

FLYER TO THE SHIPPING INDUSTRY

Six crew lost as a general cargo ship founders



Swanland's two survivors in a liferaft

NARRATIVE

The master and five crew from the general cargo ship *Swanland* were lost when the vessel foundered about 17 minutes after suffering a catastrophic structural failure in darkness and heavy seas.

The officer of the watch, who was the second officer, sounded the general alarm to alert the crew, who were asleep in their cabins, and the master wasted no time in broadcasting a “Mayday” message on Very High Frequency (VHF) radio channel 16; he did not use Digital Selective Calling (DSC). The “Mayday” message was very brief and so over the next 4 minutes the master was prompted by the coastguard operator to provide more details about the vessel’s cargo, damage and liferafts.

The crew started to assemble on the bridge and donned immersion suits collected from two decks below. These were a mix of different types - some of the suits were required to be donned with lifejackets, others did not. However, the cook was never seen, and some of the other crew went back to their cabins to collect valuables and did not return.

As the vessel’s freeboard reduced, the master realised that the vessel was sinking and ordered the crew to prepare to launch the liferafts. At about the same time, the second officer collected the two search and rescue transponders (SART). However, he had difficulty activating them because of the design of the gloves integral to his immersion suit (**Figure 1**), and eventually had to use his teeth to operate them.

Four of the crew were preparing to launch a liferaft from the port bridge wing, when they were covered by a wave and *Swanland* started to sink beneath them. The second officer and able seaman (AB) soon surfaced and climbed into a liferaft, which fortunately had inflated nearby.



Figure 1: Immersion suit glove

The liferaft's internal light soon extinguished, and the survivors continued to be hampered by the lack of dexterity afforded by the immersion suit gloves (**Figure 1**).

About 1 hour after Swanland foundered, a rescue helicopter arrived on scene and spotted the survivors in the liferaft. No other survivors were seen, so the helicopter crew winched the second officer and the AB on board; they were cold but uninjured. The body of the chief officer was recovered several hours later. He was wearing an immersion suit but no lifejacket; he had drowned. The master and the remaining four crewmen have not been found.

SAFETY LESSONS

Abandoning ship in the middle of the night in rough seas is a situation no seafarer wants to experience. Unfortunately, many do, and although SOLAS requirements place a great deal of emphasis on the importance of life saving appliances (LSA) and abandon ship drills, tragically lives continue to be lost.

To improve the likelihood of all crew surviving should the need to abandon ship arise, vessel owners, managers and crews are strongly advised to take into account the lessons to be learned from this accident. In particular:

- The importance of ensuring that all crew are fully briefed on mustering procedures and that they are able to properly don the immersion suits and lifejackets available through regular and realistic abandon ship drills.
- The benefits of transmitting distress messages in the recommended and internationally recognised format. This can quickly and accurately be achieved via DSC, but in situations in which the use of voice procedures is preferred, a simple aide-mémoire, showing the format and information required, is a simple and cost-free option.
- The provision on board of several different types of immersion suit and lifejackets is potentially confusing and increases the risk of the equipment either being donned incorrectly or not quickly enough. It is commonsense that either all of the immersion suits provided on board a vessel should be of the same type; i.e. they all have in built buoyancy, or, they all need to be worn with a compatible lifejacket, but not a mix of the two designs. Even in large fleets that carry many types of suits and lifejackets, this can usually be arranged through good planning.
- The provision of LSA should be goal-based and holistic in order to ensure that the components are compatible and that the 'system' is fit for purpose. The compatibility of individual items of equipment cannot be taken for granted, even where the LSA provided meets the required performance standards.

This flyer and the MAIB's investigation report are posted on our website: www.maib.gov.uk

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