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**NOTE**

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## Flooding and partial sinking of an inflatable migrant boat resulting in the loss of at least 8 lives in the Dover Strait on 14 December 2022

### FOREWORD

On 24 November 2021, at least 27 lives were lost when an inflatable migrant<sup>1</sup> boat flooded and partially sank in the Dover Strait. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) carried out an investigation, analysing the causes of the accident and the factors contributing to the fatalities. The report was published on 9 November 2023 (MAIB report 7/2023<sup>2</sup>).

A significant amount of the detail included in the factual section of that report provides background relevant to this investigation into further loss of life that occurred in the Dover Strait on 14 December 2022.

In lieu of reproducing the same factual information in this report, references have been made to MAIB report 7/2023 where amplifying information can be found.

The French authorities were unable to fully engage with the MAIB investigation into the events of 24 November 2021 due to an ongoing criminal investigation. In light of this, the scope of the investigation into the events on 14 December 2022 was constrained to activities within the UK search and rescue region and the actions of UK authorities. It is noteworthy that the inflatable migrant boat was within French waters from departure from the beach until 0257 on 14 December 2022. However, the French authorities' response to the presence of inflatable migrant boats differs significantly from that of His Majesty's Coastguard and any recommendation made by the MAIB to the French authorities on this matter would most likely not have been implemented.

### SUMMARY

At around 0300<sup>3</sup> on 14 December 2022, an inflatable boat lost structural integrity and flooded during an attempt to cross the Dover Strait from France to the UK. An estimated forty-seven migrants entered the water, at least eight of whom subsequently lost their lives.

At 0213, the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre at Dover (MRCC Dover) had been informed of the presence of an inflatable boat carrying migrants from France to the UK that was potentially in distress. His Majesty's Coastguard (HMCG) reacted proactively, tasking assets to locate and assist the inflatable boat when it

<sup>1</sup> The term migrant is used in this report to describe a person who is relocating their place of residence from one country to another. It is not intended to be pejorative, and no motivations are ascribed to the migrants.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/maib-reports/flooding-and-partial-sinking-of-an-inflatable-migrant-boat-with-at-least-27-lives-lost>

<sup>3</sup> All times are universal time coordinated.

entered UK waters. At around 0300, the boat suffered structural failure and many of the migrants entered the water. Very shortly afterwards, the crew of fishing vessel *Arcturus* encountered the inflatable boat and raised the alarm while starting to recover migrants from the water. A full-scale coastguard response was initiated in the UK and France. Thirty-nine migrants were successfully rescued by fishing vessels and search and rescue (SAR) assets, but at least eight migrants lost their lives. Four of the victims were recovered to the UK and the others were lost at sea.

Since the incident the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has engaged with a French migrant charity to establish a process for raising a distress call. In view of the recommendations made in MAIB report 7/2023 and the actions already taken, no recommendations have been made in this report.

## FACTUAL INFORMATION

### Environment

The air temperature was around 1°C, reducing to -4°C in the light northerly winds. The seawater temperature was 11°C, the sea state was slight with a significant wave height measured at less than 0.5m. Sunrise was at 0752.

## NARRATIVE

### Events before the accident

Between 1830 and 1900 on 13 December 2022, the night shift at the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in Fareham, England started their watch and the aeronautical rescue (AR) team received the usual briefing pack, which included the Operation Deveran<sup>4</sup> predictions for migrant crossings and UK weather and sea condition forecasts. The weather information in the briefing pack did not concern the oncoming tactical commander but by 2100, during the national network brief, it was confirmed that there were freezing conditions at Humberside Airport, where fixed-wing aircraft were based, and that icing effects would prevent the scheduled surveillance aircraft (CG30) from flying. At approximately 2300, MRCC Dover requested an earlier than planned Operation Eos<sup>5</sup> launch to support the surveillance of ongoing small boat incidents, focusing on incidents *Alpha* and *Bravo* in the northern section of the Dover Strait.

With CG30 grounded by the freezing conditions the request was passed by JRCC AR to the operators of a fixed-wing drone (CG50) based at Lydd, who informed JRCC AR that they would carry out a weather assessment and report back. At 0211, Dover MRCC again requested JRCC AR support to the ongoing inflatable migrant boat incidents. JRCC AR passed this request to CG50.

At approximately 2330 on 13 December 2022, an inflatable boat was launched from a beach in the Calais/Dunkirk area of France. There were around 47 people on board and their intention was to reach the UK and claim asylum.

