

Report on the investigation into the
partial collapse of an
inflatable migrant boat
resulting in the loss of one life in the English Channel
on 9 September 2025



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

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CPR	- cardiopulmonary resuscitation
CTV	- crew transfer vessel
HMCG	- His Majesty's Coastguard
hp	- horsepower
ILB	- inshore lifeboat
IMO	- International Maritime Organization
JCR	- Joint Control Room
MAIB	- Marine Accident Investigation Branch
MASO	- Maritime and Aviation Support Officer
MCA	- Maritime and Coastguard Agency
MRCC	- Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre
MTBE	- 2-methoxy-2-methylpropane
OIC	- officer in charge
PFD	- personal flotation device
PVC	- polyvinyl chloride
RHIB	- rigid-hulled inflatable boat
RNLI	- Royal National Lifeboat Institution
SAR	- search and rescue
SOP	- standard operating procedure
UAV	- unmanned aerial vehicle
UTC	- universal time coordinated

TIMES: all times used in this report are UTC unless otherwise stated.

SYNOPSIS

On 9 September 2025, an inflatable boat carrying 74 migrants across the English Channel partially collapsed during a rescue operation by the Border Force vessel *BF Volunteer*. One of the occupants, 36-year-old Manpreet Kaur, was found submerged in the flooded boat and subsequently died from drowning.

The migrants had been provided with the boat by criminal facilitators. During the crossing from France, the overcrowded and unseaworthy boat progressively deteriorated as it lost air, accumulated water and spilt fuel, reducing both buoyancy and structural integrity.

At 1057, when the boat entered UK waters, it was declared to be in distress and *BF Volunteer* was tasked to rescue those on board. As a line was passed during the intercept, the occupants moved rapidly to one side, causing the port sponson to collapse. This resulted in further flooding, multiple people entering the water and the development of a mass casualty situation.



During the incident, Manpreet Kaur was trampled into the bottom of the boat and became submerged in a mixture of water and fuel. She was not identified immediately and remained submerged for a prolonged period before recovery. Although all visible survivors were rescued quickly, her eventual recovery by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the commencement of resuscitation occurred after a period of submersion beyond which survival was highly unlikely.

The investigation found that the migrant boat was wholly unsuitable for the voyage. Its poor construction, overcrowding, low freeboard and unsafe fuel and engine arrangement made it vulnerable to flooding and collapse.

The investigation also found that Border Force procedures, training and equipment did not address the recovery of an unresponsive casualty from within a partially collapsed inflatable boat, exposing a limitation in on-scene capability when rescue conditions deteriorated.

Recommendations have been made to Border Security Command to improve the identification of less visible or unresponsive occupants during rescue operations, and to develop procedures, training and equipment to enable the safe recovery of an unresponsive casualty from a partially or fully collapsed inflatable boat.

SECTION 1 – FACTUAL INFORMATION

1.1 PARTICULARS OF *MIGRANT BOAT 512* AND ACCIDENT

SHIP PARTICULARS	
Vessel's name	<i>Migrant boat 512</i>
Flag	Not applicable
Classification society	Not applicable
IMO number/fishing numbers	Not applicable
Type	Rudimentary inflatable boat
Registered owner	Not applicable
Manager(s)	Not applicable
Construction	Polyvinyl chloride inflatable boat
Year of build	Not applicable
Length overall	7.8m
Registered length	Not applicable
Gross tonnage	Not applicable
Minimum safe manning	Not applicable
Authorised cargo	Not applicable
VOYAGE PARTICULARS	
Port of departure	Malo-les-Bains, France
Port of arrival	Not applicable
Type of voyage	Migratory transit
Cargo information	Not applicable
Manning	Not applicable
MARINE CASUALTY INFORMATION	
Date and time	9 September 2025 at about 1110
Type of marine casualty or incident	Very Serious Marine Casualty
Location of incident	English Channel
Place on board	Not applicable
Injuries/fatalities	1 fatality
Damage/environmental impact	None
Ship operation	Human trafficking
Voyage segment	Interdiction
External & internal environment	Fine weather, light to no wind
Persons on board	74

1.2 BACKGROUND

Since 2018, attempts to cross the English Channel in small boats have developed into a persistent and complex maritime safety issue, and placed sustained demands on UK search and rescue (SAR) and border enforcement agencies. The scale of this activity has also significantly increased: 299 people arrived by small boat in 2018 compared to 41,472 in 2025.

The nature of crossings also evolved during this period. The average number of people carried on each boat markedly increased, reaching 62 people per boat in 2025, while some boats carried more than 120 people. The boats used were typically inflatable craft manufactured on the black market, at scale. They were operated by people with little or no maritime experience and put to sea without effective lifesaving appliances, creating an inherently high-risk operating environment.

The MAIB previously investigated two accidents involving migrant boats in the English Channel: the loss of at least 27 people in November 2021, when an inflatable boat carrying about 33 occupants flooded and partially sank; and the loss of at least eight people in December 2022, after another overcrowded inflatable boat suffered structural failure (see section 1.11). Both investigations identified common safety issues, including unseaworthy and overloaded boats, limited lifesaving equipment, and difficulties locating, monitoring and assisting multiple small craft in a congested maritime environment.

The UK government's operational response to small boat crossings significantly matured since these earlier accidents. The MAIB's investigation into the November 2021 tragedy noted that the rapid increase in crossings had initially outpaced elements of the UK response, particularly in relation to surveillance, coordination and situational awareness. Subsequent capability improvements and the development of a more coordinated interagency approach strengthened the UK's ability to respond.

By 2025, the operational context in which this accident occurred was materially different from that examined in MAIB's earlier migrant boat investigations. This report therefore considered an accident that arose within a more established response system, while recognising that the fundamental risks associated with small, overloaded and unseaworthy boats remain unchanged.

1.3 NARRATIVE

1.3.1 Departure from France

In the early hours of 9 September 2025, a group of migrants were transported to an unidentified location along the inshore canal system at Malo-les-Bains, northern France. Each had paid criminal organisations to facilitate their passage to the UK.

On arrival, gang members provided an inflatable boat, an outboard engine, fuel and manual pumps for the group to inflate the boat. While inflating the boat's deck, they found that the pump could not be removed from the valve without the deck deflating, so it remained connected.

After launching into a nearby canal, the boat proceeded towards the sea, collecting additional groups of migrants, including Manpreet Kaur, along the route and from the beach. Those boarding from the beach waded out into chest-deep water before being assisted on board. At several of the boarding points improvised stalls sold lifejackets, which some of the occupants, including Manpreet, wore.

At 0344, the boat departed France (**Figure 1**) for the UK with 74 people on board. It was logged within minutes by Dover Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC). About 30 minutes later, the French SAR vessel *Minck* intercepted the boat and shadowed it for the remainder of its voyage towards UK territorial waters.

