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सं./ No :

दिनांक / Dated:

File No. 11-NT (21)/2012 **Dated: 07.05.2013**

Casualty Circular No.12/2013

Case of suicide attempt by Junior Engineer by jumping overboard from a Container ship

1. What happened?

On 23rd April 2012 at 1330hrs, a Junior Engineer, 23 years of age, was reported missing from a container vessel. Vessel was en route from Singapore to Hong Kong and in the South China Sea, at the time of the incident. A man overboard search was carried out and the Junior Engineer was recovered safely after about 19 hours in water.

2. How it happened?

2.1 The vessel had sailed from Singapore on 22nd April 2012 for Hongkong. On 23rd April 2012, the Junior Engineer was last seen, by the Oiler, taking the engine room noon counters in the ECR, until 1215 hrs. At 1322hrs, the Chief Engineer had asked the 2nd Engineer to call the Junior Engineer in ECR as the noon readings had not been recorded in the ECR log. The 2nd Engineer called in the engine room, using the manual call button but the Junior Engineer did not respond to the call. The 2nd Engineer was asked by the Chief Engineer to call the Junior Engineer's cabin and then to check in the engine room. While the crew were being enquired about the whereabouts of the Junior engineer, the Steward in the galley, reported that the junior engineer had not been seen for lunch. Later, it also emerged that the Junior Engineer had not taken his breakfast as well. When the Junior Engineer could not be located, public address announcements were made. A thorough search was carried out on board and general emergency alarm was sounded at 1345 hrs.

2.2 As the search did not reveal the whereabouts of the junior engineer, man overboard was suspected and vessel was turned to her reciprocal course at 1415 hrs. Man overboard message was broadcast at 1422 hrs and surface search was started. The search was assisted by four merchant vessels and a New Zealand SAR air craft. At 1912 hrs, one of the ships assisting in the search reported to have seen a black working shoe in the water. The container vessel proceeded to the location and searched the area in the vicinity, until the next morning. At 0610 hrs on 24th April 2012 search was resumed. The Junior Engineer was sighted in the water at 0630 hrs by the lookout posted on the forecastle and was seen to be waving. A lifebuoy was released and rescue boat launched for recovery of the Junior Engineer. He was safely recovered on board at 0720 hrs on 24th April 2012.

2.3 The Junior Engineer was reported to be suffering from high fever and trauma but otherwise appeared to be physically fit with some chafing marks on his upper arms, neck and waist. His throat was sore, he could not speak well and his eyes were red and burning. He was sent to a hospital in the next port of call, for a checkup and repatriated home, after being declared medically fit.

2.3 The Junior Engineer had joined the vessel on 3rd March 2012 and had been on board for a month and a half at the time of the incident. During the first month, he was kept on "day work" where he was either asked to be standby and observe the work being undertaken in the engine room or being assigned certain basic functions such as taking soundings of fuel tanks etc. Typically he was working from 0700 hrs to 1700 hrs, with an hour's break for meals. Thereafter he would be required to come to the engine room along with other senior engineers between 2000-2100 hrs, for UMS rounds. The junior engineer was, as per company's report, allowed, access to the e-mail and telephone facility, which he used, to be in contact with his family and friends ashore.

2.4 Prior to joining the vessel, the Junior Engineer had undergone one- year pre-sea training course of 1-year duration. His pre joining medical records indicate that he was in good health and the tests for drug and alcohol were negative. A review of his educational background revealed an excellent academic performance throughout. He was noted to have achieved an average score of 91% in his Class X exams and 88% in his Class XII exams. He had also achieved an average score of 79% in his final year of engineering studies. Pre-induction tests carried out by the employers indicate an average performance in terms of engineering knowledge, reasoning and general aptitude.

2.5 A psychometric test was also carried out during his selection process which had revealed;

"Reserved in nature but assertive, at times he may become adamant if he feels strongly about something. Impulsive. No element of anxiety. Liberal in thinking, open minded, has an inquiring mind. May tend to question traditional methods and press for new approaches. Tends to be more self directed than most people, likes to express his views and opinions, influence others. Moderate self control (may need to be more receptive and accommodating of others' views and opinions). Mild amount of negative thinking."

2.6 The junior engineer was interviewd in the hospital and he confirmed that he had jumbed overboard by himself. He informed that he was not happy with his performance on board because of which he was frustrated. He also stated that he was making mistakes and was pointed out at times. He felt upset and could not bear the mistakes that he had made. He confirmed that there was no other reason for jumping overboard apart from his own frustration. He further confirmed that he had gone to the engine room at 1200hrs, after the safety meeting and then went to the steering flat at 1215 hrs, from where he went to the poop deck and jumbed overboard from the port side.

2.7 The junior engineer was advised to take up a shore job, related to shipping, for the next one year and not take up an onboard assignment till his mind was settled and he had been able to overcome the incident.

3. Why it happened?

A review of the Junior Engineer's educational background indicates that he generally had a good academic performance throughout his education. Typically the Junior Engineer's work schedule involved standing by and observing work being undertaken in the ER or being assigned basic functions. The basic nature of the work, coupled with the feeling that he was not learning fast enough, and his performance had been criticized at times, was too frustrating for him, and may have lead him to take the drastic step of ending his life.

4. Lessons learnt.

4.1 Trainees should be explained the necessity of appropriate familiarization and supervision for their own safety and the safety of the vessel, before they are given independent responsibilities. Performance of trainees should be regularly monitored as per the structured training program and they should be given regular feedback on their progress and future planning for their training.

4.2 Senior officers should be aware of the background of trainees who are being trained by them, their strengths and weaknesses and adopt training methods accordingly. Trainees, particularly those on their first ships, should be closely supervised and provided guidance to cope with the new environment.

4.3 Ship owners/managers/operators should evolve psychometric testing methods which would identify traits that would lead to suicidal tendencies in the marine environment. A brief of the findings of the psychometric test, along with the possible ways in handling difficult cases, should be made available to the Master and chief engineer of the vessel.

(Capt. Harish Khatri)
Dy. Director General of Shipping [Tech]