

**Fire on board and the subsequent sinking of the locally licensed fishing vessel
“Chow Wah Tsai” in waters south of Wanshan Qundao, China on 18 August 2003**

1. The Incident

1.1 At about 2300 hours on 18 August 2003, a fire broke out in the engine room of the fishing vessel “Chow Wah Tsai” (Figure 1) while it was returning to Aberdeen from Wanshan Qundao, China at an approximate position 22^o 02’ N 113^o 57’ E. The fire spread rapidly and went out of control. All 6 crewmembers on board abandoned the vessel and escaped into the sea without wearing any lifejackets. The Master, the Engineer and 2 crewmembers clung onto a wooden plank as floating aid, while 2 other crewmembers were holding onto a rope tied at the starboard forward of the vessel to remain afloat. Only 4 crewmembers were rescued. The Engineer and 1 crewmember were lost into the sea and were not found at the time of writing this report. The vessel was destroyed by the fire and later sank in the waters off Wanshan Qundao.

2. Findings

2.1 While it is believed that the fire had originated from inside the engine room, due to lack of substantial information or corroborative evidence the exact seat and cause of the fire cannot be ascertained.

2.2 The investigation into the incident has identified that the late detection of the outbreak of the fire had contributed to the fire getting out of control and spreading quickly to the accommodation and wheelhouse deck, making it impossible for the crewmembers to access the life-saving appliances, such as lifebuoy and life-jackets, stowed on board the vessel.

2.3 It is also considered that the lack of strategically stowage of life-saving appliances, i.e., stowage that can allow easy access during emergencies, had to a certain extent attributed to the casualties.

3. The Lessons

3.1 Important lessons should be learnt from this incident :-

- (i) carrying out frequent inspections on engine room or other machinery spaces where engines/machinery are in operation. Such inspections are vital for the early detection of any mal-functioning of machinery or electrical appliances that may give rise to fire or explosion risks; and

- (ii) appropriate stowage of life-saving appliances in easily accessible locations during emergencies. Reference should be made to Marine Department Notice No. 35 of 2003 dated 30.3.2003 which promulgated the proper stowage and donning of lifejackets on vessels.

- (iii) fishing vessels to be considered for installing appropriate type of fire detectors in the engine room, should such spaces be unmanned for a prolonged period in the normal operation of the vessels.



Figure 1