

Investigation Report No. 15/19

Date: 30.01.2020

Serious marine casualty

Fire in the area of the deck cargo on board the container ship YANTIAN EXPRESS in the Atlantic Ocean on 3 January 2019

1 Summary

A fire broke out on the German-flagged full-container carrier YANTIAN EXPRESS early in the morning of 3 January 2019 in the deck cargo in the area of cargo hold 2. The ship was located in the North Atlantic at this point in time. She was scheduled to reach Halifax on the following day.

The ship's command sounded the general alarm immediately after the fire was discovered. After it was mustered, the crew began to fight the fire in bay 12. Prevailing wind strengths of 8-9 Bft and low temperatures made the conditions for fighting the fire extremely challenging. This and the fact that the supply of compressed air cylinders for the breathing apparatus was almost exhausted resulted in the discontinuation of active firefighting measures in the evening of 3 January 2019. The crew of the YANTIAN EXPRESS continued to fight the fire with passive measures, such as aligning the nozzles so as to cool down the area and for hydro shields, even though the weather conditions deteriorated further on 4 January 2019.

The shipping company contacted the salvage company, SMIT Salvage, early on and consequently the tug SMIT NICOBAR, which was on her way to Mexico, had already been diverted to the YANTIAN EXPRESS on 3 January 2019. The tug arrived at the scene late in the evening of 4 January 2019 and started with fighting the fire with the help of her firefighting monitors.

Despite the work of the SMIT NICOBAR, the fire continued to spread through the deck area of cargo hold 1. After consulting with the shipping company, the master of the YANTIAN EXPRESS gave the crew the opportunity to transfer to the SMIT NICOBAR due to the overall situation, which 11 of the 22 crew members accepted. They were transferred safely with the help of a liferaft.

Since a further deterioration in the weather was predicted, the shipping company decided that all crew members should abandon the YANTIAN EXPRESS. Operating systems were left running wherever possible because a return was planned. The burning ship was abandoned in the afternoon of 6 January 2019.

The MAERSK MOBILISER arrived at the scene on 7 January 2019 and took charge of fighting the fire. Since the situation on board appeared safer than before on

9 January 2019, five crew members transferred to the YANTIAN EXPRESS voluntarily and resumed operations there. The salvage master began his work on the distressed ship along with the crew. The first step was to establish a towing connection with the MAERSK MOBILISER at the stern.

On 10 January 2019, the DALIAN EXPRESS took the other crew members of the YANTIAN EXPRESS on board to take them to Halifax.

When the SOVEREIGN arrived at the location of the tow on 15 January 2019, the SMIT NICOBAR continued her original voyage. Firefighters, salvage experts and additional equipment arrived at the ship, still burning, with the SOVEREIGN. The firefighters started to fight fires in individual containers. Using the larger pumps now available, it was possible to lower the water level in cargo holds 1 and 2.

SMIT Salvage announced that the containers stowed on the deck of the YANTIAN EXPRESS were extinguished on 21 January 2019. The towing operation to the Bahamas began on 22 January 2019. The YANTIAN EXPRESS continued her voyage unassisted from 1600 on 24 January 2019. She was escorted by the tugs. The last burning containers in cargo hold 1 were also extinguished and all the fire pumps were stopped on 26 January 2019.

The tow arrived at the roadstead of the port of refuge, Freeport (Bahamas), on 30 January 2019. Entry was permitted on 4 February 2019. The unloading operation for the containers in the area of cargo holds 1 and 2 began on 19 February 2019.

On 3 January 2019, the shipping company (Hapag-Lloyd) notified the BSU about the outbreak of the fire. The shipping company co-operated with the investigating agency very closely in the ensuing period.

2 Safety Recommendation

The following safety recommendation does not constitute a presumption of blame or liability.

2.1 The shipping company, Hapag-Lloyd

The Federal Bureau of Maritime Casualty Investigation recommends that the shipping company, Hapag-Lloyd, enter the drencher system for the transverse bulkheads in some of the cargo holds on the YANTIAN EXPRESS in the fire and safety plan, even if there is no requirement to enter this part of the equipment. This entry should also be made for other ships belonging to the shipping company with a similar installation.