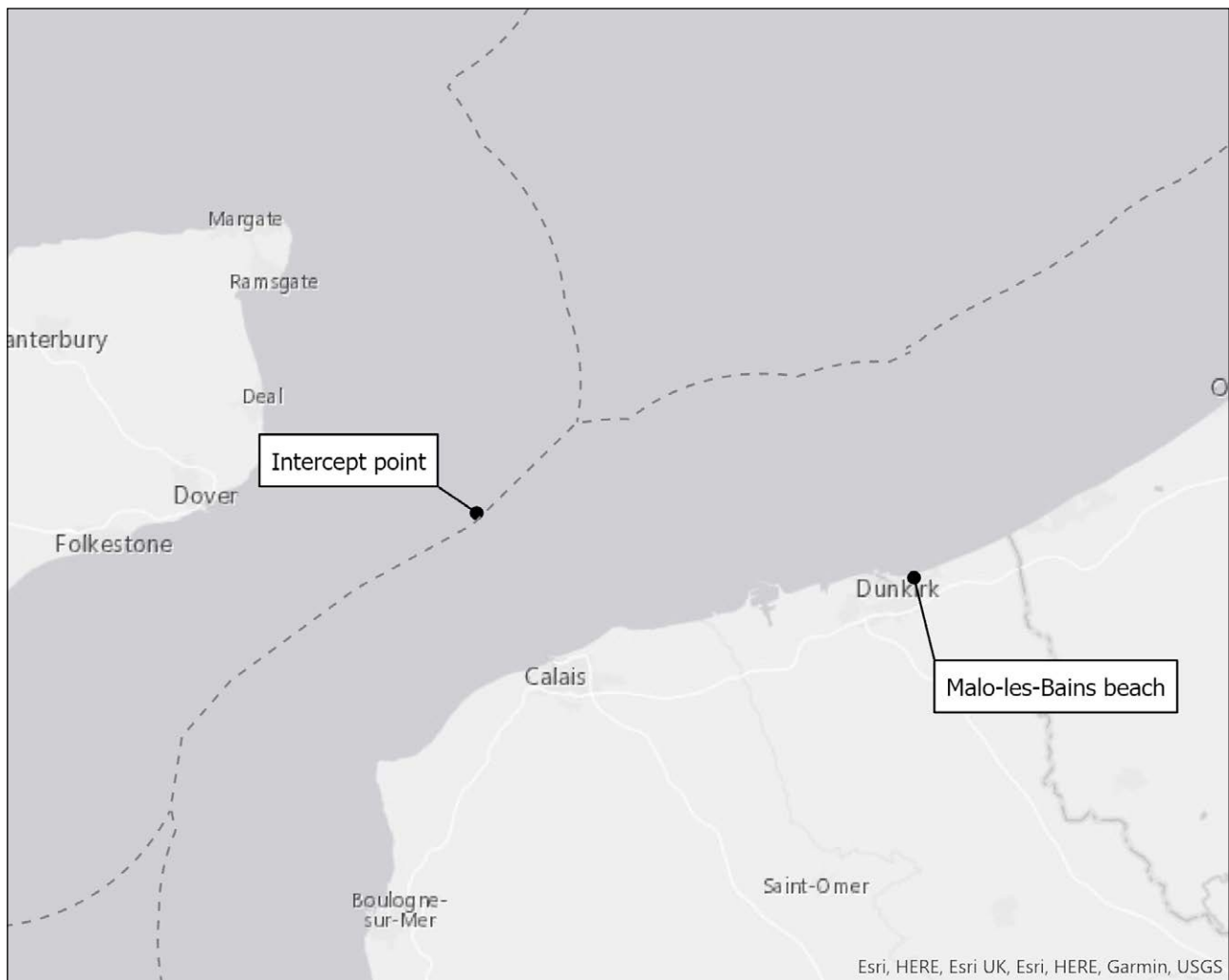


Figure 1: Chart showing departure and rescue position of *migrant boat 512*

1.3.2 Crossing and deterioration

During the passage Manpreet Kaur was seated aft, on the deck and away from the sponsons, in confined conditions alongside other occupants (**Figure 2**). As the voyage progressed, the boat began to take on water, resulting in a significant accumulation on the deck. Occupants attempted to bail out the water using small containers such as plastic bottles. The sponsons progressively lost buoyancy, and repeated reinflation of the deck was required as the pump became detached allowing air to escape under pressure. The engine required refuelling on at least four occasions, during which petrol was spilled into the bottom of the boat.

By this stage, the occupants had very little space and many were sitting on or against one another. Those seated low in the centre of the boat were partially submerged for much of the voyage, and the water in places was more than knee-deep by the time of rescue. The mixture of seawater and petrol caused chemical burns to several occupants, including Manpreet.

The boat deteriorated further as the crossing continued, resulting in reduced rigidity and freeboard and increased water accumulation. Before entering UK territorial waters, several physical and verbal altercations occurred on board and many of the occupants feared for their safety.

The voyage was prolonged with confined conditions. Many of the boat's occupants became cold, dehydrated and weak by the time of rescue; some temporarily lost full use of their legs.

Image from [Home Office](#)



Figure 2: Manpreet Kaur's approximate position on board the boat

1.3.3 Rescue and collapse

At 1057, the boat, by then designated as *migrant boat 512*, entered the UK search and rescue region and was formally declared to be in distress by His Majesty's Coastguard (HMCG) Dover MRCC. The Border Force¹ Crew Transfer Vessel (CTV) *BF Volunteer*, which had been tasked with rescuing the boat's occupants, began its approach. At that time, Manpreet remained seated towards the back of the boat and had started to complain to fellow occupants that she felt dizzy. About 10 minutes later, as *BF Volunteer* continued its approach, Manpreet was seen sitting up for the last time.

¹ Since the accident, Border Force's maritime directorate and small boat operations were brought under Border Security Command.

At 1108, *BF Volunteer* passed a line to *migrant boat 512* to bring it alongside in accordance with standard operating procedures (SOPs). This action precipitated a mass movement of the occupants (**Figure 3**), resulting in the collapse of the port sponson, the ingress of significant quantities of water into the boat and multiple occupants entering the water.

Images from [HM Coastguard](#)

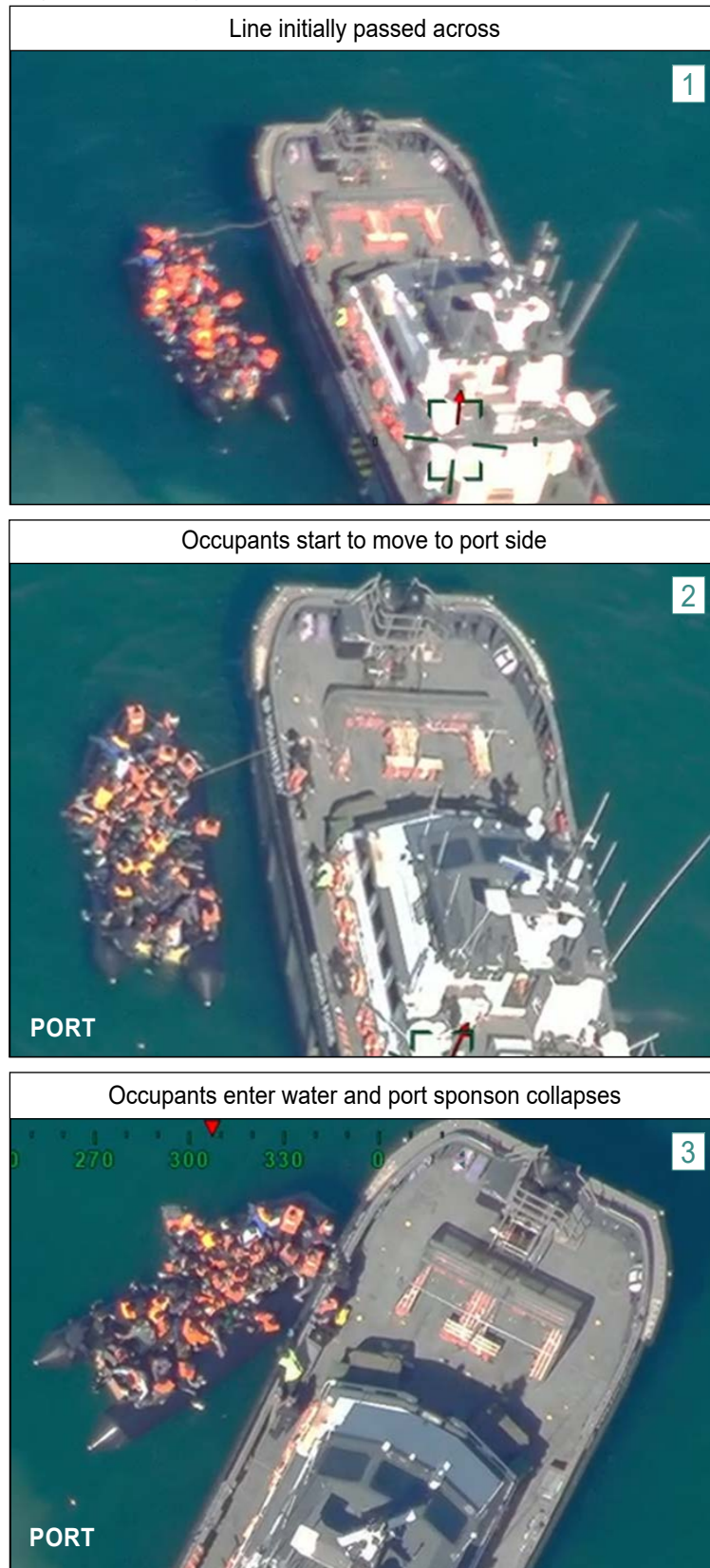


Figure 3: The movement of the boat's occupants during the rescue operation and the subsequent sponson collapse

As the occupants began to panic and move around the boat its structure collapsed further, causing more people to enter the water. Manpreet was trampled into the bottom of the boat, where she ended up face down in a mixture of water and fuel. A fellow occupant noticed her and attempted to pull her up by her lifejacket, which slipped off in the upheaval. At about the same time, the boat's deck flipped up, and Manpreet fell face down back onto the flooded polyvinyl chloride (PVC) floor (Figure 4).

