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सं./ No :

दिनांक / Dated:

File No. 11-NT(13)/2012

17.5.2013

Casualty Circular No. 19/2013

Case of missing Seaman from a Bulk carrier

1. What happened?

On 17th March 2012 at 0830hrs, a seaman, 48 years of age, was reported to be missing from a bulk carrier when he failed to report for work. The vessel was en-route from Kwinana, Australia to Singapore, at the time of the incident. Weather at the time was reported to be rough seas, swell 2.5mtrs and wind force 6.

2. How it happened?

2.1 A bulk carrier had sailed from Kwinana, Australia on 12th March 2012 at 0800 hrs and was bound for Hunagpu, China via Singapore, for bunkers. On 17th March 2012 at 0830hrs, it was noted that the seaman had not reported for work. The missing seaman's cabin was searched by the Chief Officer and another seaman but he was not found there. Announcements were made on the P.A system and crew was mustered. A search was initiated on board which was unsuccessful.

2.2 The vessel was turned to the reciprocal course at 0845 hrs for a search in water. A distress message was transmitted at 0850 hrs and RCC Australia contacted the vessel at 0906 hrs. RCC Australia informed the vessel at this

time, that no aircraft was available on nearby Christmas Island and that they would broadcast the message and provide search co-ordinates shortly. The Master requested the RCC Australia for an aircraft from some other location, to assist in the SAR. At 1005 hrs, RCC Australia provided the search co-ordinates based on the drift modeling and same were followed up by the ship. At about 1320 hrs, the vessel was informed that an aircraft was nominated for surface search from Cocos Island, however it developed a technical defect and could not assist in the search operations. The missing seaman could not be found and the search was called off at 1900hrs, on 17th March 2012.

2.3 The seaman was last seen on board at 1930 hrs, on 16th March 2012, while having dinner and had asked another seaman whether a safety movie was to be screened that night. Thereafter he had gone to his cabin and was not seen by others.

2.4 The search of the cabin of the missing seaman revealed that his regularly used slippers, a pair of shirt and trousers were missing. His lifejacket and immersion suit were still noted to be in his cabin and a search of other locations did not reveal any missing lifejackets or immersion suits. Later, during the search of his belongings, a notarized promissory note was found, which indicated that a person owed him 11 lakhs for forcibly selling his flat in Mumbai, without the consent of the missing seaman.

2.5 It was reported that the missing Seaman was reserved in nature and did not talk much with other crew members on board. He was reported to be a loner and would generally keep to himself and never complained about anything. Although aloof, he was known to have cordial relations with other crew on board and not known to have any disagreements with others. He would normally do his work on board and retire to his cabin in his free time. It was reported that he did not watch movies nor used onboard phone call facility, while at sea.

2.6 The seaman had joined the vessel on 17th Sept. for an 8-9 months contract and had requested for early relief, after having completed 6 months. He, on being questioned by the Master, had not given any particular reasons for the early sign-off request. He had agreed to pay for his repatriation costs to the Owners for the early relief. The relief had been promptly approved from the company office. He was expected to be relieved at the next port, Singapore.

2.7 Interviews indicate that the missing seaman's son was training to be a Seaman and that his daughter had been engaged in December 2011, a prospective union that he was quite pleased with. No signs of tension or other

problems were noticed by any of his colleagues. The seaman was reported to be in stable state of mind and had been noted to be happy and singing the previous day while working on deck. His work and rest hours reveal that he had been on day work for the last 4 days and previous records indicate that he was generally well rested.

2.6 Safety rounds were taken by the night watch keeper at 0200 hrs but nothing unusual was reported. Safety lines were reported to be rigged on deck at all times. The door next to the seaman's cabin, which is normally kept shut, was reported to have been found 'open', on the morning of 17th March 2012. Although, it cannot be confirmed whether it was the missing seaman who had opened the door, as locking of doors was not particularly monitored, since the vessel was not in a piracy area. Additionally, this door opens on the funnel deck and there is no risk of falling overboard, even if someone slips.

2.7 The missing seaman was not assigned any work between the time he was last seen on board till the time he was reported to be missing. Information available does not reveal any foul play

3. Why it happened?

3.1 Information available is insufficient to arrive at any firm conclusion. It may be that the seaman fell overboard inadvertently or intentionally jumped overboard. Both the possibilities are unsubstantiated as falling overboard inadvertently would require willful determination to go out on open deck when the weather was reported to be quite bad with heavy seas, swell and rain.

3.2 Suicide cannot be substantiated as nothing in the behavior of the missing seaman, as reported by other crew members, supports this act, although, reasons for requesting early relief are not known and cannot be ignored. Additionally the promissory note found in his belongings would indicate to some form of stress, though not noted by others.

4. Lessons learnt.

4.1 Although the privacy of individuals should not be breached but reasons for early relief should be discreetly questioned, to ensure the emotional well being of staff on board.

4.2 Ship owners/managers/operators should implement procedures to ensure that crew members do not go out on open decks during hours of darkness or outside work hours. Procedures should exist to ensure that crew

would inform a responsible officer or the Bridge before venturing out on deck at these times.

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.



Capt. Harish Khatri

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