

# Operating lifeboats

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**T**he risks associated with launching, running, and recovering a modern ship's lifeboat are well documented. Although the design and manufacture of the lifeboat and its ancillary equipment has evolved to meet the minimum requirements of international conventions, many mariners have been killed or injured in accidents during the operation of these lifesaving appliances, as documented in this issue of *Seaways*. The functional, seaworthy, open wooden boat has been replaced by the totally enclosed shell of brittle glass-fibre, with seakeeping qualities unsuitable for conditions beyond the most sheltered waters. Increased reliance on technology has resulted in complacency throughout the industry, and the tacit acceptance of marginally inadequate survival equipment.

Modern vessels are awash with checklists and procedures developed to ensure that officers and crew correctly carry out proper maintenance and operation of the lifeboats and launching gear. The average foreign-going crew, especially those supplied by third-party ship managers, are equally laden with certificates of proficiency for many tasks, including those pertaining to marine emergency duties and survival craft. Enhanced focus on personnel training, voluminous regulatory instruments, and the pedantry of port state inspections, have failed to curb the increase of dangerous incidents involving the lifeboat. While regulatory intervention is substantial, the number of fatalities and serious injuries to crew members continues to rise, most often the result of accidents occurring during emergency drills due to failure of on-load release gear.

A culture of blame exists within the shipping industry; therefore, it is often easy to find a scapegoat for anything that goes wrong. Although investigations generally try to find the root cause of an accident without finding fault, recommendations often focus on the need for more training, or better maintenance.

In general, the usual underlying suggestion is that the accident would have been preventable had the crew member been more qualified, or carried out timely and proper maintenance. Rarely would a manufacturer of equipment be held accountable, and in any case, the argument would return to the crew's perceived lack of understanding of the manufacturer's operating manual and maintenance instructions.

Today, with our high standards of education, our advanced technology and our outstanding success at international cooperation, we still seem unable to deal effectively with basic operational problems. Perhaps if we could analyse the problems from the perspective of an experienced mariner, we might discover some solutions to make the lifeboat safer. Unfortunately, the trend toward a reduction in manning levels of ships has eroded the foundation of practical seamanship, while simulators and videos take the place of real physical experience.

It is probable that few bureaucrats, even those involved in the development of regulations applicable to lifeboat safety, have ever descended a ship's side at night in a near gale, totally dependent on the ability of the boat's crew to release the hooks at just the appropriate moment. It is open to debate whether the designers of modern lifeboat equipment understand what a bowman experiences while trying to grasp a swinging steel block from the small hatch of a pitching boat. In either case, untimely concerns about the status of the on-load release gear may cause a dangerous distraction at a critical moment.

## Drawn from experience

To complain about deficient lifesaving appliances and regulations is probably futile, unless one can provide a viewpoint based on personal experience or detailed knowledge. The preceding opinions have been fostered through many years of participation and observation of shipboard drills; fortunately I have no personal experience of serious injuries or significant damage. Statistics focus on near misses and incidents, but rarely

quantify potentially dangerous scenarios averted by appropriate and timely action. The following is one of these.

Although it has been some time since I last crewed a lifeboat as officer-in-charge, my memories are still vivid. Some years ago, while anchored in a Canadian harbour, we finished up an emergency drill by launching the port boat. Without going into detail on the routine matters, suffice it to say that all of the normal commands and duties were carried out with a professional can-do attitude. Some obstacles were evident during the course of the drill.

The lashings were released and a seaman climbed on to the cabin of the enclosed lifeboat in order to prevent the wire gripes from fouling on the boat's hatches and handrails. As a precaution, he wore a safety harness but it kept hanging up on various fittings as he crawled around. Down on the boat deck, the crew passed the painter forward, but the only practical place to secure it was just forward of the accommodation block. The lead was nearly vertical, and would have been insufficient for launching at sea with headway on the ship. Once everyone was out of the boat, the bosun lifted the brake handle and the boat started down to the embarkation deck. It settled hard against the fishplate with plenty of weight on the tricing gear.