At 0153, a charity volunteer for Utopia 56<sup>6</sup> received a global positioning system (GPS) location of 50°50.3'N 001°21.1'E (**Figure 1**) followed by a WhatsApp voice note message on the charity's emergency mobile telephone that said, in accented English:

*“Hello brother, we are in a boat and we have a problem, please help. We have children and family in a boat and water come in the boat and we do not have anything for the children safety. Please help bro. Please, please, please, we are in the water. We have a family.”*

A steady engine noise and the sound of one person crying loudly could be heard in the background.

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<sup>4</sup> A more detailed explanation of Operation Deveran forecasting is at MAIB report 7/2023, section 1.10.3, page 36.

<sup>5</sup> Operation Eos is a UK multiagency coordination of air assets.

<sup>6</sup> Utopia 56 was a French charity that aimed to provide information, shelter and other means of support to asylum seekers arriving in France. It operated all over France but mainly in the Calais and Dunkirk area. Among the information given to migrants in this area was safety advice to those looking to cross the Dover Strait by small boat, including the coastguard emergency telephone number in France and the UK and an emergency telephone number for the charity.

The volunteer unsuccessfully attempted to return the call to gain further information before, at 0157, contacting the French coastguard directly to relay the details of the voice note. At 0213, Utopia 56 sent an email to MRCC Dover and the French coastguard with the same information. It then called HMCG at 0228.

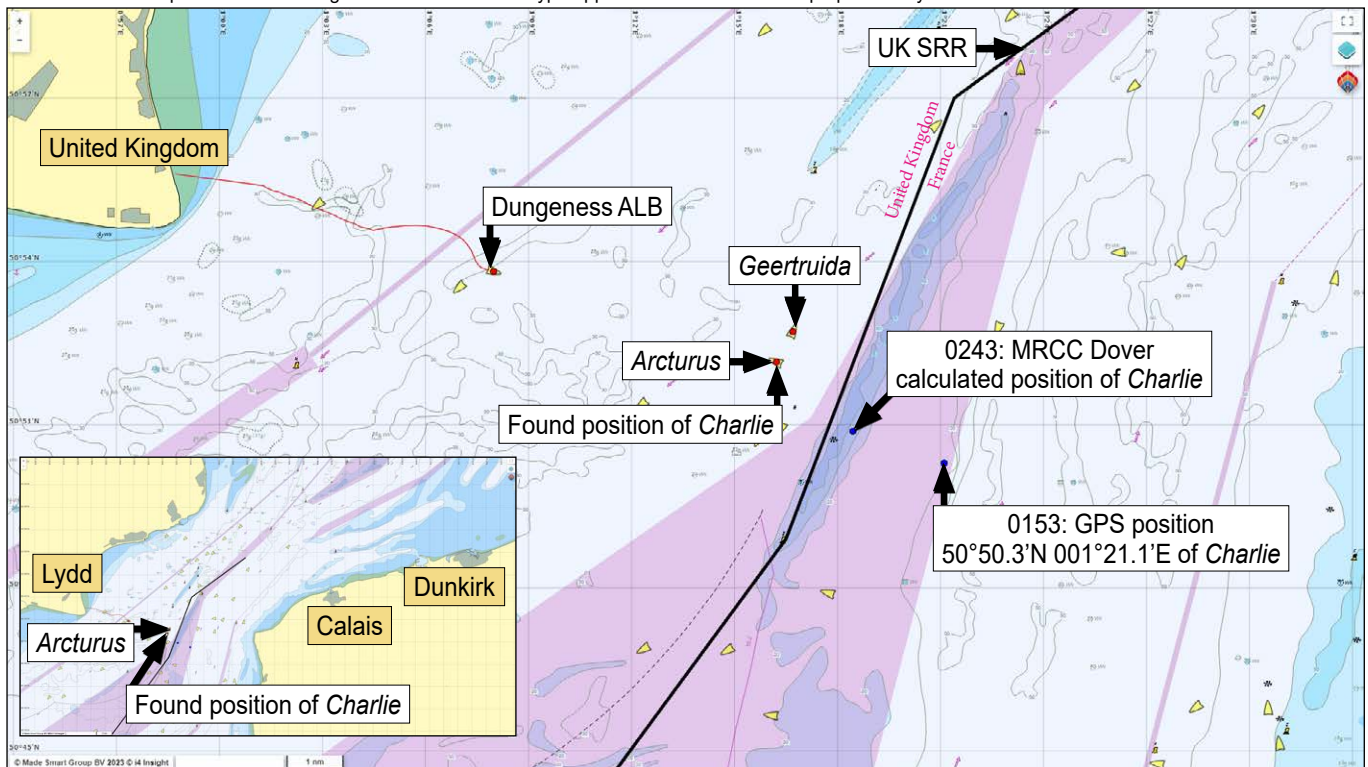
The email was received and read almost immediately by MRCC Dover and it was quickly established that no aircraft or boats from France were monitoring the inflatable boat, and that the information provided indicated the boat was in distress.

