

Missing of auxiliary powered yacht “141839” in the South China Sea on 3 October 2015.

1. The incident

1.1 One Hong Kong locally licensed auxiliary powered yacht departed from Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong for her destination Subic Bay of the Philippines on 1 October 2015. There were 5 sailors on board including the skipper. A tropical cyclone warning had been issued by Hong Kong Observatory alerting that a tropical depression named “Mujigae” was formed near the Philippines. The yacht did not arrive at Subic Bay Yacht Club of the Philippines and went missing with all 5 sailors.

1.2 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, 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 etc. 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) the 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. However, the skipper was not a Grade I competent holder qualified to operate the yacht; and

- (d) the EPIRB of the yacht used an outdated MMSI number which was assigned previously for a vessel already deregistered from UK. Using an EPIRB with outdated MMSI number had caused difficulty to identify the yacht in the first place and confused the search and rescue operation.

2. Lessons learnt

- (a) The sailors of yacht should prepare well for intended high sea voyage, including preparation of long distance communication equipment, maritime safety information receivers and ship shore communication procedures;
- (b) Sailors of yacht should be always reminded themselves of the operational limitation of their yacht in adverse environment conditions, and avoid to sail into typhoon area;
- (c) The yacht should be always manned adequately by qualified operators while underway;
- (d) An EPIRB used on board should be set properly with an updated registered MMSI number.