Meanwhile, *BF Volunteer* and the support rigid-hulled inflatable boat (RHIB) *Osprey III* responded to the incident by recovering people from the water and attempting to bring the collapsed *migrant boat 512* alongside. Dover MRCC, which was observing events unfold via live feeds provided by air assets on scene, tasked Walmer inshore lifeboat (ILB) and an HMCG rescue helicopter (*R363*) to assist.

Images from [Home Office](#)



Figure 4: *Migrant boat 512* during the rescue operation

1.3.4 Recovery of occupants and discovery of the casualty

By 1114, all those in the water had been recovered on board either *BF Volunteer* or *Osprey III* and *migrant boat 512* had been brought alongside. The boat's remaining occupants were then recovered onto *BF Volunteer*'s deck via the aft platform. During this process, at 1119, the *BF Volunteer* deck team noticed that a person was face down and partially submerged in among a large quantity of floating debris towards the aft end of *migrant boat 512*. The deck team immediately reported this to *BF Volunteer*'s master and officer in charge (OIC), who were in the wheelhouse.

The crew, the master and the OIC discussed the possibility of recovering Manpreet from the bottom of *migrant boat 512*. They concluded that it would be too dangerous, given that the boat was collapsed, flooded and lacked a solid deck. This information was relayed to the UK Border Force team embedded within Dover MRCC.

By 1121, all the occupants of *migrant boat 512* had been rescued except Manpreet. With nobody left on board to hold the line the boat began to drift away, requiring *BF Volunteer* to manoeuvre to bring it back alongside. Once *migrant boat 512* was alongside, further assessments were made as to whether a man overboard sling could be used to retrieve Manpreet. It was agreed that entering the boat would place the crew at unacceptable risk and the decision was to wait for SAR authorities to arrive. *Migrant boat 512* was then manoeuvred to *BF Volunteer*'s starboard side to allow for the offloading of those on board *Osprey III*.

1.3.5 Recovery of the casualty

At 1137, *R363* arrived on scene and was directed by Dover MRCC to start a search pattern to determine whether any people had drifted away during the event. At 1145, Walmer ILB arrived on scene and two RNLI crew boarded *migrant boat 512* to recover Manpreet. When they boarded, the RNLI crew sank to chest height in the mixture of water and fuel and the recovery was physically demanding (**Figure 5**). Five minutes later, Manpreet was recovered on board Walmer ILB and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) was started. Walmer ILB then moved away from *BF Volunteer* towards Dover.

At 1201, Manpreet was winched onto *R363* where advanced life support was administered. *R363* proceeded to the landing pad at Dover MRCC, where an ambulance was waiting. At 1253, recognition of life extinct was declared.

Images from [Home Office](#)

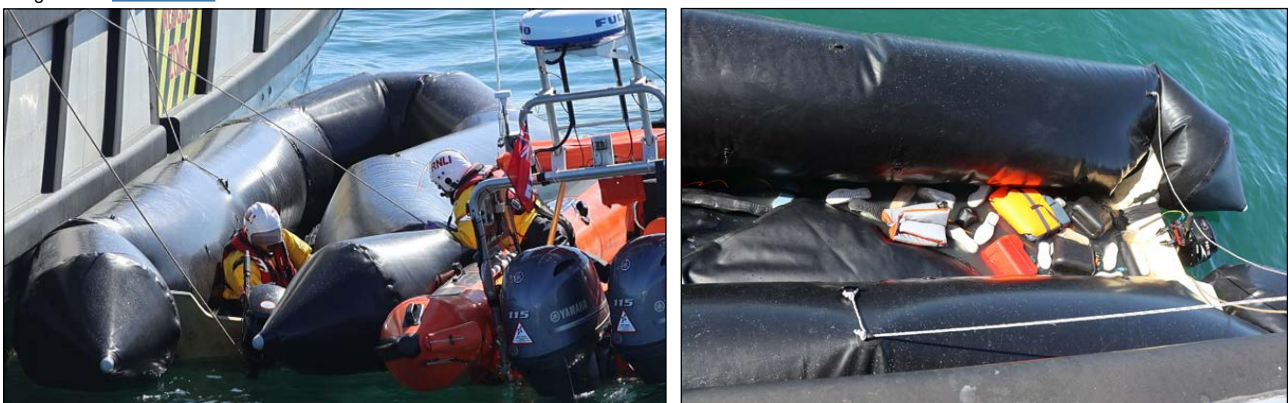


Figure 5: *Migrant boat 512* condition and partially collapsed state during rescue and post-recovery

1.4 ENVIRONMENTAL

At the time of the accident the weather was fine and clear with good visibility, sunny spells and an air temperature of 15°C. There was almost no wind, the sea state was calm, and the sea temperature was 18.5°C.

1.5 THE DECEASED

Manpreet Kaur was a 36-year-old Indian national who had travelled alone to northern France to reach the UK. Her personal circumstances were otherwise unknown.

1.5.1 Postmortem examination

Manpreet Kaur's cause of death was recorded as drowning. The postmortem examination found no evidence of significant underlying natural disease or traumatic injury that could explain death or loss of consciousness before immersion.

Manpreet's body and clothing had a strong smell of fuel, and there were widespread areas of skin loss. These findings were considered consistent with either prolonged submersion in water or fuel contamination. The examination also noted that it was difficult to determine the extent of Manpreet's exposure to the fuel, but inhalation or intoxication could not be ruled out.

1.5.2 Toxicology report

Toxicological analysis identified no alcohol, drugs or carbon monoxide. Additional blood testing for hydrocarbons found the following substances:

- 2-methoxy-2-methylpropane (MTBE)
- toluene
- hexane
- hexanal
- acetone
- 2,3-octanedione.

The report identified toluene, hexane, hexanal and acetone as compounds that may be present in postmortem samples as a result of decomposition or degradation, with acetone also capable of arising through postmortem microbial activity. Although MTBE and 2,3-octanedione were not identified as recognised decomposition products, the toxicologist did not exclude decomposition as a possible source for either compound.

1.5.3 Fuel additives

Toluene was used in petrol to enhance octane performance. Hexane was a naturally occurring constituent of petrol and typically formed a small proportion of its volume, contributing to volatility, particularly at lower temperatures. MTBE was added as a fuel oxygenate to improve combustion efficiency and reduce emissions. MTBE concentrations in postmortem blood and urine have been used in previous forensic cases as indicators of petrol exposure.

Petrol fume inhalation could cause dose dependent effects on the central nervous, cardiac and respiratory systems. Lower levels of exposure could cause irritation and mild cognitive impairment, while higher concentrations could cause narcosis, unconsciousness and fatal arrhythmias. Severe exposure could also displace oxygen, causing hypoxia. In some cases, death could occur suddenly due to cardiac sensitisation or respiratory failure.

1.6 **MIGRANT BOAT 512**

1.6.1 Construction

Migrant boat 512 was 7.8m long with a beam of 2.2m. Its sponsons, hull and deck were constructed from unreinforced PVC. The sponsons were divided into four separate chambers, each fitted with a valve with a spring-loaded pin that could be set to inflate or deflate. The deck was a single drop-stitch chamber with its own valve and was not secured to the rest of the boat. Several securing points had been glued to the sponsons along the boat's length. The transom was taped and glued in place (**Figure 6**) and was constructed from non-marine grade plywood.

The boat's origin was unknown. Such vessels were commonly produced from low-cost materials in workshops or factories operating outside recognised safety and quality standards.

1.6.2 Boat defects

The deck valve leaked during inflation unless the pump remained connected. The MAIB tested the boat's valves and found no obvious defects, although the deck valve could not be tested under pressure because the boat was no longer airtight at the time of inspection. Several glued-on securing points had detached from the sponsons (**Figure 6**). The sponsons lost air during the voyage, with small tears reported in the boat.

