

SAFETY FLYER TO THE FISHING INDUSTRY

Fatal fall overboard from the crab potting vessel *Amadeus* (TH7) in the German Bight, North Sea on 13 December 2023

Narrative

At about 0009 on 13 December 2023, a deckhand on the UK registered crab potting vessel *Amadeus* fell overboard while manually recovering crab pots in rough seas. He was leaning over the starboard side to lift the 48th pot in a string of 100 pots when the vessel lurched, causing him to lose balance and fall into the water (see **figure**).

The crew cut the back rope, and the vessel was manoeuvred to recover the deckhand. Although initially seen swimming, the deckhand was unable to stay afloat and became unresponsive within minutes in the 9°C water. Several attempts were made to reach him with a boat hook, but he was struck by a wave and disappeared. A major search and rescue operation ensued, but the deckhand was not found.

Image courtesy of Frits Olinga ([Shipspotting.com](https://www.shipspotting.com))



Amadeus

Images courtesy of The Blue Sea Fishing Company Ltd



Figure: CCTV stills of the moment the deckhand fell overboard

Safety lessons

1. Leaning outboard to recover pots presents a significant risk of going overboard. Appropriate fall prevention controls must be in place if a task requires reaching over the vessel's side. These may include safety harnesses, safety lines, or restraint systems designed to stop a person from falling into the water. Remember: a personal flotation device (PFD) does not prevent a fall, it

only assists once someone is already in the water. Marine Guidance Note (MGN) 571 (F)¹ offers guidance on how to prevent man overboard situations from occurring.

2. Immersion in water below 15°C triggers an immediate and severe physiological response. Cold water shock can quickly overwhelm breathing control and muscle function, even in strong swimmers. This makes it hard to keep the airway clear and greatly increases the risk of drowning within minutes. Wearing a properly fitted PFD is the most effective protection as it keeps a casualty afloat and maintains their airway when consciousness or muscle control is lost. However, the deckhand in this instance was not wearing one. This significantly reduced their survivability and removed a critical layer of protection that could have increased the time available for rescue.
3. Recovering a person from the water requires crews to be prepared and ready to put their training into practice quickly. High freeboard, darkness, poor sea conditions and recovering an unconscious person all contribute to challenging recovery methods. Regular, practical manoverboard drills in line with MGN 570 (F) Amendment No.1², clearly defined roles, and accessible, properly rigged recovery equipment are essential to ensure crews can respond quickly when every second counts.
4. The deckhand was almost certainly fatigued after weeks of demanding work with insufficient rest. Alertness, coordination, decision-making and reaction time decline as sleep debt builds, increasing the likelihood of mistakes or accidents during safety critical tasks. To prevent cumulative fatigue, work routines must provide adequate rest. Merchant Shipping Notice (MSN) 1884 (F) Amendment 1³ requires a minimum of 10 hours rest in every 24-hour period and 77 hours rest in every 7-day period, and these limits must be met in practice to maintain safe performance at sea.

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

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- 1 [MGN 571 \(F\) - Fishing Vessels: Prevention of Man Overboard](#)
- 2 [MGN 570 \(F\) Amendment No.1 - Fishing Vessels: Emergency Drills](#)
- 3 [MSN 1884 \(F\) Amendment 1: ILO Work in Fishing Convention, Working Time](#)

Extract from The United Kingdom Merchant Shipping (Accident Reporting and Investigation) Regulations 2026 – Regulation 5:

The sole objective of a safety investigation into an accident under these Regulations is the prevention of future accidents through the ascertainment of its causes and circumstances. It is not the purpose of such an investigation to determine liability nor, except so far as is necessary to achieve its objective, to apportion blame.

NOTE

This safety flyer is not written with litigation in mind and, pursuant to Regulation 19(1) of The Merchant Shipping (Accident Reporting and Investigation) Regulations 2026, shall be inadmissible in any judicial proceedings concerning liability unless the Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents or a court of law determine otherwise.

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