



South African Maritime Safety Authority

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Lessons learned from a recent sailing vessel casualty

TO TRAINING INSTITUTIONS, SAILING CLUBS, SAFETY OFFICERS, SAMS A EXAMINERS AND PRINCIPAL OFFICERS

Summary

This notice brings to the attention of the sailing fraternity lessons learned from a recent casualty investigation into the capsizing of a catamaran

1. Background

A catamaran was on passage to Mossel Bay, on autopilot, in deteriorating weather conditions with a strong cold front approaching the area. The yacht was under full sail with both engines operating at full power.

The skipper believed that he would reach Mossel Bay before the passage of the frontal system; however the catamaran was capsized by a strong unexpected and unpredicted gust of wind. This may have been what Meteorologists refer to as a Gust Front which produces winds much higher than predicted over a short period of time. This is not an unusual phenomenon in this area.

The crew managed to board the liferaft and activate the EPIRB.

The skipper's wife was persistent in raising the alarm when she realized the vessel was overdue.

Fortunately no lives were lost.

2. Lessons learned

Had the catamaran been on hand steering and the sheets manned, it may have allowed a timeous reaction to the unpredicted gust of wind.

The liferaft was lashed to the cabin, it was unreachable with the boat capsized, and when the lashing broke, started drifting away and was nearly lost, as a result of the painter not being attached to the vessel. The life raft should be mounted in such a position that it can be released, even when the vessel is capsized, using a senhouse slip to secure it, with the painter securely attached to the vessel. In the case of displacement vessels that are likely to sink, it is recommended that the life raft be secured using a hydrostatic release, which will release the life raft when the vessel is 4m below the surface, on the way down!

The regulations for this type of liferaft do not require space blankets. It would be prudent to keep sufficient space blankets in the capsizing bottle or the "grab bag" easily accessible even with the vessel capsized

Fortunately catamarans are almost unsinkable due to the nature of their construction. The antifouling had been painted with blue paint. Red would have been a better option from a search and rescue perspective. When the air search was being undertaken, the white shiny gelcoat reflected the light best and was the easiest to see from the greatest distance. The tunnel area was extremely slippery and difficult to board and remain onboard in the sea conditions. The use of non-slip deck paint would have made remaining on the hull much easier for the crew.

The EPIRB had been registered with ICASA but not with the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC). The Merchant Shipping (EPIRB Registration) Regulations, 2002, require that the EPIRB is registered with MRCC. One of the requirements of registration is that an emergency telephone number ashore is provided. A large number of EPIRB activations are false alarms. When an EPIRB is activated MRCC will call the number provided, cross check that the EPIRB belongs to that vessel and enquire if the vessel is at sea in the area from which the alarm is received. This allows a much faster activation of the Search and Rescue Services (SAR). Time is of the essence when reacting to such an emergency.

It is important that somebody ashore knows where you are and when to expect you back. In this case it was the persistence of the Skippers wife that she believed all was not well onboard that contributed to the safe rescue of the crew.

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