1.6.3 Engine and fuel

Migrant boat 512 was fitted with a 9.9 horsepower (hp) four-stroke outboard engine connected to a 12-litre external fuel tank. The engine consumed about 3.5 litres of fuel per hour. Two additional 10-litre jerrycans were also carried on board (**Figure 7**). No refuelling equipment was provided, and fuel was spilled into the boat each time the tank was replenished. The lower section of the engine shaft was in contact with the base of the transom at a point where the PVC had been taped, resulting in abrasion and a hole in the structure (see **Figure 6**). A foam insert had been taped to the underside of the shaft in an apparent attempt to reduce this contact.

Image from [Border Force](#)

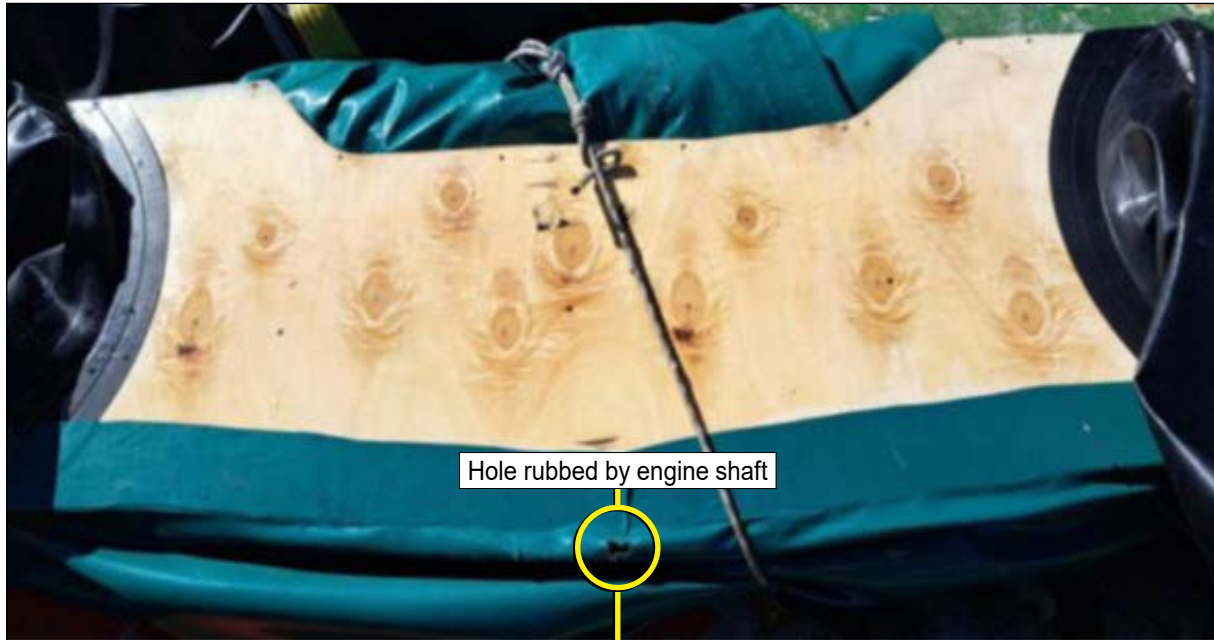


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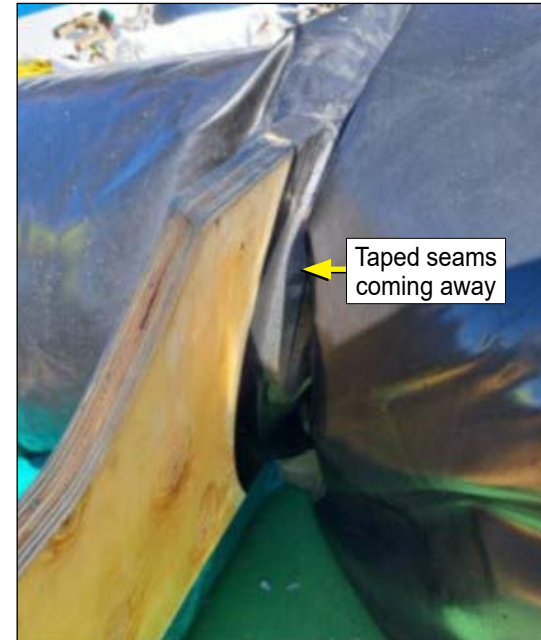


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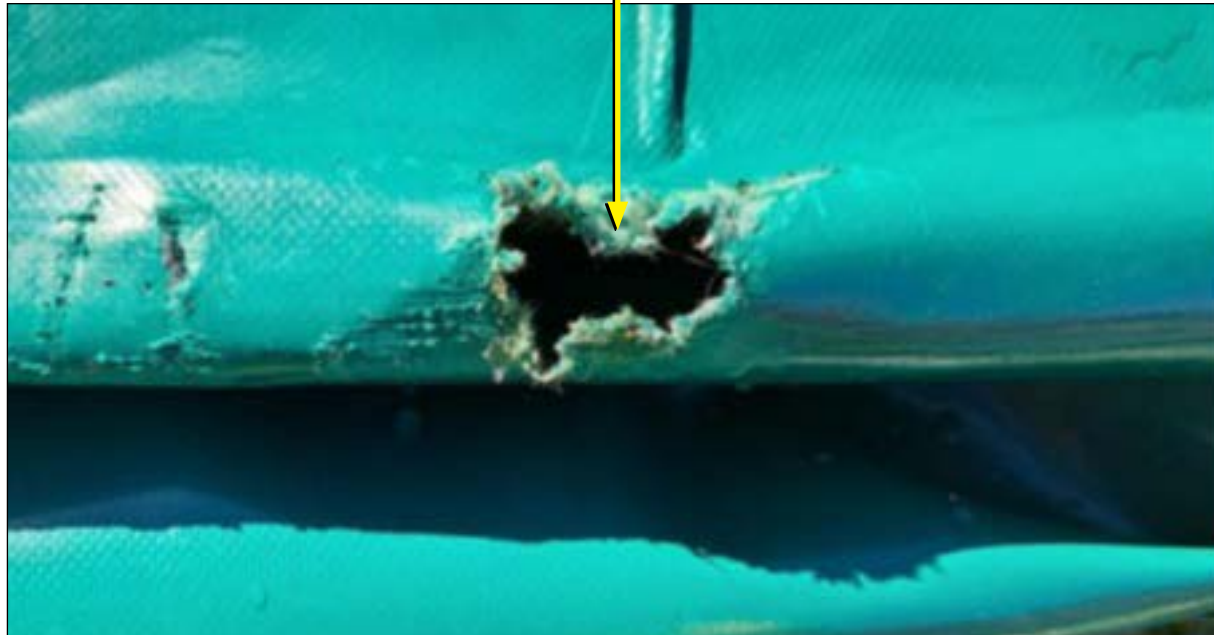


Figure 6: The boat's construction and defects

Image from [Border Force](#)

12-litre external fuel tank



Image from [Border Force](#)

Additional fuel cannisters for refuelling



Engine shaft with foam insert



Figure 7: Engine and fuel arrangements for
migrant boat 512

1.6.4 Loading and freeboard

Migrant boat 512 did not have an established loading capacity, although comparable military commando raiding craft of a similar size and design were typically rated to carry no more than 12 people when fitted with a 50hp to 80hp outboard engine. The boat had a low freeboard, which allowed water over the sponsons throughout the voyage (**Figure 8**).

Image from [Home Office](#)



Figure 8: *Migrant boat 512* during the initial approach, showing deflation and low freeboard

1.7 **BF VOLUNTEER**

1.7.1 Vessel description

BF Volunteer (**Figure 9**) was a twin-hulled CTV with a registered length of 20.7m originally built to transfer personnel to, from and between offshore wind farms. The vessel was certified to carry up to 15 persons under the Code of Practice for the construction, machinery, equipment, stability and examination of small commercial vessels. Seacat Services Ltd (see section 1.8.5) had completed additional stability calculations demonstrating the vessel's ability to carry up to 150 more recovered people.

BF Volunteer had open deck areas forward and aft, both of which were used as temporary shelter areas for recovered migrants. The aft end of the port hull had been modified to include a lower secure platform to assist the transfer of migrants directly from small boats. The main deck accommodation comprised a crew welfare area, with the wheelhouse located above.

