

Synopsis

The accident was notified to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) at 0800 on Sunday 13 December 1998. The investigation was carried out by the Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents, Rear Admiral John Lang.

In the early hours of 13 December, five young men living on the Isle of Iona on the west coast of Scotland were returning to the island after attending a ceilidh at a hotel in Bunessan on the Ross of Mull. Their journey back involved crossing the 1.4 km wide Sound of Iona.

It was a dark night, the wind was south west 4-6 and visibility was good. The waters of the sound were turbulent but not unusually so. The five young men set out to cross the sound in an open 4.27m (14ft) dinghy propelled by an outboard engine. They were all, to varying degrees, capable and experienced seamen and had made this particular crossing many times previously. None of them were wearing lifejackets.

When about a quarter of the way across, the dinghy pitched into a wave and shipped sufficient water to partially fill it. With its stability destroyed, the dinghy capsized very shortly afterwards and threw all five occupants into the sea. All five managed to cling to floating objects or the upturned boat but one became separated from the others and eventually managed to swim ashore and raise the alarm.

Despite a comprehensive search being made, only the upturned dinghy and the body of one of the young men was found in the hours that followed the capsizing. The bodies of the remaining three were eventually recovered over the weekend of 9-10 January 1999.

The accident was caused by the failure of the well laden dinghy to rise to an oncoming wave that nobody onboard had seen in the dark. Sufficient water was shipped to destroy all residual buoyancy and the capsizing that followed was inevitable. The lack of lifejackets denied four young men an opportunity to survive. No accident is the result of a single action and this report comments on the chain of events that contributed to this tragic event.

The report makes a single recommendation to the Royal National Lifeboat Institute to examine the feasibility of establishing an inshore lifeboat station on the Ross of Mull to cover accidents in the Sound of Iona and adjacent waters. This recommendation is made as a result of a number of drowning accidents in the area in recent years.

The report also very strongly advises anyone crossing the Sound of Iona in an open boat to wear a lifejacket.