

SYNOPSIS



On 14 March 2001, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) was notified of an accident which had taken place in Harwich, UK, involving a brake failure on a lifeboat winch. The MAIB began an investigation the next day.

On 14 March 2001, the 2,198gt UK-registered research vessel *Marine Explorer* was berthed port side alongside Parkeston Quay, Harwich, UK. The vessel's port lifeboat had been returned, by lorry, to the quayside following repairs to its suspension hooks.

While it was still on the lorry, two crewmen climbed into the lifeboat at about 1530 to secure lifting gear. They remained in the lifeboat while a mobile crane lifted it from the lorry and suspended it vertically beneath the heads of the davit's arms on the port side of the vessel. Welded repairs had recently been made to these davit arms.

The two crewmen then connected the davit's falls, or lifting wires, to the lifeboat's suspension hooks. These two men remained in the lifeboat. The mobile crane was then lowered and moved clear so that the davit took the lifeboat's weight.

The davit's winch was then used to hoist the lifeboat. Hoisting continued until the lifeboat had almost reached its fully stowed position, when the winch motor's limit switch shut off the power, as designed.

The winch then began to run out, the davit arms swung out and then the lifeboat lowered. It continued to lower until it struck the edge of the quay and, despite efforts to apply the winch's brake, continued into the water. The two men in the lifeboat were slightly injured.

It was found that the winch ran away because its hand-operated brake had been assembled incorrectly. This had recently been dismantled in preparation for load testing of the davits and the lifeboat's suspension hooks. The test was required to satisfy Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) requirements.

No risk assessment was undertaken before these operations began, and the dangers associated with allowing personnel to be carried on an untested system were not recognised.

The vessel's owners are recommended to:

1. Issue instructions that for planned, routine, non-emergency activities no personnel are to be in lifeboats, or on any other item supported by testable loadbearing systems, unless and until that system has been fully and satisfactorily tested under load, and for proper functioning, as required by the relevant regulations.