

Synopsis

This accident was reported to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch on the evening of 1 October 1997. The investigation began the following morning and was conducted by Mr J Lee, Inspector.

Sapphire and *Elegance*, two Scottish fishing vessels of similar size and construction, operated as partner vessels in pair trawling operations. Having completed two days of successful fishing in the North Sea at the end of September, the two vessels headed for Fraserburgh at 1000 on 1 October. On the homeward passage weather conditions gradually deteriorated during the late morning and early afternoon, giving winds of force 7 to gale force 8.

Shortly after 1530, *Sapphire* capsized and rapidly sank about 12 miles from the Scottish coast, just north of Peterhead. Of her five crew, only the skipper managed to scramble clear and swim to one of the automatically released liferafts. The vessel's Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) did not float free and went down with the sinking vessel.

The single survivor fired several distress flares, two of which were spotted by *Elegance* who alerted the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) Aberdeen. A search and rescue operation recovered *Sapphire's* skipper alive at 1746, but no other member of the crew was found.

From an underwater survey of the wreck and an inspection following its recovery, it has been concluded that the vessel most probably capsized due to progressive flooding of the fish hold through the unsecured hatch cover and of the engine room through open weathertight doors.

Two Safety Bulletins were issued by the MAIB shortly after the accident and a third following the collection of further evidence. These covered matters concerning maintenance of Hydrostatic Release Units (HRUs) fitted to EPIRBs and the securing of weathertight doors and hatch covers when a vessel is at sea.

Five recommendations have been made regarding the revision of stability booklets for fishing vessels, the marking of weathertight hatches and doors, the amendment of regulations covering EPIRB requirements and potential problems with HRUs within the industry. All recommendations have been addressed to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA).