

Going the distance



safety at sea

Seminar hears concern over cruise operations in remote areas...

WITH AN uncanny sense of timing, the Nautical Institute last month staged a seminar on the theme of cruiseship safety in remote areas, just hours after news broke that a passenger vessel had run aground.

Mercifully, all 281 people aboard the 5,975gt Majestic America-owned vessel *Empress of the North* were safely evacuated to a ferry and other smaller vessels that were in the vicinity, while the ship was refloated on the following day and returned to the port of Juneau.

The evening seminar, held aboard the HQS Wellington in London, was naturally abuzz with the incident.

First of the speakers was David Jardine-Smith, the Maritime & Coastguard Agency's acting head of search and rescue (SAR) operations. He had been involved in a recent International Maritime Organisation review of the regulations for remote areas, which had been prompted by concerns that passenger ships are getting larger, carrying more and more people, and venturing into areas beyond their traditional trade.



The US Coast Guard cutter *Liberty* helps to evacuate the 248 passengers from the vessel *Empress of the North* after it ran aground off the SE coast of Alaska last month. Some 50 volunteer boats went to the aid of the 2003-built vessel after it began to list when the double hull was breached. An investigation into the causes has been launched

PICTURE: REUTERS

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One of the first things IMO did was define what is meant by remote areas, Mr Jardine-Smith explained: 'We tend to think of the high latitude areas, the adventure cruises into the Arctic and Antarctic, but in the IMO work, we came up with the definition that a remote area is one where there are insufficient SAR facilities to recover everyone at risk within likely survival times.'

The IMO came up with contingency planning guidance that resulted in a Maritime Safety Committee circular which 'beefed-up' existing guidelines for passengerships, setting out rescue coordination centre reporting requirements.

Other recommendations in the IMO review included:

- operators should 'pair' voyages so that two or more ships keep relatively close to each other in case of an emergency
- lifesaving appliances should be carried or enhanced, particularly in high latitude areas
- operators should have a contingency plan for the area, assessing the risks and how to deal with hazards should they happen, including identifying other assistance that may be available

Mr Jardine-Smith questioned what might happen if a ship had to be evacuated in polar waters. 'The question I would like to leave hanging is whether existing survival craft designed for worldwide use are sufficient for high-latitude cruising,' he added.

He also highlighted the major problems confronting crew on other ships when trying to rescue evacuees in remote regions.

Grant Laversuch, operations director of Saga Shipping — which runs three medium sized passenger ships whose itineraries include remote regions — presented the seminar with an operator's perspective. 'In Antarctica, there's no permanent population, nothing in the way of SAR facilities so you very much rely on your own resources and the resources of other ships.'

He said the Association of Antarctic Tour Operators had been formed to do what he described as an exceptionally good job in putting together safety and environmental rules that operators could work to — including an IAATO contingency plan.

For Antarctic trips, Saga has introduced vari-

ous supplementary arrangements. The company employs a retired British Antarctic Survey master as an ice pilot, and an additional deck officer and nurse.

The final speaker was Nautilus UK member Captain Martin Scott, recently retired from Windstar Cruises. He was master on a Windstar 6,000 tonne passengership with 127 passengers and 91 crew aboard when the engine room caught fire 'plumb in the middle of Pacific'.

'The fire, he recalled, had 'wiped out the whole engine room' and all power was lost immediately, with the exception of an emergency generator. Fearing that the bottom was going to go out of the ship, the crew evacuated the passengers some 14 miles from land.

The crew of Indonesians and Filipinos were well trained, said Capt Scott. He had ensured that boat drills were conducted every week, and this paid off during the emergency. 'One of the things I found was that you didn't have time to micro-manage the crew at that stage,' he explained.

'As captain, I didn't have time to manage the fire-fighting or anything — you have to definitely rely on all your crew knowing their jobs, because you're so busy organising everything — including trying to get someone to help you, because when the ship was 14 miles away from land, the wind slowly got up during the day to a force 9 from the south east.'

Once the wind got up, his ship drifted about 25 miles and it was not until later in the evening that a navy tug arrived.

The ship was a write-off — but all the passengers and crew escaped with, as Capt Scott put it, 'not a fingernail broken'.

However, he added, 'what I find I'm doing is "what if" all the time. What if it had been a force 9 in the morning? What if I had just got out of the port on the island of Raiatea, which is surrounded by extremely unpleasant coral reefs which go down vertically so forget about dropping your anchors if you get in trouble? What if I'd been one mile off those reefs when this accident occurred? It's very difficult — there's no perfect answer to these things.'

That pretty much summed up the consensus of the evening.