

MARINE DEPARTMENT NOTICE NO. 93 OF 2019

(Navigational & Seamanship Safety Practices)

Missing of a Locally Licensed Auxiliary Powered Yacht in the South China Sea

The Incident

1. A Hong Kong locally licensed auxiliary powered yacht departed from Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong on 1 October 2015 to Subic Bay of the Philippines with the estimated time of arrival on 4 October 2015. There were five sailors on board including the skipper. About 8 hours after its departure, the Hong Kong Observatory issued a tropical cyclone warning alerting that a tropical depression named “Mujigae” had been formed near the Philippines and was heading northwest. On the third day of the yacht’s voyage, the yacht encountered “Mujigae” and did not arrive at Subic Bay Yacht Club of the Philippines eventually with all five sailors missing.

2. The investigation into the incident revealed the following safety issues:

- (a) the sailors did not prepare well for the intended high sea voyage:
 - (i) there was a lack of appropriate communications equipment for the intended voyage. The only long range communication equipment, i.e. the handheld Isatphone was not an approved equipment for marine use and therefore its performance might be adversely affected by severe sea and weather conditions;
 - (ii) the yacht company failed to monitor the movement of the yacht at sea by establishing an effective communication procedure in advance; and
 - (iii) there was no equipment such as MF radio, Inmarsat C, NAVTEX and weather facsimile receiver on board to receive updated weather information.
- (b) the sailors were not aware of the yacht’s acceptable operating environment limit (e.g. wind force and wave height) despite knowing that there was a typhoon in the course of the yacht;
- (c) a yacht of 17.75 metres in length overall requires a person holding a valid local certificate of competency as a Grade I pleasure vessel operator (Grade I COC) on board. However, the skipper of the yacht was not a Grade I COC holder qualified to operate the yacht; and

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- (d) the emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) of the yacht used an outdated Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number which had been assigned previously to a vessel already deregistered from the UK. Using an EPIRB with the outdated MMSI number caused difficulty to identify the yacht in the first place and confused the search and rescue operation.

Lessons Learnt

3. In order to avoid similar accidents in future, attention is drawn to the following important points:

- (a) Before sailing to high sea, sailors of a yacht should:
 - (i) carry long range communication equipment such as DSC HF Radio, Inmarsat C and / or other approved satellite telephony which are designed to work under adverse weather condition;
 - (ii) carry equipment for receiving updated weather information, such as Inmarsat C, NAVTEX and weather facsimile receiver; and
 - (iii) establish an effective communication procedure with shore;
- (b) a yacht should always be manned in accordance with the requirements of the Merchant Shipping (Local Vessels) (Certification and Licensing) Regulation by a qualified operator while underway; and
- (c) any onboard EPIRB should be set properly with an official assigned MMSI number. Outdated MMSI numbers shall never be reused for other vessels.

Agnes WONG
Director of Marine

Marine Department
Government of the HKSAR
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