

SYNOPSIS

This incident occurred just after midnight on 16 April 2001, and was reported to MAIB by the owners at 1000 that day.

Van Dijck, a scallop dredger, sailed from Brixham at 1030 on 14 April for the Channel Islands fishing grounds. Francis Sharpe, a 17 year old trainee fisherman, had joined the vessel on sailing, and had been paired with Mark, another deckhand, and the skipper on the 0800-1400 and 2000-0200 watch. The vessel arrived at the fishing grounds to the south-west of Guernsey at about 1800 the same day. The first shoot began at 1805. The weather during this initial period was moderate with relatively little ship movement. Francis was shown where to go, what to do etc, and how to sort out scallops from the debris dumped on deck before pushing/kicking the residue back overboard through the scuppers. These scuppers were fitted with removable centre-hinged flaps which were usually wedged about three-quarters open using a stone.

During Francis's first six hour fishing watch the gear was shot about four times. He was kept well clear of the moving gear. Given Francis's inexperience, the skipper always came down to help him with the dredges on the port side, while Mark worked alone on the starboard side. This pattern of fishing continued over the next 24 hours or so, with about 14 hauls carried out at fairly regular intervals. At 2335 on Sunday 15 April, the gear was again re-shot. Debris sorting started immediately, with Mark on the starboard side, and Francis on the port. The skipper saw both deckhands working on deck at 2340, and again at midnight. Shortly afterwards, Mark became aware that he could no longer hear Francis working. Thinking he might be unwell, Mark went to look for him. Not finding him in the galley/mess room area, Mark told the skipper at 0005 that he could not find Francis. Both Mark and the skipper carried out further searches of the vessel, but found no trace of Francis. The position of *Van Dijck* at this time was 49°21.25'N, 003°09.10'W.

At 0015, the skipper broadcast a "Pan Pan" message. This was received by St Peter Port Radio (Guernsey), who were told that as soon as the gear was onboard, *Van Dijck*, together with *Geeske*, another of the company's vessels which had been about half a mile behind, would be starting to search on a reciprocal course, allowing for wind and tide. At 0020, both vessels started the search. Weather conditions at this time were north-west force 4 to 5 with a slight sea. Other vessels in the area, the fishing vessels *Centaur*, *Alison Louise*, *Maravana* and the Russian tug *Nafticas 31* also joined in the search. Despite a detailed air and sea search by the Guernsey lifeboat, and aircraft from the voluntary Channel Islands Air Search organisation, Francis was not found. Both these searches were terminated at about 0936 UTC. *Van Dijck* together with *Geeske* continued searching until daylight faded, and at 2100 on 16 April the search was reluctantly called off. *Van Dijck* then returned to Brixham.

Subsequently, one scupper door was found to have been carefully removed by Francis and stored alongside the opening, probably shortly after the debris had been tipped on to the deck. No marks or signs of where Francis might have been lost overboard were found, and his loss remains unexplained. He was not suffering from depression, or the affect of alcohol or drugs at the time of his disappearance.