

SERIOUS MARINE CASUALTY

Serious Marine Casualty: Allision with a closed lock gate

What happened?

A coaster heading for the Kiel Canal (NOK) was navigating the Kiel Fjord without pilotage before daybreak. VHF radio contact concerning the NOK pilot's scheduled embarkation shortly before approaching the NOK lock was made between the officer on watch on the bridge of the ship and the pilot watch station about 1.5 hours before the subsequent accident occurred. The latter enquired about the ship's estimated time of arrival (ETA) at the pilot boarding point. After the officer on watch, who had never sailed through the NOK before, specified the relevant time, the pilot watch station stated that the pilot would embark there at the time in question. However, the coaster passed the pilot boarding point without any reduction in speed about 70 minutes later, turned into the approach to the NOK lock shortly afterwards and then sailed directly for the closed and appropriately illuminated lock gate without having first taken a pilot on board. The vessel traffic service and the pilot watch station urged the officer on watch to turn back on VHF. However, the latter ignored the corresponding requests. The ship inevitably struck the lock gate shortly afterwards. A crash-stop manoeuvre initiated at the last moment prevented the lock gate from being breached. The accident did not result in any injuries, nor did it harm the environment.

Why did it happen?

- The voyage planning and the written orders of the master concerning watch operations did not contain any information or stipulations for requesting the NOK pilot, the procedures to be followed when approaching the pilot boarding point or the specific characteristics of NOK lock operations. The officer on watch had no knowledge in this regard due to the lack of previous canal passages. The master's written orders did not contain any instructions as to when he should have been called to the bridge prior to the canal passage, either.
- They had neglected to change ship's time on board the coaster back by one hour to the local time applicable in Germany's territorial sea punctually before entering Kiel Fjord. The officer on watch and the pilot station inevitably talked at cross-purposes when agreeing on the time at which the NOK pilot would embark based on the officer on watch's ETA. Based on local time, this meant that the coaster would actually reach the pilot boarding point one hour earlier. However, since the pilot station was not expecting the ship to arrive until an hour later at this point, a pilot boat had not yet been dispatched to the ship. It is highly likely that the officer on watch on the bridge of the coaster began to assume that the pilot would not board until they were in the lock for this very reason, i.e. because no pilot boat was encountered far and wide when they reached the boarding point.

- The officer on watch was evidently not aware of the significance of the signals controlling access to the lock. He may have assumed that the conspicuous red warning signals on the lock gate indicated the rear end of the open lock chamber rather than the closed lock gate.

What can we learn from this?

- Careful voyage planning, its control by the master, as well as full awareness and observance by officers on watch is of great importance for the safe navigation of the ship. Rather than focusing merely on the listing of waypoints, voyage planning must also describe the specific characteristics to be observed on the respective voyage for the area of operation (e.g. reporting procedures, the system of pilotage, rules for using locks).
- The master's written orders for watchkeeping on the bridge are an indispensable supplement to the voyage planning. The orders must clearly and unambiguously state the circumstances under which the master is to be called to the bridge. Insofar as events that are or can be based on a time schedule are concerned (e.g. entry into an operating area, approach to a pilot boarding point), relevant stipulations must be clear from the written order.
- To prevent misunderstandings in connection with an ETA or other time-dependent information, the ship's command must make absolutely sure that ship's time is punctually adjusted to the local time applicable before contacting vessel traffic services and pilot stations in the respective operating area.

Who can implement/observe it?

Ship's commands, ship operator offices responsible for ISM