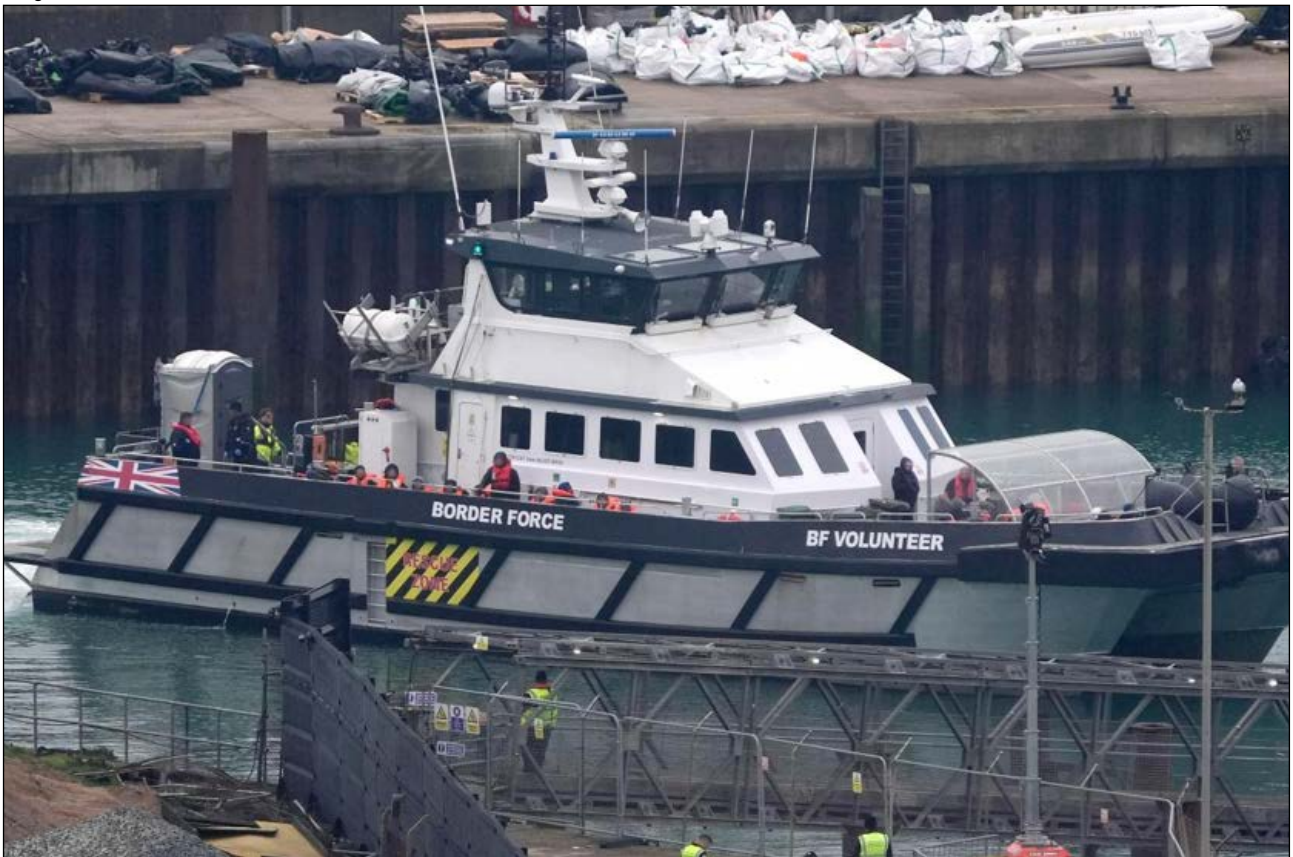


Figure 9: BF Volunteer

1.7.2 Crew

At the time of the accident, *BF Volunteer* had 13 crew on board. Seacat Services Ltd provided the master, chief mate and five deck marshals. Border Force provided the OIC, three Border Force officers, a Criminal and Financial Investigation officer and a medic.

The master had overall command of the vessel and was responsible for carrying out the rescue operation. The master had been in the role since the start of the CTV charter for migrant operations in the English Channel and was confident in carrying out small boat rescue operations, including those requiring recovery from the water. The chief mate assisted the master with navigation and other routine wheelhouse tasks.

The OIC was a Border Force maritime commander whose role was to assist and provide guidance to the master on migrant operations, communicate information to colleagues in the Joint Control Room (JCR) and to manage other Border Force personnel on board.

The remaining crew worked together on deck to carry out rescue operations. The deck marshals physically assisted boat occupants during recovery, passed lines and deployed safety equipment as required. The Border Force officers assisted the deck marshals but were also responsible for the physical security and processing of migrants once they were on board. The medic provided assistance where medical assessment or intervention was required and the photographer documented the scene in detail.

1.7.3 Equipment

In addition to the required safety equipment for a vessel of its size and type *BF Volunteer* carried equipment to support rescues and mass casualty events involving people in the water. This included deployable scramble nets, which could be used to assist people from the water or lowered into a small boat alongside to help occupants climb out. The vessel also carried several types of deployable flotation aids, including horseshoes and large life rings that inflated automatically on contact with the water.

The deck marshals wore drysuits and safety harnesses when working on the aft platform. Crew working on deck wore an inflatable personal flotation device (PFD), which inflated automatically on contact with water.

The vessel was also equipped with a man overboard sling fitted to a long pole. This device was designed to facilitate the recovery of a person in the water using the vessel's recovery davit. The device required clear water around a casualty to function as designed.

1.7.4 Training and familiarisation

All crew on board *BF Volunteer* had completed STCW² basic safety training, including fire prevention and firefighting, personal survival techniques and elementary first aid. Seacat Services Ltd and Border Force personnel had also completed additional internal training relevant to their roles. The additional internal training did not include specialist SAR training.

All new crew members joining *BF Volunteer* were required to complete a familiarisation process, facilitated by the OIC, to understand English Channel migrant operations and what was expected of them.

1.8 ENGLISH CHANNEL SMALL BOAT RESPONSE SYSTEM

1.8.1 English Channel monitoring

Migrant boats were monitored from the point of departure using a combination of aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and maritime assets. UK authorities worked in coordination with the French Coastguard to maintain continuous tracking as boats approached UK waters. Monitoring systems included live video feeds, enabling personnel in the Border Force JCR and Dover MRCC to observe boats in real time. *Migrant boat 512* was monitored from within minutes of its departure from France until its intercept later that morning as it passed into UK territorial waters.

1.8.2 UK Border Force

Border Force had a central operational role in responding to and monitoring small boat migrant crossings in the English Channel, primarily through maritime deployments under Operation Kirstead. Its five chartered CTVs and three support RHIBs patrolled designated areas and were available for tasking by HMCG to rescue and recover occupants from migrant boats in distress. The vessels also supported the disruption of illegal entry into the UK. Law enforcement was the primary statutory function of Border Force.

² International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended.

The JCR coordinated Border Force English Channel operations by integrating intelligence, surveillance and asset tasking. Besides the core JCR staff, Border Force Maritime and Aviation Support Officers (MASOs) embedded within Dover MRCC provided an operational link with HMCG by assisting with asset coordination, tasking support, information integration and operational liaison.

1.8.3 His Majesty's Coastguard

His Majesty's Coastguard was the statutory SAR authority and retained overall responsibility for maritime distress responses, including small boat incidents. For English Channel migrant operations, MRCC Dover acted as the operational focal point, from where HMCG developed SAR plans, tasked assets and managed incidents through a designated SAR mission coordinator.

To deliver SAR, HMCG tasked a mix of assets, including Border Force CTVs and support RHIBs, RNLI lifeboats, and its own aviation and surveillance capabilities such as helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft and UAVs, alongside other available maritime resources in the area.

1.8.4 Royal National Lifeboat Institution

RNLI lifeboats were declared SAR assets, crewed by volunteers and were routinely tasked by HMCG through MRCC Dover, particularly when rescue conditions deteriorated or involved multiple persons in the water.

The RNLI assets regularly tasked to migrant incidents in the Dover Strait area included all-weather lifeboats and ILBs from the Dover and Walmer lifeboat stations.