The crew were ready to let-go the tricing pennants as a matter of routine, but I suggested they rig the bowsing tackles first. The heavy manila tackles, with their double

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blocks and open hooks, were dragged out of the boat, and hooked on. They hove them tight, but there were no suitable fittings on the boat or the davits to make them fast. Instead, they took a couple of half hitches on the lower fall blocks and then slipped the tricing pennants. With the bowsing tackles taking the strain, it was now safe to embark. On the order, 'let go the bowsing tackles', the crew fore and aft struggled with their lines. The half-hitches had jammed and nearly had to be cut free. From my position at the steering console, I verified that the crew were finally ready, then advised the second mate on deck to lower away.

We hit the water with the engine running and the falls released simultaneously as required. The engine was kicked ahead with the rudder over, but the mechanical release gear for the forward painter had jammed. The bowman had to remove his lifejacket in order to climb through the small forward hatch to manually cast off the painter. At the same time, the floating steel blocks dragged across the cabin top, with the forward hook fouling on the starboard hand rail. One of the crew climbed out of the side hatch and shinned along the narrow gunwale to set it free. We finally pulled away from the ship and carried out some man-overboard drills while a few of the crew took turns manoeuvring the boat. The biggest problem with driving the boat was the inability to see through the perspex window, which had been rendered translucent from years of tropical sunshine and abrasive cargo dust. One had to climb on the seat and open the hatch, in order to peer over the top of the coaming.

By the time we returned to the ship's side, the wind had picked up and the sea was becoming choppy. The crew confirmed that the fore and aft hooks had been reset correctly. I manoeuvred into position and the bow was quickly hooked on. As the stern pitched up and down, the seaman wrestled with the swinging block to engage the after hook. He tried three or four times to hook on, but the release gear would not engage. We had to let go forward, manoeuvre clear of the ship until the hooks were reset, and then try again. The second time we were successful, and with both falls hooked on, the bosun hoisted us clear of the water. Half way up the ship's side, the winch stopped. We waited pensively while swinging in the wind, wondering what the problem could be. The air-driven winch was on its last legs, and required excessive air pressure to hoist the boat. It took a few minutes for the pressure to build up before we could resume our slow and erratic ascent. Eventually we reached the embarkation deck.

Everyone was anxious to get out of the boat, but the distance between the ship and boat was about one and a half metres. A couple of the crew were very uncomfortable with the gap, but managed to jump out anyway; it was a better option than staying in the lifeboat. If the winch had been functioning properly, we would have disembarked at the final stowage position; but as it was, we all had to take turns cranking the boat in by hand.

There was no great drama that fine day, nor any injuries or damage. Eventually, some of the problems were sorted out, but not all. Out on the open sea, during a real emergency, any one of these seemingly insignificant problems could have led to tragic consequences. This scene is replayed daily in one form or another aboard ships all over the world. Sometimes the drills are flawless, but other times they are problematic; nevertheless, it is time to take a full, pragmatic look into the issue of lifeboat design and safety.

## Natural instincts

The mariner of recent history, with instinctive aptitude and practical skills, has gradually been replaced by a watchman forced to follow regulations designed more often for the subliminal benefit of various stakeholders within the industry. If we are having difficulty finding a way forward, perhaps we should look back to a time when things did work relatively well. From that point, we can

chart a course that will safely take us clear of the dangers. Ocean industries are becoming significantly more complex, therefore a satisfactory solution for one sector will likely be unsuitable for another. Although an evacuation system may soon be designed to meet the needs of all seagoing structures, it is not yet available. Until that time arrives, it may be prudent to return to a more traditional lifeboat system for conventional ships.

The versatility of an open boat, staunch and strong, rigged with a toggle painter and manual hooks, and operated by a skilled crew, has long been ignored by the industry. Strong gravity davits, tricing pennants, and bowsing tackles have given way to unmanned launch and recovery systems. Knotted manropes, considered to be a superfluous hindrance, no longer hang from the davit span. Although it remains a requirement to manoeuvre the lifeboat for training purposes, crews are now advised to board the lifeboat via the side ladder. Authorities, in their great wisdom, consider the davit launch of a manned lifeboat to be an unacceptable risk.

Seafaring has always been a dangerous profession, but to interfere with the natural instincts of experienced seafarers through over-regulation and illogical design is foolhardy. Perhaps it is time for the policy makers and captains of industry to listen to the valuable advice of experienced mariners. Their intimate knowledge of the sea may be the key to solving difficult problems associated with ships' boats.

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