At 0215, the SAR mission coordinator (SMC) based at the JRCC<sup>7</sup> was informed of the incident. The vessel was assigned the alphanumeric reference of *Charlie* and a record of events was started.

At 0219, the Dungeness Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) all-weather lifeboat (ALB) was requested to attend incident *Charlie*. At 0221, JRCC AR tasked *CG50* to incident *Charlie* as a search asset. At 0239, the drone's operators confirmed that *CG50* was unable to fly due to the now freezing conditions at Lydd.

At 0243, MRCC Dover calculated an estimated position (**Figure 1**) and a predicted track that showed *Charlie* crossing into the UK search and rescue region (SRR) at 0257 and Dungeness ALB was initially tasked to this predicted position. At 0250, a HMCG rescue helicopter (*R163*) was tasked by JRCC AR to replace *CG50* as a search asset to locate incident *Charlie* and provided with the same predicted position as the Dungeness ALB.

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**Figure 1:** The Dover Strait at 0304 on 14 December 2022, showing the found location of inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* and previous estimated positions

## The accident

At around 0300, approximately 3.5 hours into the crossing, the occupants of the inflatable boat heard a pop or bang and the boat started to flood rapidly from under the floorboards. The fabric floor section of the boat then ripped and it is likely that the floorboards escaped through this tear, allowing the side tubing to collapse inward and almost meet in the middle. Several of the migrants entered the water, while some were able to stay on the tubing (**Figure 2**).

Very soon afterwards, the watchkeeper on the UK registered fishing vessel *Arcturus* (PH7979) heard shouting and saw the inflatable boat with people on it and in the water. At 0304 (**Figure 1**), the

<sup>7</sup> See MAIB report 7/2023, section 1.11.3



watchkeeper woke the skipper who immediately alerted MRCC Dover on very high frequency radio and reported a position of 50°52.1'N 001°16.2'E, approximately 14.6 nautical miles north-west of Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. Meanwhile, *Arcturus's* crew started to recover the migrants onto the fishing vessel (**Figure 2**) and take them into the accommodation area to warm up. During their recovery from the water, the migrants were swimming around *Arcturus* and using the scallop dredges and rope ladders to climb up the side of the fishing vessel (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 2:** Inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* alongside *Arcturus*, with its flooring missing and tubing collapsed together



**Figure 3:** Video still, showing migrants climbing the scallop dredges and ladders of *Arcturus*

### The search and rescue effort

In addition to the assets already tasked, MRCC Dover immediately requested Dover ALB to attend, and JRCC AR requested *CG30* to get airborne but were again informed that this was not possible due to the icing conditions. At 0320, *R163* was airborne and on its way to the scene. *R163* arrived on scene at 0330.

Meanwhile, at 0321, the Dungeness ALB arrived close to the predicted position of the inflatable boat. The crew saw two bodies lying face down and motionless in the water so went to the rescue of a conscious casualty nearby. The first two bodies were never recovered. By this time, HMS *Severn* (engaged in Operation Isotrope<sup>8</sup>) was also on its way.

From 0324, HMCG issued "Mayday Relay" broadcasts to seek the attention and assistance of passing vessels. These broadcasts continued until 1704 the following day.

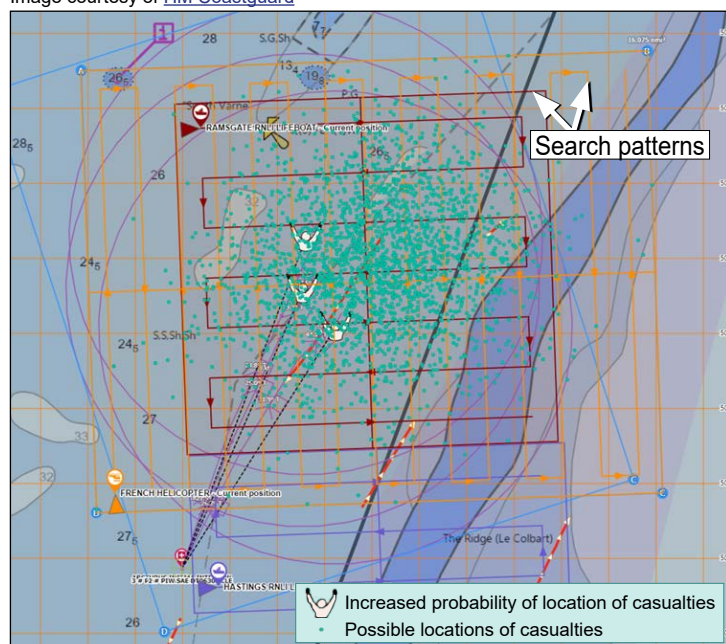
Soon after arriving on scene the Dungeness ALB crew saw a body sink below the surface of the water while they were recovering the first migrant on board; the body was never recovered. During the various attempts to recover migrants from both the water and the inflatable boat, ALB crews entered the water at least three times. At 0410, the Dover ALB arrived and *R163* transferred its paramedic to Dover ALB to assist with survivors, remaining with the vessel until it returned to Dover.

