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Case of missing Master from a tug off Namibia

1. What happened?

On 13th February 2013 at 0600hrs, the Master (age 42 years) of a tug 'X', was reported missing while the tug was in position off the port of Luderitz, Namibia. The tug was waiting to take over towing duties from another towing vessel in the vicinity but the changeover was delayed due to poor weather conditions.

2. How it happened?

2.1 On 10th February 2013 the tug had arrived in position 3nm off the port of Luderitz, Namibia. Subsequent to the arrival off the port, the tug 'X' continued to steam up and down till 12th Feb. at 0757hrs, when the tow was handed over to tug 'Y' and the tug 'X', at 0945hrs, entered the port of Luderitz, for bunkering and crew change.

2.2 Bunkering was completed at 2030hrs on the same day and the new crew including the new Master, boarded the tug at 2200hrs. The new Master took over the command, soon after, at around 2330hrs. The pilot who took the tug out of the port at 2330hrs, recalled that the Master was tired due to the extended travel time from India to Namibia and not yet familiar with the ship, which was considered to be normal as he had just joined the vessel. Nothing unusual was reported by the pilot, regarding the Master. The tug cleared the harbor at

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2400hrs on 12th February 2013 and the pilot was away at 0110hrs on 13th February 2013. The tug 'X' was supposed to take over the towing duties again from the tug 'Y', but instead, anchored due to poor visibility and bad weather, off the port limits. From 0330hrs, the tug 'X' was steaming up and down, off the port, as it failed to approach the other tug 'Y' to pick up the tow line. The Master was last seen at 0500 hrs on the bridge, by Chief Officer.

2.3 Tug 'X' was being repeatedly called to take the towline from the tug 'Y', as the tug 'Y' was required for port movements. The 2nd officer came on watch at 0545hrs. He received a call from the port control at 0600hrs, to take over the tow line from the tug 'Y'. The 2nd officer searched for the Master, in the in the Master's cabin, mess room, chief engineer's cabin and the gallery, to inform him about the call. However, the Master could not be located. At 0615 hrs, a general emergency alarm was sounded, Search was carried out on board and around the ship. The port control was informed about the situation while the crew continued with the search on board and lookouts were posted around the vessel. At 0640hrs, a man overboard message was broadcast on the VHF. At 0700hrs, the owners called the tug 'X', instructing her to take over the tow got adrift and subsequently grounded.

2.4 The investigation did not reveal any foul play. Neither did the search of the vessel and the belongings of the Master reveal and suicide note. The Master, had, in the recent past, undertaken a towing operation through the Arabian seas during monsoon period and had even earned bonus for the successful operations. Analyzing the circumstances and the sequences of events, it would emerge that the Master may have inadvertently fallen overboard, apparently due to a momentary lapse, caused by fatigue.

2.5 Records and the investigation report do not indicate that an appropriate search, as per the established search patterns, was carried out in water, although a Man overboard message was broadcast on VHF. Vessel was asked to take over towing duties by owners, immediately after the incident.

3. Why it happened?

3.1 It is noted that the Master did not yet get an opportunity to take adequate rest before taking over his duties. It was reported that the Master was constantly busy through the night, after taking over command. It is possible that the Master may have had a momentary loss of concentration, due to exhaustion and fatigue, while checking something over the side and fell overboard.

3.2 Although the report of the investigation, does not highlight any reasons for the Master to go missing but a lack of appropriate sea search of the area, is noted.

4. Lessons learnt.

4.1 Operations on board should be planned in such a manner that all staff members are given adequate rest before taking over their responsibilities to ensure safe operation and proper concentration while working.

4.2 When planning change of crew, particularly where travel periods extended are expected prior joining, ship owners / managers / operators\ should ensure that joining personnel have the opportunity to take adequate rest before taking over their duties and responsibilities.



(Capt. Harish Khatri)
~~Dy. Director General of Shipping [Tech]~~