

Safety Report

Idyllic to disaster in moments

Narrative

A Queensland businessman had a 15.7 metre aluminium motor cruiser built in 2007 with the intention of using it for fishing charter work in the future. She was built to commercial standards but the fit out was not yet to the standard required for commercial operations. She lacked items such as a fixed fire extinguishing system for the engine room, a functional fire alarm for the engine room and had no life raft.

In March this year the family of 4, (father, wife, boy and girl) was on a pleasant cruise past some of the more isolated sections of the Queensland coast.

At approximately 12 noon she was steaming north and the computer screens went blank and power dropped out. The master tried to throttle back the electronic controls with no response. The emergency engine stop was used. The master lifted the engine hatch to find the engine room full of smoke with smoke coming out the vents so the engine room was sealed. The family was mustered on the fore deck, fitted with lifejackets and EPIRB activated. The master attempted to fight the fire but was driven back. The master went to the cabin roof to launch the dingy but as there was no power the davit did not work. The master finally managed to release the dingy, which promptly landed upside down. The wife and 2 children jumped from the bow into the water. The 8 year old boy caught his leg on the railing during his jump and fractured his femur.

The dingy was righted but could not be bailed out in the 2 metre sea so the family sat in a semi submerged dingy waiting for help. After approximately an hour a sailing ship was seen on the horizon about 5 miles south, alerted with a flare and came to the families rescue.

A rescue helicopter was arranged and arrived about 45 minutes later but it was too rough to lower the paramedics to the yacht to treat the child. They headed for calmer water. The Coast Guard arrived and transferred the paramedics to the yacht. Another ship transferred the wife and 2 children to shore so they could get in the rescue helicopter. They were then transferred to hospital where the broken femur was operated on.

An air search 3 days latter could find no trace of the \$1.2 million ship.

Lessons

1. Good owners and masters always ensure that their vessels are safe before undertaking any type of voyage, by conducting regular checks of all equipment located on a ship and ensure such equipment is in good condition.
2. Had the master installed both the fixed fire extinguishing system for the engine room and a functional fire alarm, this costly and potentially deadly incident may have been avoided.

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3. Be aware that re-opening fire-affected spaces will carry a risk of worsening an existing fire or reigniting an extinguished fire, when fresh oxygen is re-introduced. Such spaces should be left to cool before opening.
4. The vessel should also have had a quick release davit enabled for the dinghy, allowing for a quick and safe departure from the stricken vessel.
5. Regardless of a master's competency and experience, unexpected events happen at sea. This incident highlights the unexpected nature of marine incidents and the potential for dire consequences.