

Synopsis

The accident occurred in the Bay of Biscay on 8 October 1997. A Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) Incident Report Form was completed on 12 October and was received by the MAIB on 20 October. An investigation was carried out by Mr R Brydges.

An experienced skipper and two novice crew agreed to deliver a Beneteau Oceanis 390 yacht, *Ocean Madam*, from Malta to Plymouth, United Kingdom. Before sailing, the crew were informed the voyage would last four to six weeks. The yacht sailed from Malta on 22 September 1997 and headed towards Gibraltar where it arrived on 2 October. This leg included one refuelling stop in a Spanish port.

After 36 hours in Gibraltar *Ocean Madam* resumed her voyage with the intention of making a non-stop passage to Plymouth. In the event the plan was changed and a diversion was made to La Coruña to refuel on 7 October. During the short stopover the skipper became aware that force 7-8 winds were forecast for the Bay of Biscay. Confident in his ability to handle adverse weather conditions he chose to sail and once underway, began to pick up the BBC shipping forecasts which were predicting force 9 winds. Within 24 hours *Ocean Madam* was encountering high winds and correspondingly rough seas with breaking waves.

On the evening of 8 October, *Ocean Madam* was knocked down twice by breaking waves. She recovered after the first knock-down but inverted after the second. While in this position one of the crew became detached from the yacht despite being securely clipped on by his safety harness. Faced with a dismasted and partially flooded craft in a high sea state and in the dark, the two survivors were severely handicapped by the circumstances in what they could do. They were without power and were confronted with a flailing liferaft but could hear the cries of the man overboard. Controlling the inflated liferaft became their first priority and both men climbed into it to secure it. Before they were able to do so, another sea struck them and broke the painter. The liferaft was swept away and any chance of rescuing their colleague had gone.

Alerted by the transmissions of the EPIRB a French search and rescue operation was successful, and after spending eight hours in the damaged liferaft, the two survivors were rescued by a French naval helicopter.

The capsizing was caused by breaking waves. Prior to the second knock-down the crew member who lost his life was wearing a lifejacket and a safety harness which was properly clipped on. Although it will never be determined exactly what happened, it is probable he unclipped himself whilst underwater but was unable to return to the boat once it had righted. He was never found and is presumed drowned.

The report makes four recommendations.