1.8.5 UK Border Force chartered crew transfer vessels

Seacat Services Ltd managed three of the five CTVs chartered by Border Force to support the small boat response in the English Channel. The company was responsible for the safe operation, commercial crewing, maintenance, regulatory compliance and welfare of its vessels and crew. The vessels operated under Seacats Services Ltd's safety management system and the master's overriding authority at all times.

1.8.6 The system in operation

Small migrant boats that entered UK territorial waters were designated by HMCG as being in distress unless there was credible evidence to indicate otherwise. Distress was the highest category under SAR protocols and reflected the boats' risk profile due to their unseaworthiness.

Because migrant boats were tracked from departure, HMCG normally tasked an available Border Force CTV before the boats reached UK territorial waters. In practice, this meant that migrant boats were usually intercepted and their occupants rescued shortly after crossing from French into UK waters.

Although migrant boats were designated as being in distress, a declared SAR asset was not normally tasked unless the situation deteriorated to the point where specialist capability was required. Most rescues were therefore conducted by

Border Force CTVs, which were not declared SAR assets. In the 2 years before the accident, HMCG tasked declared SAR assets such as RNLI lifeboats to between 5% and 7% of migrant boat rescues.

When a Border Force CTV intercepted a migrant boat its crew followed a prescribed SOP to carry out a rescue operation. The CTV approached the migrant boat and remained at a short distance to minimise wash and the risk of contact. At this stage, the OIC and master assessed whether to declare a “Mayday”³ and request additional SAR assistance, or to continue with the rescue. Their assessment considered the vulnerability of those on board, the condition and suitability of the migrant boat, environmental risks, the weather on scene, tasking from HMCG and the CTV’s safe operating limits.

If direct rescue was considered appropriate, the crew established verbal communication and instructed the occupants to stop the engine. Once it was safe to do so, the CTV manoeuvred alongside and passed lines to gain control of the boat. Dynamic risk assessments informed each stage of the operation. The occupants were transferred in a controlled manner where conditions allowed. Lifesaving equipment was otherwise deployed. Where available, a Border Force support RHIB would be on scene and stand off at a distance to assist with handling the migrant boat or recovering people from the water if required.

Early deployment of lifesaving equipment risked encouraging occupants to enter the water, creating, or worsening, a mass casualty situation. The preferred approach was to keep the occupants calm and recover them in a controlled manner via the aft platform.

1.8.7 Procedures and their management

His Majesty’s Coastguard held overarching responsibility for SAR procedures and incident management. Seacat Services Ltd was responsible for administering the day-to-day safety and operating procedures on board its CTVs, including *BF Volunteer*, while Border Force provided and administered the SOPs and risk assessments for migrant operations.

Border Force SOPs covered the working arrangements between Border Force, CTV operators and crews, operational capabilities, initial detection, escalation for further assistance, roles and responsibilities, cold exposure and the response to mass casualty events.

The Border Force ‘CTV Securing Migrant Vessels’ risk assessment set out the task elements, control measures and risk ratings for intercepting and bringing a migrant boat alongside a CTV. It identified the hazards of a migrant boat sinking or capsizing alongside, with the associated risk of drowning, and the risk of injury while passing a line with a chock attached. The ‘Multi-Casualty Incident’ risk assessment addressed the hazards associated with migrants entering the water after a boat became compromised and detailed the control measures for recovering them.

Neither risk assessment, nor any associated procedure, identified the hazard of people becoming trapped or stranded inside a compromised boat, or the risk of drowning inside the boat.

³ The international distress signal for grave or imminent danger, spoken three times. Although migrant vessels were routinely designated as being in distress, this provision gave Border Force crews an additional means of escalation when further assistance was required during a rescue.

1.9 REGULATION

The UK's SAR obligations applied to the response to small migrant boats in UK territorial waters and within the UK Search and Rescue Region. These obligations derived from international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982, Article 98, the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974, as amended, and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979. Together, these instruments required the UK to maintain arrangements for an adequate and effective SAR service.

1.10 REFERENCE INFORMATION

Research by Quan et al. (2016)⁴ examined observable factors at the scene of a drowning to determine their ability to predict survival and neurological outcome. Drawing on 24 cohort studies, the study identified submersion duration as the most significant predictor and strongly associated longer durations with poorer outcomes resulting in death or survival with severe neurological impairment. Shorter submersion durations were associated with more favourable outcomes including those who survived with good neurological function.

The study indicated that submersion durations exceeding 25 minutes were associated with very poor outcomes. Several datasets reported 100% mortality, while others reported poor outcomes in 96% to 99% of cases. Favourable outcomes were described as *absent or rare*, with such durations considered *invariably fatal*. The study identified a sigmoid relationship⁵ between submersion duration and outcome, with poor outcomes *rapidly increasing* between durations of 10 minutes and 25 minutes.

The study concluded that:

This information may be useful to rescuers, responding systems and agencies in the setting where decisions to rescue and care for a drowning victim pose risk of death to the rescuer and very high costs to the responding system. They may contribute to the decision when to attempt a rescue versus a body retrieval.

1.11 PREVIOUS ACCIDENTS AND INCIDENTS

1.11.1 Inflatable migrant boat – partial sinking with loss of at least 27 lives

During the early hours of 24 November 2021, an overcrowded inflatable boat carrying about 33 migrants from France flooded and partially sank while crossing the Dover Strait, resulting in at least 27 fatalities (MAIB report 7/2023⁶). The MAIB investigation found that the boat was wholly unsuitable for the voyage because it was inadequately constructed, heavily overloaded and lacked basic lifesaving equipment. The occupants had no effective means of raising an accurate distress alert other than mobile phones, which limited the ability of rescue services to locate the boat. The investigation also identified shortfalls in the monitoring of small boats in the English Channel and in liaison between UK and French authorities.

⁴ [Predicting outcome of drowning at the scene: A systematic review and meta-analyses](#)

⁵ A distinctive S-shaped mathematical curve modelling processes that start slowly, accelerate rapidly in the middle and then level off or saturate as they reach a maximum limit.

⁶ [MAIB report 7/2023: inflatable migrant boat](#)

This accident was the subject of the Cranston Inquiry⁷, which considered the circumstances of the boat's departure, the distress calls made during the crossing and the subsequent SAR response. The inquiry found that the loss of life was likely avoidable and identified systemic failures, inadequate resources and coordination weaknesses in the UK's SAR response.

The Cranston Inquiry made several recommendations to the UK government, including that it reconsider the use of Border Force to provide SAR functions and develop a memorandum of understanding between HMCG and Border Force.

1.11.2 Inflatable migrant boat – partial sinking with loss of at least 8 lives

At 0300 on 14 December 2022, an inflatable migrant boat travelling from France to the UK suffered structural failure in the Dover Strait, causing several occupants to enter the water and resulting in at least eight fatalities (MAIB report 9/2024⁸). The MAIB investigation found that the boat was inherently unseaworthy because it was poorly constructed, overcrowded and unsuitable for open sea conditions. The occupants had no reliable means of raising a distress alert beyond mobile phones and informal communication. SAR assets and a fishing vessel were involved in the rescue.

1.11.3 UK Border Force incident reports

Border Force maintained records of incidents and near misses associated with migrant boat operations in the English Channel. These reports identified recurring safety themes, including poor boat construction, structural failure, overcrowding, low freeboard and difficulty maintaining control during transfers. Several incidents involved sudden or uncontrolled entry into the water, while others involved slips, loss of balance, unpredictable occupant behaviour and injuries from exposure to fuel contamination.

Before this accident, Border Force records contained no examples of an unconscious casualty requiring recovery from a collapsed or partially collapsed migrant boat. The day after this accident, an unconscious casualty was identified early during the intercept of a heavily overloaded but intact inflatable boat. The early identification allowed the CTV crew to rescue the casualty by rapidly unloading the boat, then reaching over the aft platform and lifting the casualty out before providing immediate first aid. The incident report noted the difficulty of the rescue, including the manual handling challenges involved. The rescued person survived.

⁷ [The Cranston Inquiry](#)

⁸ [MAIB report 9/2024: inflatable migrant boat](#)

SECTION 2 – ANALYSIS

2.1 AIM

The purpose of the analysis is to determine the contributory causes and circumstances of the accident as a basis for making recommendations to prevent similar accidents occurring in the future.