The recovery and care of migrants continued with the arrival of several more assets, including RNLI ALBs from Hastings and Ramsgate, HMCG helicopter *R175*, the French warship *La Perouse* and a French coastguard helicopter. By 0445, 39 survivors had been recovered from either the inflatable boat or the water, including one migrant who had been recovered by the scallop dredger *Geertruida* (which had responded to the "Mayday Relay") and then transferred to HMS *Severn*. A further three migrants

<sup>8</sup> Operation Isotrope was a Ministry of Defence multiagency operation to assist the MCA and Border Force response to the migrant boat crossings. It came into force in March 2022 and ceased, as planned, on 31 January 2023.

were recovered, who did not survive despite first aid attempts. During this period the initial search was conducted using search instructions generated by the HMCG's THEMIS SAR planning tool (**Figure 4**) and passed to the SAR assets via MRCC Dover.

Image courtesy of HM Coastguard



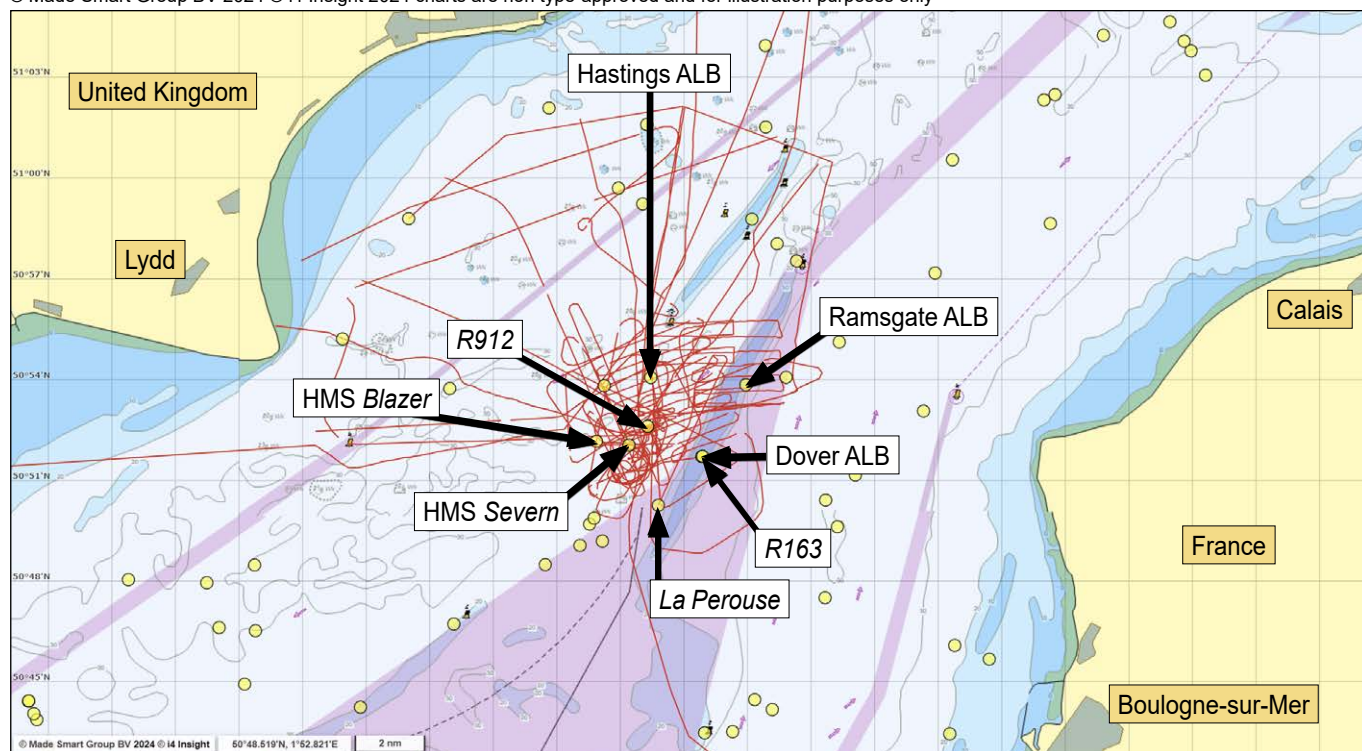
**Figure 4:** THEMIS SAR image, showing one of the search plans used during the incident

At 0445, as *Arcturus* was heading to Dover, the crew sighted a body in the water; the body sank before the victim could be recovered. As the searches continued, *Arcturus*, Dungeness ALB and Dover ALB made passage to Dover. On arrival, the survivors were handed into the custody of waiting Border Force (BF) and Kent Police officials and the deceased were taken to RNLi Dover Lifeboat Station.

