

## SYNOPSIS

The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) was contacted by Pentland Coastguard at 0453 on 19 March 1999 and informed that a chemical tanker was on fire and drifting in the western approaches to the Pentland Firth. An investigation was started that day.

*Multitank Ascania*, a Tuvalu registered chemical tanker of 2,780 gross tonnage with 1,800 tonnes of vinyl acetate monomer on board, was on passage from Eastham towards Teesport, via the Pentland Firth. Shortly before 0245 on 19 March, while approaching the Firth, a fire broke out in the machinery spaces.

The crew responded properly by attempting to extinguish the fire using portable extinguishers, and then flooding the machinery spaces with the fixed CO<sub>2</sub> system. At 0305, the master contacted Pentland Coastguard. Immediate assistance was arranged and, with the agreement of the master, the coastguard broadcast a "Mayday Relay".

Various search and rescue units were tasked and the Orkney harbour's tug *Einar*, which was secured to her mooring buoy in Scapa Flow, was made available and got underway to assist.

By 0537, all the crew except the master, had been airlifted off. With the casualty drifting towards land, the tug *Einar* was able to connect a tow rope to a mooring line that had been lowered from the tanker's bow. She started to tow the tanker clear of the Dunnet Head peninsular, but after about 20 minutes the connection parted. The master then let go an anchor, and the Thurso lifeboat recovered the mooring rope in an attempt to tow the vessel clear of the headland.

The anchor eventually held in a position approximately 7 cables off Scarfskerry Point. The master was then evacuated by helicopter and, at 0836, the coastguard invoked its powers of intervention. A temporary exclusion zone was established around *Multitank Ascania*, which involved the evacuation of up to 600 people from their homes in the affected area.

At 1026 the following morning, two salvage personnel were lowered on to the vessel. An hour and a half later the salvage master reported that the fire appeared to be out. The vessel was eventually towed to safety. There was no pollution, only minor injuries and the damage was light.

The fire was caused by thermal oil leaking from a thermal oil pump mechanical seal and/or a nearby flanged joint on a pressure relief valve. Cause of ignition has not been positively identified. The quantity of oil involved was little more than 1m<sup>3</sup>.

Recommendations are aimed at improving measures to prevent, and extinguish, similar fires in the future, and to reduce unacceptable risks associated with loaded chemical tankers when transiting particular areas of concern.