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Death of Junior Officer who jumped overboard from a vessel at anchorage to swim

1. What happened?

On 23rd August 2011 at 2340 hrs, a Junior Officer, 28 years of age, was lost overboard from a survey vessel when he jumped into the water to take a swim, while the vessel was at the defused anchorage of a Port. On 27th Sept 2011, the mortal remains of the Junior officer had washed ashore, photograph of which was identified by the parents of the deceased.

2. How It happened?

2.1 On 23rd August 2011, the Junior Officer was on watch in the evening while the vessel was at the anchorage. At 2340 hrs, the duty Ordinary Seaman and a Wiper (who had come on deck for a round) saw the Junior Officer standing on the forecastle deck. He was seen to be removing his clothes and footwear and was wearing only his undergarments. He told the Ordinary Seaman that he wanted to go for a swim. Before the Ordinary Seaman could stop him, the Junior Officer jumped overboard.

2.2 Two lifebuoys were immediately released but the Junior Officer could not grab them. At 2342 hrs, the general alarm was raised and all crew were mustered on deck. At this time, the Junior Officer was drifting abeam of the main deck. A 3rd lifebuoy was thrown by an Oiler, which the Junior Officer appeared to have caught hold of and was seen to be drifting away from the vessel. At 2350hrs, the Ordinary Seaman called Port Control and informed them about the incident and asked for permission to lower the rescue boat, which was granted. The rescue boat was launched at 0001hrs on 24th Aug 2011. The boat was manned by the Chief Engineer and two other crew members. The Port also dispatched their Pilot boat to assist in the rescue operation. At 0200hrs, the Pilot boat returned to the vessel with all the three lifebuoys. At around 0200 hrs, a Naval Patrol boat also joined the search but the search was unsuccessful and it was called off at 0245hrs on 24th Aug 2011. The junior Officer's clothes and footwear were found to be lying on the forecastle deck.

2.3 On 26th August, 2011, the mortal remains of the junior officer were found to have washed ashore. The photograph of the mortal remains were later identified on 27th Sept. 2011 by the family of the deceased.

2.4 The Junior Officer had joined the survey vessel on 9th July 2011 and was reported to be hard working, sincere, diligent in his duties and friendly with other staff. There were no complaints against him. On the morning of 23rd Aug 2011 at 1000 hrs, he had gone ashore to submit application for appearing in the CoC examinations and had returned back on board in the evening at 1830hrs. He had his dinner at 1930 hrs and thereafter was seen moving on the main deck near the bridge and on the forecastle deck. It was reported that he was continuously talking on the phone and at times, loudly. Earlier too, he was observed to be talking on the phone for very long durations.

2.5 The investigation did not reveal any foul play, neither did the search of the vessel and the belongings of the Junior Officer, reveal any suicide note. Analyzing all the statements given by the officers and the crew of the vessel, it would appear that the Junior Officer jumped overboard for a swim without realizing the hazards.

3. Why it happened?

3.1 Inadequate risk perception of the hazards involved while swimming in open sea waters. The Junior Officer may not have been aware of the hazards, such as strong currents and sea conditions which would make swimming in open waters, highly dangerous.

3.2 It was reported that the Junior Officer was regularly talking on the phone for long durations and noted to be shouting at times during these calls. It is possible that the Junior Officer was under some kind of emotional stress. This could possibly result in losing focus over personal behavior, resulting in this unsafe act.

4. Lessons learnt.

4.1 Ship masters/owners/managers/operators should ensure that procedures exist to discourage swimming in open sea waters. Senior officers on board should highlight the dangers involved when indulging in such activities.

4.2 It is important that senior officers on board the vessel are suitably trained to observe signs of depression or unusual behavior and provide at least the 'first aid' counseling and the matter is duly reported to the DPA, in cases where more professional help is considered necessary.



(Capt. Harish Khatri)
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