During the transit to Dover the paramedic from *R175* was winched onto *Arcturus* to carry out a welfare check and found all 31 survivors to be in good health. The survivors estimated there had been between 40 and 47 occupants in the inflatable boat. The SMC used the IAMSAR<sup>9</sup> guidance recorded in the Coastguard Information Portal (CIP) to calculate survivability as a basis to determine the search duration. The upper limit of survivability was calculated as approximately 18 hours.

At 0812, HMCG helicopter *R912*, which had joined the SAR operation, sighted two people in the water, one of whom was already submerged (**Figure 5**). The crew recovered the one person afloat and marked the location of the other with a smoke float for recovery by a nearby surface asset, but no other person could be found. The crew of *R912* transferred the casualty to hospital in Folkestone, where they were pronounced deceased.

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**Figure 5:** The scene at 0812 when the last two migrants were sighted, showing the positions of the SAR assets and the tracks of their completed search patterns

<sup>9</sup> The International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue Manual – for organisation and operation of maritime and aviation search and rescue.



Searches involving surface assets continued until 2100, with further aerial searches involving fixed-wing aircraft and drones continuing until approximately 1700 the next day<sup>10</sup>. No other migrants were found. In the early hours and morning of the 14 December 2022, HMCG responded to 25 other small boat incidents in the Dover Strait.

### The occupants

The total number of occupants reported to be on board migrant boat *Charlie* varied, with 47 being the upper estimate. Of the 43 migrants recovered to the UK, 39 survived. A further four were seen sinking below the water and were never recovered (see **Table 1**). The occupants were all male, between the ages of 13 and 35, and their nationalities were a mixture of Afghan, Sudanese, Indian, Uzbek and Albanian.

At the time of publication of this report, the identities of the three deceased migrants recovered from the water were still under investigation by the relevant authorities. The body of the fourth casualty was returned to their family. The postmortem examinations conducted on all four bodies found signs consistent with drowning.

Some buoyancy aids had been placed in the boat before it was launched from the beach, but the quantity was insufficient and the quality was poor, with many of them missing buckles (**Figure 6**). The migrants had been provided with at least one additional fuel tank and a manually operated air pump, which was to be used to maintain *Charlie's* buoyancy.



**Figure 6:** A survivor on board *Arcturus*, wearing one of the buoyancy aids supplied to the migrants before the boat was launched from the beach

SAR asset recovered to	Number of migrants	Vital status
<i>Arcturus</i>	31	Survived
Dover ALB	1	Deceased
Dungeness ALB	7	Survived
Dungeness ALB	1	Deceased
HMS <i>Severn</i> (via <i>Geertruida</i> )	1	Survived
HMS <i>Severn</i>	1	Deceased
<i>R912</i>	1	Deceased
<b>Sighted (not recovered)</b>		
<i>Arcturus</i>	1	Presumed deceased
Dungeness ALB	3	Presumed deceased
	47	

**Table 1:** Vital status summary of the migrants who were accounted for

### Inflatable migrant boat *Charlie*

*Charlie* was an inflatable boat comprised of an inflatable collar, floor panel and transom, to which an outboard engine was fitted. The four side chambers, single bow chamber and inflatable keel were each fitted with an inflation valve and the transom was constructed of three sheets of plywood that had been

<sup>10</sup> The assets involved in the SAR operation included: RNLI ALBs from Dungeness, Dover, Hastings and Ramsgate; Royal Navy ships HMS *Severn*, HMS *Trumpeter*, HMS *Blazer*, HMS *Dasher*; coastguard rescue helicopters *R163*, *R175*, *R912*; fixed-wing *CG30* and drone *CG50*; French warship *La Perouse*; and a French coastguard helicopter.

glued and stapled together. Between each inflatable section of the collar was an internal fabric bulkhead. The fabric floor panel was glued to the tubing and transom and secured in various places with masking tape. It was established from inspections of other examples of these boats that several sections of plywood fitted into a metal frame to form a floor, although no floorboards from *Charlie* were recovered.

