unused, they were sent to an independent approved lifesaving appliance laboratory for inspection and testing. They were all fitted with Hammar release units.

The examination revealed that the gas cylinders were either not connected to, or were not fully tightened into their release units. The gas cylinders in the five unused lifejackets were not fully tightened into their release units.

Comment

The owner's policy regarding the wearing of lifejackets on deck is commendable and may well have saved one life in this accident.

The wearing of inflatable lifejackets on deck is encouraged, and provided they are properly serviced, those who do so have every right to expect that they will function reliably when required.

An inflatable lifejacket being worn by fishermen is subjected to heavy use. It is too early to know precisely what happened in this instance, but it has been discovered that when the fabric of a lifejacket rubs against the gas cylinder with constant use, it can cause the cylinder to unscrew from the release unit if it has not been fully tightened.

Following tests on the lifejackets recovered, it is assessed that in all probability, the reason why four out of the five lifejackets used on *Radiant* failed to inflate was because the gas cylinders were no longer attached to the release units. The casualty had been wearing one of them.

Users should remember that when all else fails, a lifejacket can be inflated using the oral tube provided having first removed the dust cap.

It is also important to service inflatable lifejackets annually or more frequently according to manufacturers instructions. The two lifejackets recovered from *Radiant* were found to be a few days overdue for service.

MGN 155(F) published by the MCA, and available free of charge, contains useful guidance on inflatable lifejackets and other buoyancy equipment for fishermen at work.

Safety Recommendations

Fishermen and mariners who routinely wear inflatable lifejackets are recommended to:

1. Check that the gas cylinders are firmly tightened into the release units. It is especially important that owners of lifejackets fitted with Hammar release units make this check.
2. Carry out the safety checks listed in the booklet issued with every lifejacket fitted with a Hammar release unit:
 - Check that the single point indicator is green.
 - Check that the expiry date has not been reached.
 - Check that the red handle is attached.
 - Check that the gas cylinder is firmly tightened by holding it through the jacket fabric.

Any deficiencies should be dealt with as soon as practicable and no later than the next time the vessel goes to sea.

Users, service stations and suppliers of inflatable lifejackets are recommended to:

3. Heed the updated information that Hammar is promulgating about tightening gas cylinders into release units.