

Synopsis

This accident was notified to the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) by the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) at Aberdeen at 0115 on 11 March 1997, and an investigation commenced the same day. It was carried out by Mr O Brown, Inspector, with contributions from Mr K Dixon, Principal Inspector, and experienced fishing vessel skippers.

On 10 March 1997, the 19m wooden fishing vessel WESTHAVEN AH190 was fishing the Fladen Grounds in the North Sea with a crew of four. Weather conditions were good and a slight swell was running.

She capsized at about 1010 while attempting to pull her port trawl door clear of a seabed obstruction which was subsequently found to be the PIPER to Flotta 30" pipeline.

The Coastguard was alerted to an emergency by the transmissions of an Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB). This beacon was registered, incorrectly, to a fishing vessel called WESTHAVEN FR375. When this vessel was found safe and well at 1209, the MAYDAY was lifted. However, distress signals continued to be received from the beacon at irregular intervals, (determined by the frequency of satellite passes) and, at 1551, the MAYDAY was reinstated when it became evident that the transmissions were coming from another source. Later that same afternoon the existence of another WESTHAVEN, registration number AH190, became known. Only then did it become apparent that this was the missing vessel.

A search was begun and continued throughout the night and into the next day. On 11 March the wreck was located on the seabed and positively identified by remotely operated vehicle (ROV). This survey also showed that the port trawl door had become fast on the pipeline. One body was seen and saturation divers recovered the body of the Skipper. The search for survivors was abandoned when the liferafts were discovered still attached to the wreck.

On 1 May the MAIB carried out a further survey of the wreck to help determine the cause of the accident and establish why the liferafts failed to operate. The survey vessel and the remotely operated vehicle were provided by Elf Exploration UK PLC whose willing help is acknowledged.

The Inquiry found that WESTHAVEN capsized as her crew attempted to free the trapped port trawl door from the PIPER to Flotta 30" pipeline. Excessive force exerted by the port trawl warp on the port gallows, caused by a combination of winch pre-tension, swell and propeller thrust, pulled the vessel over.

In May 1997 the MAIB issued a Safety Recommendation to the fishing industry advising skippers of the dangers involved when fishing close to pipelines and recommending them to contact the Coastguard should their fishing gear become fast on the seabed.

In March/April 1998 a Fatal Accident Inquiry into the deaths of the crew was held in the Aberdeen Sheriff Court and the fresh evidence to emerge during this Inquiry has been incorporated into the report.

The report contains 14 recommendations.