The engine was a Chinese copy of a Yamaha two-stroke outboard with a pull start, tiller steering and throttle, and a kill cord. It was in good working order.

### Damage to inflatable migrant boat *Charlie*

The inflatable boat was recovered by HMS *Severn* and taken to a BF warehouse for analysis. The crew of HMS *Severn*'s rescue boat had made several knife slashes in the tubing during the recovery of a body from the water and again while recovering the inflatable boat. There was also a large tear in the fabric floor panel, which originated in the port quarter and ran longitudinally almost the full length of the boat (**Figure 7**).

Further assessment of inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* by UK authorities concluded that it was poorly built compared to the many others that had been recovered and inspected in the preceding years. It was reported that there were glue marks consistent with the presence of handholds that had come away from the tubing, and the fabric floor panel, which was constructed with one side slightly textured to improve grip, was fitted upside down.

Internally, the fabric bulwark between the port aft chamber and port forward chamber tubing was found partially detached. Some occupants of the inflatable boat reported that they heard a pop or a bang coming from the boat as it was being inflated on the beach.



**Figure 7:** Inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* in the warehouse, ready for post-recovery inspection

## Air surveillance planning

Surveillance flights for Operation (Op) Eos were planned for the morning of 14 December 2022: The fixed-wing aircraft *CG30*, stationed at Humberside Airport, was due to fly between midnight and 0400; the fixed-wing drone *CG50*, stationed at Lydd (see **Figure 1**), was due to fly between 0400 and 1200; and the contingency option was a coastguard SAR helicopter, also based at Lydd. The purpose of these flights was to gain awareness and information on the small migrant boat situation in the Dover Strait, such as locating reported small boats and tracking them until a BF vessel or lifeboat could recover the occupants. On the night, neither *CG30* nor *CG50* could safely take off due to the icing conditions.

## ANALYSIS

### Overview

At least eight migrants lost their lives because they entered the sea when the inflatable boat they were attempting to cross the Dover Strait in suffered damage and they were unable to withstand the effects of cold water immersion before drowning. This section of the report will analyse the factors that contributed to the migrants entering the water and losing their lives, as well as the UK SAR efforts made in response to the incident.

### Damage to the inflatable boat

The inflatable boat was constructed in an uncontrolled environment, with no regulation or certification and for the sole purpose of illegally transporting migrants across a body of water such as the Dover Strait. It was reported that the boat was of particularly poor build quality in comparison to other examples that had previously been recovered and examined. Of all the similarly loaded vessels that attempted to cross the English Channel on the night of 14 December 2022, inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* was the only vessel to fail.

The initial cause of the tear in the boat's fabric floor panel (**Figure 7**) is unknown; however, it was assessed that the weight of the many migrants sitting on the floor of the boat could have caused the tear to spread quickly and extend to almost the full length of the boat. The rescuing vessels did not recover or see any floorboards from the inflatable migrant boat, indicating that these almost certainly fell through the tear and either drifted away or sank. The loss of the floorboards would have removed the boat's structural integrity and allowed the still inflated tubing to collapse together. While some occupants were able to straddle the tubing, many entered the water.

### Cold water immersion

The sea water temperature was 11°C at the time of the accident. Immersion in water temperatures below 15°C can lead to cold water shock, cold incapacitation and/or hypothermia:

Cold water shock is an immediate reaction to entering the water and is associated with a gasp reflex, hyperventilation and a rapid increase in heart rate and blood pressure as the body encounters the cold water. The onset of cold shock occurs immediately, peaking within 30 seconds, and lasts for 2 to 3 minutes. If the head goes underwater during this stage, the inability to hold breath will often lead to water entering the lungs in quantities sufficient to cause death. Cold water shock is considered to be the cause of the majority of drowning deaths in UK waters.

Cold incapacitation usually onsets within 2 to 15 minutes of entering the water. The blood vessels become constricted as the body tries to preserve heat and protect vital organs. This results in restricted blood flow to the extremities, causing cooling and consequent deterioration in the functioning of muscles and nerve ends, which leads to progressive incapacitation that impedes the ability to swim and leads to death by drowning.

Hypothermia occurs when the human body's core temperature drops below 35°C (it is normally around 37°C). This can occur after 30 minutes, depending on circumstances. The body's core temperature can continue to drop after the casualty has been recovered from the water if rewarming efforts are ineffective.



## Survival in the water

During the recovery of the migrants by *Arcturus*, the migrants were holding on to small gauge lines, climbing up the scallop dredges and swimming from point to point around the fishing vessel (see **Figure 4**), indicating they had been in the water for a short period and the effects of cold incapacitation had yet to materialise for some. All 31 migrants recovered by *Arcturus* were assessed by the paramedic from *R175* and found to be in good physical health with no injuries. The postmortems of the four deceased migrants who were recovered showed signs consistent with drowning.

