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SUBJECT: Crabbing Vessel Capsizes in the Bering Sea

SUMMARY

The 80-ft crabbing, F/V Sugar Bear, capsized in the Bering Sea on January 27, 1995. The vessel was traveling to a new opelio crab fishing position when the vessel lost power and began to list toward the aft starboard side. The captain ordered the crew to don survival suits and sent a mayday message. As the vessel rolled over, the crew of six entered the water. Five of the crew got into an enclosed life raft, but the sixth crewman did not don an immersion suit, and was found in the water approximately two hours later. He was wearing an undershirt and tights. CPR was attempted, but the crewman was unable to be revived. Another fishing vessel in the vicinity located the five survivors within one hour and took them on board. A 30 knot wind and 6-8 foot seas were reported at the time of the sinking.

INTRODUCTION

It was not possible to physically visit the incident site. U.S. Coast Guard records and media reports were reviewed to evaluate possible factors related to this sinking. Also, Coast Guard investigators and a marine safety training specialist were interviewed

The F/V Sugar Bear was an 80-ft crabbing vessel of Alaskan registry. The crew was composed of four members from Alaska (including the victim), one from California, and one from Washington. The crew were moving to a new opelio crab fishing site in the Bering Sea approximately 50 miles west-southwest of St. Paul Island. The opilio crab season opened approximately two hours after the incident. The Sugar Bear was a privately owned vessel from Alaska.

Known weather conditions during the incident were as follows:

Visibility: Limited by ice fog
Wind: Gusts to 30 knots
Seas: 6-8 feet
Air Temperature: 14 degrees F
Other: Potential for icing

INVESTIGATION

The crabbing vessel, Sugar Bear, lost engine power and began to list toward the aft starboard side. The crew checked the engines and then heard a loud "pop." At this point the list became severe. The captain ordered the crew to don immersion suits. He sent a mayday message at approximately 9:40 AM. The wrong position was given. Vessels, which monitored the mayday, began a search in the wrong area. However, another vessel in the actual vicinity of the incident sighted the over-turned vessel (nearly 50 miles from the area under search) at approximately 10:00 AM. The vessel eased alongside the raft, and survivors came across (one at a time) as the waves brought the raft to the level of the rescue vessel's deck. The survivors were all on board the rescue vessel by 10:20 AM. Approximately two hours later, the victim was found floating in the water. He was brought on board the vessel, where CPR was unsuccessfully attempted. The victim was reported to have been sleeping at the time of the incident and was dressed in light clothing only. Reports indicate that he intended to swim to the life raft and then don his immersion suit.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The crewman is believed to have died from hypothermia/drowning. This will be confirmed after review of the death certificate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1:

Fishers entering the water while abandoning a vessel should always don immersion suits, if possible.

Discussion: Five of the six crewmen were able to successfully don their immersion suits prior to entering the water to get to the life raft. Reports indicate that the victim chose to attempt to swim to the life raft prior to donning his suit. This should only be attempted if there is no alternative.

Although immersion suits can be donned in the water, and provide some level of protection, wet immersion suits are less efficient barriers to cold temperatures

Recommendation #2:

All fishing vessel crew should have practical training in the donning of immersion suits, and participate in regular emergency drills for abandoning ship.

Discussion: All crew should have practice donning a immersion suit and have the immersion suit stored for easy access. Survival times in such weather conditions is significantly less than one hour, unless an immersion suit is correctly worn. All crew members should have practiced emergency drills prior to the need to institute an actual vessel abandoning. Also, all crew members should be capable of sending a distress message, if called upon to do so

Recommendation #3:

All commercial fishing vessels should have functioning bilge alarms that are tested on a regularly scheduled basis.

Discussion: The crew did not report activation of a bilge alarm system. The first indication of difficulty was a “loud pop” and a pronounced starboard list. Water was then reported in the engine room. Whether the bilge alarm system malfunctioned or such a system was not installed cannot be determined at this time. The vessel was lost and there are no plans to attempt a recovery. Thus, a mechanical inspection of the vessel is not possible.

Recommendation #4:

All crew should be trained in emergency radio procedure.

Familiarity with proper radio procedure increases the likelihood that a complete distress message can be delivered under adverse circumstances. In this case, the inaccurate position given in the distress message led to delays in reaching the incident scene. That a vessel “stumbled” onto the scene was more a matter of luck than a well-managed emergency response.

It is unclear why the inaccurate position was given. According to Coast Guard investigators, the crew had sufficient time to don survival suits and send a complete mayday message. Thus, the transposition of digits in the position report seems unlikely. Also, the differences in actual and transmitted positions are not accounted for by improper reading of the position on the GPS (Global Positioning System) indicator. It is possible that the GPS may not have been indicating the current position (e.g., the GPS may not have been in the continuous tracking mode). Such an occurrence could result in a previous position being indicated on the GPS.