

SYNOPSIS



The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) was notified of the accident on 6 January 2002 and an investigation began that day.

The high-speed craft *Diamant* and the ro-ro passenger ferry *Northern Merchant* collided in the Dover Strait in poor visibility.

Diamant was en-route from Oostende to Dover with 148 passengers and crew on board. *Northern Merchant* had just departed Dover for Dunkerque with 102 passengers and crew on board.

As both vessels approached each other with a CPA of 3 cables, 3 miles south-east of Dover, *Diamant's* speed was 29 knots, *Northern Merchant's* was 21 knots. The bridge team on *Diamant* then assumed, incorrectly, a green - green situation and maintained course and speed.

On board *Northern Merchant*, the bridge team fully expected *Diamant* to keep clear, because of a perceived unwritten rule that high-speed craft will keep clear of all other vessels in all scenarios. However, as the distance between the vessels decreased to 6 to 7 cables, they realised this might not be the case and then altered course to starboard by 7° to 10° and then applied 20° of helm. At the same time, *Northern Merchant's* echo began to arc on *Diamant's* radar. The master of *Diamant*, assuming the danger to be on his starboard side, altered course to port. The result was that the vessels collided.

As a result of the collision, *Diamant* suffered substantial prow and starboard side wave piercer damage. *Northern Merchant* suffered slight damage to her port side shell plating. There were no injuries.

This accident has raised three important safety issues relating, firstly, to the perceived unwritten rule, secondly, how operators should determine a safe speed and close quarter situation in restricted visibility and, thirdly, the extent to which reliance can be placed on radar for detection in restricted visibility.

As a result of the issues, appropriate recommendations have been made to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the operator of each vessel.