Of the 16 remaining migrants, 8 were recovered alive, 4 bodies were recovered, and 4 bodies were observed in the water but not recovered as the rescuers prioritised saving the living. While the poor-quality buoyancy aids might have provided some assistance for wearers to survive the effects of cold water shock, they would have been of limited use once the victims started to experience swim-failure as they were not designed to sustain the wearer's airway clear of the water. In the cold waters of the Dover Strait, the survival of the migrants once they entered the water was dependent on their rapid rescue, and it is fortunate that their boat failed in very close proximity to *Arcturus*.

## Raising the alarm

The first information received about inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* was a position and voice note sent to Utopia 56 at 0153 (see **Figure 1**). The message stated that there were children and families in the boat and that they were taking on water. An unsuccessful attempt was made to call the migrant boat, and *Charlie* was encountered by *Arcturus* 76 minutes later, approximately 3.6nm to the north-west of the initial position received by Utopia 56.

Assuming the initial position for incident *Charlie* was accurate, the inflatable migrant boat required an average speed of approximately 3 knots to cover 3.6nm, which was realistic for a heavily overloaded and poorly constructed boat of the type being used to attempt the crossing. That the inflatable boat was underway was corroborated by the steady engine tone that could be heard in the background of the voice note. Further, the physiological state of the migrants who were recovered to *Arcturus* indicated that they had not been in the water for long.

It is possible that inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* started to take on water over the tubing at around the time the voice message was sent; however, it is highly unlikely that the damage to the boat that caused many of the migrants to enter the water also happened then. The distance travelled, the steady engine tone heard in the message, and that no women or young children were recovered or sighted all indicates that the initial distress was a false declaration intended to expedite rescue.

There are internationally recognised methods for raising a distress, but these do not include email. There was no guarantee that the email Utopia 56 sent to MRCC Dover would be received into a continually monitored inbox and, despite the message being read within 2 minutes of being sent, this method of raising a distress call could have caused unnecessary SAR delays.

## Search and rescue initial actions

MRCC Dover was unaware of the existence of inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* until the 0213 email from Utopia 56 was received. Within 2 minutes, HMCG had created an incident and assigned it an alphanumeric reference. Recognising the potential for a threat to life and acting in accordance with the UK's approach, the JRCC requested an RNLI lifeboat to locate migrant boat *Charlie* and to carry out a rescue. Although planned airborne surveillance flights were delayed due to the icing conditions, *R163* was tasked as a contingency before migrant boat *Charlie* was predicted to cross into the UK SRR. The unavailability of air surveillance assets due to weather conditions had been identified at the 2100 briefing the night before the incident. When MRCC Dover requested the launch of drone *CG50* to assist with the assessment of incidents *Alpha* and *Bravo* at 0211, the operators responded to JRCC AR that they would conduct a weather assessment; they subsequently reported back at 0239 that *CG50* was unable to fly. However, this was after the 0221 request from JRCC AR to attend incident *Charlie*.

When the crew of *Arcturus* reported that they had encountered a migrant boat (incident *Charlie*) and sighted people in the water the Dungeness ALB was en route and *R163* was 16 minutes away from

taking off. *Arcturus* encountered the inflatable migrant boat in an area that the Dungeness ALB and *R163* would likely have passed through on their way to the predicted position for incident *Charlie*. This indicated that the SAR assets were heading to the right area to start their searches and would likely to have been successful in locating migrant boat *Charlie* had *Arcturus* not been nearby.

The SMC tasked additional assets, both surface and air, to the incident as soon as they became aware of people in the water. The SAR priority was the recovery of the migrants, and all survivors were confirmed recovered by 0410.

### The search plan

The search plans generated by the THEMIS SAR planning tool were executed by available assets almost immediately and the searches continued for over 18 hours, the IAMSAR CIP calculated upper limit of survivability for the environmental conditions and seawater temperature at the time of the incident. Given the number of assets involved, the duration of the search, the THEMIS SAR search patterns used and favourable weather conditions, HMCG considered it likely that any remaining persons floating in the water would have been found, though it was not possible to ascertain that all occupants of inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* had been accounted for.

### The use of air assets

On the night of the incident the plan was for an aerial asset to be active in the Dover Strait on surveillance operations from midnight, but the fixed-wing assets were unable to fly due to icing conditions that had not been forecast and, once it was established that neither *CG30* nor *CG50* were available, only *R163* could be tasked. However, *R163* was not tasked until 0250 and did not arrive on scene until 0330, by which time the SAR response to incident *Charlie* was underway. The delay in activating the contingency plan to fulfil the surveillance capability demonstrated a reactive approach towards small boat activity on a night when the favourable crossing conditions required UK authorities to take a proactive stance to improve situational awareness in the area.

