SYNOPSIS

This accident was notified to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) by the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) Falmouth at 0205 on Wednesday 3 February 1999. The investigation started later the same day.

Toisa Gryphon is a 4,000bhp (2984kW) offshore tug/supply vessel, registered in London, owned by Toisa Limited, and managed by Sealion Shipping Limited. Propulsion is by four diesel engines driving through two controllable pitch propellers (CPP) working in nozzles. One transverse thrust unit is fitted forward and can be driven via a clutch from the diesel generator set on the centreline.

The vessel was on charter to SIMEC, a French telecommunications company, and was in the process of carrying out a series of seabed survey operations. At 2200, on the evening of Tuesday 2 February 1999, the vessel was operating under unmanned machinery space (UMS) conditions and moving slowly towards the next survey position. The master had reduced to minimum pitch on the propellers and had called the contractor's staff. Electrical power was being supplied by shaft generators. At 2215, the automatic fire alarm sounded showing a fire in the engine room. With the crew at fire stations, the master called all remaining personnel to the bridge. As heat and smoke prevented entry, the engine room doors were closed, all vents and fire flaps shut, and fuel trips operated. The resultant blackout occurred while the chief and second engineers were shutting the watertight door to the cement room. Shortly afterwards, halon was discharged into the space. A distress signal was sent at 2227 and acknowledged by Falmouth Coastguard. The vessel's position at that time was 49^0 24'N, 010^0 30'W. Two helicopters and a Nimrod aircraft were scrambled, with the nearby Irish naval vessel *Ashling* also responding.

While waiting for the helicopters, liferafts were prepared and regular heat checks were carried out on the deck, funnel and engine room bulkheads. The first helicopter arrived at 0040, the second at 0205. *Ashling* arrived at 0112. By 0238, all 11 of the contractor's staff had been lifted off. At 0400, *Ashling* advised that her thermal imaging camera showed that the fire had diminished. At 0500, the chief engineer and two crew briefly entered the engine room to shut the main sea valves and to confirm that the fire was out. *Ashling* continued to assist, offering breakfast to the crew and allowing use of her radio equipment. The emergency fire pump was started at 1120 with the chief engineer and his staff re-entering the engine room shortly afterwards. After venting and checking the main switchboard, a generator was started and limited lighting and power restored. A tow line from *Ashling* was connected at 1410 and transferred to *Anglian Earl* at about 2230. The vessel arrived in Falmouth at about 0830 on 5 February.

The investigation showed that a seal on the high pressure piping from the starboard gearbox CPP control system had failed, spraying lub oil over the aft part of the engine room. This had been ignited by hot surfaces on adjacent main engine exhausts. A continuous fire watch was maintained in the engine room during the tow back to Falmouth. There were no injuries to either the contractors or the ship's staff.

Recommendations are made on both operational practices and fire fighting.