

SYNOPSIS

The accident was notified to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) at Southampton on 26 July 1996 and an investigation commenced on the same day. The investigation was carried out by Mr J Stuart Withington, Principal Inspector.

The pelagic freezer trawler ATLANTIC PRINCESS was fishing off the coast of Mauritania and approaching the end of her first voyage to these waters. The accident occurred while she was making one of her last hauls before proceeding to Las Palmas to land her catch. It happened when one of the crew, the Third Engineer Officer, opened the side door of a Refrigerated Sea Water (RSW) tank to flush it out prior to it being loading with freshly caught fish.

Shortly after opening the tank's side door the Third Engineer collapsed. Unaware of the reasons, several of his colleagues went to his assistance. By the time they realised that the fumes emerging from the tank were toxic, several other members of the crew had also been overcome. The situation was eventually brought under control but not before three seamen had been killed and six injured.

The investigation found that the deceased and injured had succumbed to the effects of breathing toxic fumes which had built up in the sealed RSW tank. Laboratory tests have revealed that in high ambient temperatures, toxic gases including hydrogen cyanide, are generated by the growth of bacteria in spoiling fish and sea water. This combination of factors had arisen in the RSW tank on board ATLANTIC PRINCESS which had been left unventilated and unrefrigerated for several days before the accident.

The investigation has resulted in recommendations being made to improve both the design of freezer trawlers and on board operating procedures.