The 0250 tasking of *R163* as a search asset meant that, when *Arcturus* reported sighting people in the water from inflatable migrant boat *Charlie*, the helicopter was airborne 16 minutes later and could be sent directly to the location of *Arcturus*, arriving on scene 26 minutes later. In this case, the earlier tasking of *R163* accelerated the arrival of a second SAR asset on scene.

*Arcturus* encountered inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* a few minutes after the boat was damaged and the occupants entered the water, which was within minutes of *Charlie* entering the UK SRR. If a surveillance asset had been active in the Dover Strait, it might have located *Charlie* before *Arcturus*, but this would have had limited positive effect on the outcome given that the Dungeness ALB was already underway and arrived on scene 17 minutes later.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Unexpected icing conditions prevented the planned surveillance flights from taking off, and there was a delay before *R163* was tasked as a rescue asset.
- When the icing conditions removed the availability of the aircraft JRCC AR and MRCC Dover had no contingency plan in place to support situational awareness in the English Channel at a time when the conditions were favourable for small boat crossings and relied upon the use of search and rescue assets to conduct aerial searches.
- Migrant boat *Charlie*'s initial distress call was likely a false declaration aimed at expediting rescue, and its relay to HMCG by email was not an internationally recognised method of making a distress call. Nonetheless, it brought to HMCG's attention that another migrant boat was crossing the Dover Strait, which enabled the proactive tasking of SAR assets.
- *Arcturus* encountered migrant boat *Charlie* within minutes of it entering the UK SRR and sustaining damage.

- The SMC acted pre-emptively to intercept the inflatable migrant boat as it crossed into the UK SRR with an appropriate level of resource, and all available assets were tasked to the incident as soon as it was confirmed that people were in the water.
- The cause of the tear in the fabric floor panel of the migrants' boat is unknown but the floorboards most likely sank or floated free as a result. This removed what structural integrity the inflatable boat had, causing the tubing to collapse together and some of the migrants to enter the water. The boat was poorly constructed, uncertified and unregulated, and was inherently dangerous.
- It is highly likely that the deceased succumbed to the effects of cold water immersion on entering the water. In the cold waters of the Dover Strait, the survival of the migrants once they entered the water was dependent on their rapid rescue and it was fortunate that the inflatable boat failed in very close proximity to *Arcturus*.
- It is almost certain that more lives would have been lost had *Arcturus* not encountered inflatable migrant boat *Charlie* so soon after the damage occurred.
- Given the number of assets involved, the duration of the search, the THEMIS SAR search patterns used and favourable weather conditions, HMCG considered it likely that any person floating in the water would have been found.

## ACTION TAKEN

### Actions taken by other organisations

The **Maritime and Coastguard Agency** has:

- conducted a Tier 3 investigation into this incident; and
- opened a priority telephone helpline for Utopia 56 to use when reporting migrant incidents and engaged with the charity to make sure volunteers use this method and do not send an email to raise distress;

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the recommendations made, and subsequently implemented by the MCA and Border Force, in MAIB report 7/2023 and the actions already taken, no further recommendations have been made.



<b>VESSEL PARTICULARS</b>	
Vessel's name	Unnamed
Flag	Not applicable
Classification society	Not applicable
IMO number/fishing numbers	Not applicable
Type	Inflatable boat
Registered owner	Unknown
Manager(s)	Unknown
Year of build	Unknown
Construction	Inflatable
Length overall	7.4m
Registered length	Unknown
Gross tonnage	Unknown
Minimum safe manning	Unknown
Authorised cargo	Unknown

<b>VOYAGE PARTICULARS</b>	
Port of departure	Between Calais and Dunkirk, France
Port of arrival	UK coastline (intended)
Type of voyage	International (intended)
Cargo information	Not applicable
Manning	No professional crew

<b>MARINE CASUALTY INFORMATION</b>	
Date and time	14 December 2022 at about 0300
Type of marine casualty or incident	Very Serious Marine Casualty
Location of incident	Approximately 50°52.12'N 001°16.19'E
Place on board	Port aft floor panel
Injuries/fatalities	At least 8 fatalities
Damage/environmental impact	Loss of structural integrity of the vessel; no environmental damage.
Ship operation	On passage
Voyage segment	Mid-water
External & internal environment	Wind northerly force 2, with a slight sea state; air temperature 1°C; sea temperature 11°C; visibility good.
Persons on board	About 47 migrants, planning to reach the UK.