

LIFEBOAT DRILLS

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TO SAVE LIVES, NOT TO HARM THEM

EVERY YEAR, LIFEBOAT ACCIDENTS CONTINUE TO HAPPEN, WITH SOME LEADING TO SERIOUS INJURIES AND OTHERS EVEN RESULTING IN DEATH. THE LOSS PREVENTION TEAM AT BRITANNIA HAS BEEN INVESTIGATING LIFEBOAT ACCIDENTS AND NOTICED THAT A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF THESE ACCIDENTS OCCURRED DURING LIFEBOAT DRILLS OR INSPECTIONS. THEY ALSO FOUND THAT THERE WERE ACCIDENTS INVOLVING THE LIFEBOAT EQUIPMENT, RELEASE MECHANISMS AND EVEN THE WIRE ROPES¹.

In one lifeboat drill fatality case, the investigation report from the Maltese Flag Marine Safety Investigation Unit (MSIU) revealed that the lifeboat's wire ropes were inferior in break load strength to the ones recommended by the manufacturer. Another contributory factor in this incident was that severe corrosion had degraded the core condition of the lifeboat fall wires. This corrosion was mainly due to lack of maintenance, which had caused the wires to part² while the lifeboat was suspended in midair. This shows how important it is for crewmembers to carry out maintenance of the lifeboat equipment according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The equipment's maintenance schedule must be incorporated into the vessel's Planned Maintenance System (PMS) and qualified shore service providers must be used for the required tests.

There was another tragic incident a few years ago which took place during a lifeboat recovery. The incident report stated that the Bosun was cranking the manual winch handle when the electrician unknowingly started working on the winch's electrical switch panel for hoisting function. Once power was regained, the winch handle spun off at high speed, striking the Bosun on the head.

Although limit switches are installed to isolate the power supply to the winch when the cranking handle is inserted for manual operation, there is always a risk that the limit switch may be bypassed by the user from the switch panel. This shows how important it is to have a well-established communication system, such as verbal exchange over walkie-talkies, between all the crewmembers involved in the lifeboat drills. This must be in place before starting any actions and would certainly help to ensure that nobody is exposed to any unnecessary risks.



¹Lloyd's Registers : Insights into the causes of lifeboat accidents

²Marine Safety Investigation Report no. 05/2014 by Transport Malta Marine Safety Investigation Unit

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AS CREWMEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN MORE LIFEBOAT DRILLS, THE GREATER THEIR MENTAL AND MUSCLE MEMORY WILL DEVELOP TO GIVE THEM MORE CONFIDENCE TO REACT DURING EMERGENCIES.

Another important point is that risk assessments should be conducted before any lifeboat drills. These assessments should cover any probable scenarios, proper log-out-tag-out permits, proper supervision and understanding the work assigned to each crewmember at the time of operation.

In some ports, the Master is not allowed to launch the lifeboats within port waters due to traffic movements. The Master would then have to carry out lifeboat launching at the anchorage or just outside of port limits, where currents, tides, traffic or sudden changes to weather can pose tremendous risks to crewmembers. The master should therefore plan the drills well in advance in order to avoid any last minute commitment to meet the deadlines for lifeboat drills, while eliminating conflict with crew rest hours, operational needs and vessel's short turnaround.

During drills, sometimes a lifeboat may come to a sudden stop during the recovery operation. While dealing with the cause of the problem, the crew inside the lifeboat should be informed of the situation and reminded to stay calm. In any event, they should only exit the lifeboat after it has been safely housed.

Overall, responsibility for safety in lifeboat drills always lies with the Master. Lifeboat drills are intended to provide important training but in many recent cases, the crew are reluctant to take part in drills as they are wary of the risks involved. However, as crewmembers participate in more lifeboat drills, the greater their mental and muscle memory will develop to give them more confidence to react during emergencies.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Follow manufacturer's guidance on the parts purchased
- Use qualified service providers for annual lifeboat servicing
- Have a structured, planned maintenance system (PMS)
- Carry out risk assessments prior to each operation
- Implement a proper log-out-tag-out permit
- Establish proper communication among team members
- Know the duties of each crewmember during lifeboat drills
- Schedule drills in advance

BRITANNIA HAS PRODUCED THE FOLLOWING GUIDANCE:

BSAFE case study 14: Accidental Release of A Lifeboat
<http://ow.ly/4rJt30smZyf>

Risk Watch: Maintenance of Lifeboats and Life rafts
(Survival Crafts)
<http://ow.ly/oEIT30smZxy>