

PERSON OVER BOARD

Very serious marine casualty: Death of the skipper of a sailing yacht after falling over board

What happened?

About one and a half hours after the start of the trip, the skipper of a 13.50 m commercially operated sailing yacht fell overboard after a failed sailing manoeuvre and drowned. The casualty had gone onto the foreship because the sheets of the headsail had become entangled there. After freeing the lines, he straightened up at the same moment as the wind came back into the sail, the yacht heeled and picked up speed. The skipper fell backwards over the railing into the water. He had not secured himself with a lifeline and was not wearing a life jacket. The fellow sailors did not manage to bring the casualty back on board, even though he was at the stern of the yacht shortly after. One of them went into the water himself to help, lost contact with the yacht and was rescued suffering from hypothermia. A rescue helicopter recovered the skipper but all attempts at resuscitation were unsuccessful.

Why did it happen?

- The ship operator's risk assessment identified the danger of going overboard and drowning and listed the wearing of a lifejacket and the use of a lifeline as protective measures. Appropriate equipment was available on board. The measures provided for in the risk assessment were ineffective because they were not implemented.
- Before the start of the trip, the skipper did not assign emergency roles and did not carry out a person-over-board exercise. Although the yacht was equipped with a lifesling and other rescue equipment, the crew members were not aware of this equipment due to an incomplete safety instruction. They acted spontaneously and used their individual skills to the best of their ability during the emergency situation.
- Other factors contributed to the circumstances of the accident: Deficient crew management; low water temperature (approx. 5 °C); difficulties in detaching rescue equipment from the railing; poor clothing considering the weather conditions as well as fatigue and both physical and mental condition of the skipper; going overboard due to improper fastening and sinking of the bathing ladder used as a means of reboarding.

What can we learn?

- The risk of fatal person-over-board accidents in recreational boating is increased on sailing yachts (compared to motor yachts). Failure to observe safe working practices and good seamanship can have serious consequences. Self-protection measures against falling overboard and drowning should be taken to reduce the likelihood and severity of such accidents. This should be consistently observed by all persons on board, especially during sailing manoeuvres and when going onto the foreship, as well as in adverse weather conditions (wind, swell, cold temperatures).

- A lifejacket can slow hypothermia in the water and keep a casualty above the surface long enough to allow time for an effective rescue that does not put others in danger. In addition, lifejackets also assist in rescuing people from the water by having their lifting loop or an eyelet (e.g. metal or webbing) provide an attachment point for rescue equipment.
- The application of the principles of crew management (see also STCW Code Table A-II/1 on Bridge Resource Management) and the implementation of a safety culture on board yachts prevent unsafe situations and unsuccessful manoeuvres. This can reduce the risk of serious accidents. Skippers should ensure and also allow that fellow sailors (are able to) carry out work on the foreship independently, so that he or she can maintain an overview of the overall situation from the cockpit and remain able to act in an emergency.
- Unfavourable weather conditions and a person in the water without a life jacket mean a serious emergency. The fact that one of the fellow sailors went into the water himself to assist the skipper could have had tragic consequences. Self-protection of those still on board should always take priority over rescue, so that the safety of those providing assistance is not jeopardised and they do not find themselves in an emergency situation.
- The only way to prepare for an emergency is to go through drills, establish emergency roles and familiarise yourself with the equipment on board, especially as part of a comprehensive safety briefing before the start of the trip. Going over manoeuvres (e.g. person over board) in theory cannot replace a practical exercise. Fellow sailors should be put in a position to be able to deal with emergency situations independently and efficiently even if the skipper is unavailable. Accident statistics show that it is often the skipper themselves who goes overboard and then has to be rescued by fellow sailors.
- Beyond the current equipment requirements, a proven and practicable operating procedure for the rescue or recovery of (helpless) persons from the water should be implemented on yachts. This procedure should be known to all persons on board and be feasible and applicable for them. Furthermore, there should always be the possibility to get back on board with a means of reboarding that can be operated from the water.
- Life-saving equipment must be quickly accessible and ready for use at any time in an emergency. They should be kept near the helm and only if necessary additionally secured with quickly and easily detachable cords or rubber expanders.

Who may benefit?

Skippers, water sportsmen and -women, operators and owners of pleasure crafts, sailing schools