

1. SUMMARY

During the evening of 3 December 1994 the United Kingdom registered fishing vessel HEATHER BLOOM, with a crew of six, snagged her fishing gear on an underwater obstruction whilst bottom trawling. The snagging caused her to heel heavily to port and to take on water. After sending a distress signal by MF radio, two inflatable liferafts were launched. The flooding continued and the vessel sank in a position 69 miles north of Cape Wrath in heavy seas and gale force winds.

Five of the crew were rescued by the United Kingdom fishing vessel AMBASSADOR, which had seen the distress flares fired from the liferaft. Two Coastguard helicopters, one from Sumburgh and one from Stornoway, assisted in the rescue but despite their efforts they were unable to recover the Skipper's body from the sea.

The immediate cause of the accident was an uncontrolled ingress of sea water into HEATHER BLOOM. Subsequently the main onboard electrical system failed which prevented release of the hydraulically operated brakes on the trawl winches and release of the tension in the snagged towing hawsers.

A significant contributory factor to the loss of the vessel was the lack of a safe operational procedure for manually releasing the winch after hydraulic power was lost.

A radio telephony distress signal was not sent until just before HEATHER BLOOM sank. At that stage the vessel was at a large angle of heel which effectively reduced the aerial height and produced a very weak "MAYDAY" signal. It took almost an hour before the significance of the signal was realised and a search and rescue operation was started.