2.2 OVERVIEW

Manpreet Kaur drowned after being trampled in the bottom of an inflatable migrant boat while attempting to cross the English Channel. This analysis examines the physical mechanism of her death, the condition and structural failure of *migrant boat 512*, the constraints on recovery once she was identified, and the role of the criminal operation in creating the unsafe conditions on board.

Search and rescue tasking, situational awareness and communications were not analysed further as causal factors. However, aspects of the response system are considered where they are necessary to explain on-scene capability, the timing of recovery, and the delay before dedicated SAR assets could intervene.

2.3 THE ACCIDENT

2.3.1 Cause of death and petrol exposure

The postmortem examination established that the cause of Manpreet's death was drowning and that she had no significant underlying disease or injuries. The toxicology report found no indication that she was under the influence of alcohol or drugs, but further blood tests identified hydrocarbons that could be associated with petrol exposure.

The boat's engine was refuelled at least four times during the voyage. The occupants were neither equipped nor trained to carry out refuelling safely and, as a result, fuel handling was poor and petrol was spilled into the bottom of the boat. The presence of petrol increased the risk to occupants through exposure to vapours and contact with fuel mixed with seawater, creating a corrosive mixture that caused skin burns to Manpreet and several other occupants. For those sitting low down in the centre of the boat, like Manpreet, vapour concentrations were likely to be particularly high due to the lack of air circulation caused by their proximity to the deck, the overcrowded conditions, and low wind speeds. This effect was likely to have been exacerbated when the boat stopped before being intercepted by *BF Volunteer*.

Manpreet had reported feeling dizzy shortly before the boat collapsed. This was consistent with the possible effects of exposure to petrol vapour, which was likely to have contributed to her reduced physical condition before she became submerged. However, the investigation could not determine the extent or full physiological effect of that exposure. It was therefore not possible to conclude that petrol exposure caused Manpreet to lose consciousness or materially contributed to her death, for which drowning remained the recorded cause.

Manpreet Kaur drowned after becoming submerged in the bottom of *migrant boat 512*. Petrol fume exposure was likely to have worsened her physical condition and reduced her ability to respond once she became submerged.

2.3.2 Condition of *migrant boat 512*

Migrant boat 512 was in a severely degraded state by the time it entered UK waters. The inflatable sponsons were partially deflated, the deck had lost rigidity, and a significant volume of water had accumulated on board. Air leakage from both the sponsons and the inflatable deck required repeated attempts at reinflation during the voyage, and the boat was likely to have departed France underinflated. *Migrant boat 512* was not constructed to any recognised design or safety standard: its inflatable floor was not structurally connected to the boat, deck pressure could not be maintained once the pump was removed, its seams and transom had been taped and glued rather than welded, and no strong points were fitted for securing or recovering it. The shaft length of the 9.9 hp outboard engine was incompatible with the depth of the transom, causing continuous contact with the hull and progressive deterioration of the PVC structure, allowing water to enter the boat.

The boat's condition deteriorated as several adverse factors acted together. Overcrowding reduced the boat's freeboard and increased the likelihood of water ingress during the voyage, while persistent air and water leaks undermined buoyancy and deck rigidity. Repeated attempts to reinflate the deck had limited effect because the supplied pump could not be used effectively without a solid surface to push against. Combined with the number of people carried, these deficiencies left the boat with very limited structural resilience and made it highly vulnerable to loss of buoyancy, flooding, deformation and collapse during the crossing.

Migrant boat 512 was a rudimentary craft produced from low-cost materials outside recognised safety and quality standards. Its poor construction, overcrowding, low freeboard, air leakage, water ingress and incompatible outboard engine arrangement meant that it was wholly unsuitable for crossing the English Channel. By the time the boat entered UK waters it was in a compromised condition and vulnerable to structural collapse.

2.3.3 The criminal element

The circumstances leading to Manpreet's death arose mainly from the criminal facilitation of the voyage in a substandard and unsafe boat rather than from deficiencies in any regulated maritime activity. Consequently, the most significant safety issues identified by this investigation do not readily lend themselves to conventional safety recommendations as those responsible operate outside established regulatory and safety frameworks.

2.3.4 Initial approach, crowd response and collapse of *migrant boat 512*

During *BF Volunteer's* initial approach, a line was passed to *migrant boat 512* to bring it alongside. The occupants then moved rapidly towards the port side, which imposed a substantial asymmetric load on a boat that was already structurally weakened and underinflated. The remaining freeboard, buoyancy and rigidity were insufficient to withstand the sudden shift in weight and significant quantities of water entered the boat. The boat partially folded and many occupants entered the water.

The initial movement to port was likely to have been a natural response to the line being passed across, but panic escalated once the boat began to collapse. Occupants were already subject to significant physical stressors, including

overcrowding, exposure to hazardous substances and fatigue, which likely reduced their ability to respond in a controlled manner. The approach of *BF Volunteer* was also likely to have created an expectation of imminent recovery and increased the urgency among those on board to secure rescue.

The immediate cause of *migrant boat 512*'s collapse was the rapid collective movement of occupants on a boat that had already lost the buoyancy and rigidity needed to remain stable. This movement, and the boat's already degraded condition, created the mass casualty circumstances that left Manpreet vulnerable to immersion and crushing within the boat.

2.3.5 Submersion and inability to self-rescue

Manpreet was trampled and forced into the bottom of the boat as the occupants moved around following its collapse, ending up face down in a mixture of water and fuel. A fellow occupant attempted to pull her up by her lifejacket. At about the same time, the partially deflated deck shifted and flipped, Manpreet's lifejacket slipped off, and she fell face down back onto the boat's flooded and unsupported floor.

Once Manpreet had been forced into the bottom of the boat, the conditions on board significantly reduced the likelihood of effective self-rescue. As discussed in section 2.3.1, it is likely that petrol exposure contributed to Manpreet feeling dizzy before the collapse and reduced her ability to respond once she was pushed face down into the flooded boat. However, this was one of several factors affecting her ability to self-rescue and could not be isolated from the effects of physical exhaustion, the absence of a stable deck, partial submersion, loss of buoyancy and the physical obstruction caused by other occupants and debris.

Manpreet's physical condition, the lack of a stable deck, and the conditions on board *migrant boat 512* greatly reduced her ability to self-rescue.

2.3.6 Discovery of the casualty

Manpreet was identified 11 minutes after the first line had been passed to *migrant boat 512* and about 8 minutes after she first became submerged. She was found lying face down in the bottom of the boat, partially submerged, while several other occupants remained on board and required rescue.

The delay in recognising Manpreet as a casualty was likely shaped by the immediate demands of rescuing multiple visible survivors from a rapidly deteriorating boat. Attention on board the CTV was directed towards those in the water and to the remaining occupants still requiring rescue. Manpreet's position in the bottom of the boat, together with her lack of brightly coloured lifejacket and partial submersion, made her difficult to distinguish from the surrounding debris. No occupants drew the crew's attention to her position as they were rescued. Combined, these factors reduced the likelihood of Manpreet being identified promptly in a fast-moving mass rescue operation.

Manpreet was not identified promptly because the crew were managing a mass rescue from a rapidly deteriorating boat. Visible survivors were prioritised, and her position, conspicuity and partial submersion reduced the likelihood of early detection.

2.4 RECOVERY AND RESCUE CONSTRAINTS ON BOARD *BF VOLUNTEER*

2.4.1 Physical, environmental, equipment and training constraints

The crew of *BF Volunteer* carried out a dynamic risk assessment to determine whether Manpreet's recovery from within the semi-collapsed vessel was feasible.

Neither the vessel's crew nor the Border Force personnel had completed specialist SAR training. Although *BF Volunteer* carried recovery equipment, including an aft loading platform, inflatable flotation aids, scramble nets and a man overboard sling, none was suitable for recovering an unconscious casualty from inside a collapsed boat without intervention from within the boat.

The deck marshals wore drysuits but their self-inflating PFDs would have inflated if they had entered the flooded boat, restricting movement and further increasing the risk to them. This assessment was consistent with the subsequent recovery by Walmer ILB, during which two RNLI crew immediately sank to chest height in the mixture of water and fuel on entering *migrant boat 512* and took just under 5 minutes to recover Manpreet from the boat.

Entry into the boat would have exposed *BF Volunteer*'s crew to a high risk of immersion and entrapment and increased the likelihood that they would also require rescue. This risk was heightened by their lack of specialist training and the equipment available on board.

