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Casualty Circular No. 14/2013

Case of missing deck officer from a supply vessel

1. What happened?

On 26th January at 0715 hrs, a Junior Officer, 39 years of age, was reported to be missing from a supply vessel. At the time of the incident, the vessel was off Veraval, along the coast of Gujarat.

2. How it happened?

2.1 On 18th January, the vessel had sailed from the Nhava port at 2212 hrs, for Mumbai High north. When taking over the afternoon watch at 1200 hrs, the handing over Junior Officer noted that the missing Junior Officer appeared tired. This was queried by him to which, the missing Junior Officer had replied that he had a slight headache. During the afternoon watch, the missing Junior Officer was noted to be tired by the Chief Officer as well, who was also told that he had a slight headache. After the watch at 1800 hrs, the Chief Officer had asked him to have his dinner and take some rest. The chief officer also excused him from the night watch. At around midnight, the Chief Officer informed the Master about the Junior Officer's condition. The next morning, on 26th January at 0715 hrs, the Master enquired about the health of junior officer with the intention of disembarking him to a rig for treatment.

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However, the junior officer was reported to be missing when the other Junior Officer, who was asked to look for the missing junior officer, could not locate him on board. Weather at this time, was reported to be fair, Wind NE 15 knots, Sea-Moderate.

2.2 On 26th January at 0830 hrs, the vessel was turned around for a surface search. The search was assisted by a Coast Guard aircraft and five other ships in the vicinity. The search was unsuccessful and was called off at 1900 hrs, on 27th January.

2.3 The missing junior officer had joined the vessel on 2nd December and was assigned bridge watch keeping from 0000 to 0600 hrs and 1200 to 1800 hrs with the Chief Officer. During the investigation, it was reported that the junior officer did not have any personal or professional issues with other crew members on board. He was reported to be a sober, reserved and co-operative person by other staff on board.

2.4 The investigation did not reveal any foul play. Neither did the search of the vessel and the belongings of the missing officer, revealed any indication for committing suicide. The missing officer was not given any job during the period he was last seen, till the time he was reported missing.

3. Why it happened?

3.1 The results of the investigation are largely inconclusive but considering all the statements given by the officers and the crew of the vessel, it would appear that the missing officer may have fallen into the water inadvertently, while on deck and drowned.

It is possible that the officer went out on deck, for some fresh air, close to the ship side and fell overboard accidentally. As the officer had complained of a head ache, he may have felt giddy when close to the ship side railing and lost his balance. However this cannot be substantiated with any evidence.

3.2 It is also possible that the Junior Officer fell overboard because of stumbling on an obstruction while walking close to the ship side. Several other causes can be speculated because of which crew members may fall overboard, such as fishing while alongside or at anchor, checking for over side discharges, slips/trips on decks etc.

4. Lessons learnt

4.1 Crew members who are reported to be sick should be given attention and discouraged from going out on open decks.

4.2 Hazards of moving carelessly on open decks should be highlighted to crew members on board, at regular intervals. Senior staff should also be cautioned not to be complacent and overconfident.

4.3 Ship owners/managers/operators should carry out risk assessments and identify potential hazards that exist on board due to which crew members are likely to fall overboard. Appropriate control measures should be implemented to mitigate the consequences of identified hazards by way of procedures, physical barriers, highlighting of obstructions or design changes as appropriate.



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