



Special Feature - Lifeboats

Lifeboats Are Designed to Save Lives

A number of recent casualties involving lifeboats have highlighted lack of suitable training and maintenance with regard to lifeboats and launching equipment. A worryingly large proportion of these casualties have happened during routine lifeboat drills, which have perhaps become too routine, sometimes with terrible consequences. There needs to be more emphasis on understanding how this vital but sometimes misused piece of life-saving equipment works, and how to operate and maintain it.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there are more than 50 different lifeboat launching systems, each with its own requirements, and each requiring a manual and illustrative diagram. Ships' crews cannot be expected to familiarise themselves with every system, but should ensure that they are able to understand, operate and maintain the equipment that is fitted on their own ship.

Recent incidents include:

- 1) A lifeboat's falls snagged on a maintenance chain whilst lowering, with the weight of the lifeboat coming onto a single hook, which then tore loose. The lifeboat fell to the water. **1 dead, 2 injured.**
- 2) A lifting hook disengaged from the block during hoisting, but the hoist button jammed, and the other block continued to be raised. A crewmember had to jump out of the boat. **1 injured.**
- 3) Crewmembers were instructed to carry out a routine check of the ship's lifeboat release gear. The lifeboat was lowered onto the hanging-off pendant wires attached to the recovery stop. Unfortunately, the pendants were not attached to the pendant lug, causing the lifeboat to be released from the falls. The lifeboat fell a distance of approximately 10 metres into the water. **2 injured.**
- 4) The second officer was assigned to assist the new third officer during a routine lifeboat drill whilst the ship was anchored. The second officer volunteered to lower the enclosed lifeboat in stages by a remote control wire, with the third officer hoisting the lifeboat back to its stowage position. The second officer went on board, pulled at the wire with both hands, and the lifeboat lowered about three metres before stopping. As the wire was slippery, the second officer wrapped the loose coils around one hand and continued to pull the operating wire. The lifeboat suddenly lowered at full speed, and four fingers were amputated by the wire. **1 injured.**
- 5) The crew were loading a life raft canister into the cradle when they accidentally knocked the release lever, releasing the canister, which fell onto the dock. The chief officer noticed that the lever was not in place but had been secured with a tie wrap. He attempted to seat the lever into the locked position but, in pulling on the lever, accidentally released the remaining canister. The falling canister landed directly on a shore worker on the gangway, killing him. **1 dead.**
- 6) The ship's service boat was lowered to the water. The seaman in the boat reached up to free the lifting hook, but his shirt became entangled in the block that attached the running wire to the hook. As the boat rocked, the crewman fell into the sea, panicked and started to flounder. Another seaman jumped into the water to assist, but was unable to save his fellow seafarer, who drowned. Neither was wearing a lifejacket. **1 dead.**

Preventing Future Accidents

These accidents could all have been prevented if some basic precautions had been taken:

- Confirm that ship's staff know where the operating manuals and instructions are, and have read and understood these instructions.
- Ensure that training manuals are ship-specific.
- Ensure that lifeboat drills are varied and do not become too routine.
- Check all fittings and loose equipment are clear before lowering.
- Maintenance should be carried out according to manufacturer's instructions and additional guidance or training given where necessary.
- If possible, fit a single type of equipment on all company ships and ensure that all staff receive the necessary training.
- Training equipment, including blocks fitted with plastic side plates, can be useful demonstration aids during training.
- When retrieving, always use the crank handle for the last few metres, and do not rely solely on the limit switch.

Refer to the IMO's Circular MSC 1/Circ 1206, issued in May 2006, for further information

WORK SAFELY AND DO NOT BECOME A CASUALTY.