BF Volunteer's crew could not safely recover Manpreet from within the collapsed boat. Intervention therefore depended on the arrival of dedicated SAR assets.

2.4.2 Evolution of the English Channel response system

Previous MAIB investigations into migrant boat accidents identified limitations in the monitoring, coordination and situational awareness of small boats in the English Channel. In this case, *migrant boat 512* was monitored from departure and intercepted shortly after entering UK territorial waters within a coordinated multiagency framework. Small migrant boats entering UK waters were routinely treated as being in distress and a Border Force CTV was typically tasked to rescue those on board, with specialist SAR assets usually only tasked when conditions deteriorated.

These arrangements indicated that the operational response system had developed since the November 2021 and December 2022 migrant boat accidents described in section 1.11, and was better able to detect, track and respond to migrant boats at an early stage. Unlike the earlier accidents, *migrant boat 512* had been monitored from departure in coordination with French authorities and using aerial assets. Once the boat collapsed, the operational challenge shifted from locating, monitoring and rescuing its occupants, to managing a rapidly developing mass casualty situation at close quarters.

The English Channel response system had developed since earlier MAIB migrant boat investigations, improving monitoring, coordination and early rescue. However, this accident showed that the remaining vulnerability lay in the capability available on scene when rescue conditions deteriorated.

2.4.3 UK Border Force search and rescue capability

Although Border Force CTVs were routinely used to initiate and support SAR activity, they were not declared SAR assets and Border Force was not a SAR organisation. The procedures and risk assessments available did not specifically address the recovery of a casualty from within a collapsed inflatable boat, and previous incidents had not involved this scenario.

The initial response to *migrant boat 512* relied on assets that were not equipped, trained or procedurally prepared to recover an unconscious casualty from within a compromised boat. When *migrant boat 512* collapsed, there were no suitably equipped or trained assets available on scene to carry out the required rescue safely. This exposed a limitation in the on-scene capability when a rescue escalated beyond the conditions normally managed by the attending CTV. Once the situation required more advanced rescue from within a collapsed boat, intervention depended on the arrival of dedicated and declared SAR assets such as the RNLI ILB.

The initial response relied on Border Force vessels that were not designated, equipped or trained as SAR assets, and existing procedures did not account for recovery from a collapsed boat. This exposed a limitation in on-scene capability when the situation escalated beyond the conditions normally managed by the attending CTV.

2.5 SURVIVABILITY AND TIME CRITICALITY

2.5.1 Submersion duration

Studies indicated that good outcomes following submersion were most likely when rescue and life support were provided within 10 minutes, with the likelihood decreasing as submersion time increased. After 10 minutes, the probability reduced rapidly, and there were almost no reported good outcomes after more than 25 minutes of submersion. Manpreet had been submerged for approximately 8 minutes when she was found face down in *migrant boat 512*. This had increased to 26 minutes by the time *R363* arrived on scene, and to 35 minutes when the ILB arrived. It then took over 4 minutes to recover Manpreet, with CPR started 39 minutes after submersion.

Although Manpreet was found within the period associated with the highest likelihood of survival, effective rescue and life support were not available before that window had passed. Her submersion time exceeded 25 minutes before SAR assets arrived on scene, a duration after which favourable outcomes were reported to be rare or absent. Consequently, by the time CPR was started, the probability of a successful outcome was extremely low.

Search and rescue assets had already been tasked and were on route. By the time Manpreet was recovered she had been submerged for a duration that made successful rescue highly unlikely.

2.5.2 Opportunity for earlier recovery

Manpreet had already been submerged for 8 minutes when the crew of *BF Volunteer* located her. A further 3 minutes elapsed before the boat was cleared of occupants, after which recovery onto the CTV's deck would have required additional time.

Regardless of the crew's training or equipment, the practical constraints of the situation meant that recovery could not have been immediate. The boat first had to be cleared of occupants before Manpreet could be reached and recovered. It is therefore highly unlikely that she could have been recovered before her submersion time had exceeded the period associated with the highest likelihood of survival. Consequently, while the limitations in on-scene rescue capability were significant they might not have altered the outcome.

Even if earlier intervention was possible by the crew of *BF Volunteer*, the constraints present at the point of discovery limited the opportunity to recover Manpreet before her submersion time exceeded likely survivable limits.

SECTION 3 – CONCLUSIONS

3.1 SAFETY ISSUES DIRECTLY CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACCIDENT THAT HAVE BEEN ADDRESSED OR RESULTED IN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Manpreet Kaur drowned after becoming submerged in the bottom of *migrant boat 512*. Petrol fume exposure was likely to have worsened her physical condition and reduced her ability to respond once she became submerged. [2.3.1]
2. Manpreet was not identified promptly because the crew were managing a mass rescue from a rapidly deteriorating boat. Visible survivors were prioritised, and her position, conspicuity and partial submersion reduced the likelihood of early detection. [2.3.6]
3. *BF Volunteer's* crew could not safely recover Manpreet from within the collapsed boat. Intervention therefore depended on the arrival of dedicated SAR assets. [2.4.1]
4. The initial response relied on Border Force vessels that were not designated, equipped or trained as SAR assets, and existing procedures did not account for recovery from a collapsed boat. This exposed a limitation in on-scene capability when the situation escalated beyond the conditions normally managed by the attending CTV. [2.4.3]
5. Search and rescue assets had already been tasked and were on route. By the time Manpreet was recovered she had been submerged for a duration that made successful rescue highly unlikely. [2.5.1]

3.2 OTHER SAFETY ISSUES DIRECTLY CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACCIDENT

1. *Migrant boat 512* was a rudimentary craft produced from low-cost materials outside recognised safety and quality standards. Its poor construction, overcrowding, low freeboard, air leakage, water ingress and incompatible outboard engine arrangement meant that it was wholly unsuitable for crossing the English Channel. [2.3.2]
2. The circumstances that led to Manpreet's death arose principally from the criminal facilitation of the voyage in a substandard and unsafe boat rather than from deficiencies in any regulated maritime activity. Consequently, the most significant safety issues identified by this investigation do not readily lend themselves to conventional safety recommendations as those responsible operate outside established regulatory and safety frameworks. [2.3.3]
3. The immediate cause of *migrant boat 512's* collapse was the rapid collective movement of occupants on a boat that had already lost the buoyancy and rigidity needed to remain stable. This movement, and the boat's already degraded condition, created the mass casualty circumstances that left Manpreet vulnerable to immersion and crushing within the boat. [2.3.4]

4. Manpreet's physical condition, the lack of a stable deck, and the conditions on board *migrant boat 512* greatly reduced her ability to self-rescue. [2.3.5]
5. The English Channel response system had developed since earlier MAIB migrant boat investigations, improving monitoring, coordination and early rescue. However, this accident showed that the remaining vulnerability lay in the capability available on scene when rescue conditions deteriorated. [2.4.2]
6. Even if earlier intervention was possible by the crew of *BF Volunteer*, the constraints present at the point of discovery limited the opportunity to recover Manpreet before her submersion time exceeded likely survivable limits. [2.5.2]

SECTION 4 – ACTION TAKEN

4.1 ACTIONS TAKEN BY OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Seacat Services Ltd has updated its procedures and provided lanyards for safety harnesses to facilitate the entry into inflatable migrant boats to assist people in distress when appropriate and necessary.

Border Security Command has increased the crewing levels to three people on its chartered RHIB support vessels and undertaken to increase the availability of RHIB support during migrant boat rescues.

SECTION 5 – RECOMMENDATIONS

Border Security Command is recommended to:

- 2026/160** Review its training and operational procedures to improve the early identification of inflatable boat occupants who may be in difficulty, unresponsive, partially submerged or otherwise less visible during rescue operations. This is in order to enable a timely response to people in distress, to address the risk of delayed rescue and loss of life.
- 2026/161** To develop, with relevant partner organisations, procedures, training and equipment to enable the safe recovery of an unresponsive casualty from a partially or fully collapsed inflatable boat. This is to include a risk-based framework as to when recovery can be attempted without exposing responders to unacceptable risk. This is in order to increase the likelihood of successful casualty rescue in scenarios where the boat is compromised, to address the risk of fatalities resulting from delays to rescue.

Safety recommendations shall in no case create a presumption of blame or liability

