

## **Passenger Ship Safety in Remote Areas**

On 14<sup>th</sup> May the NI **London Branch** welcomed members and guests to HQS Wellington for an evening debate on the safety of passenger ships in remote areas. The subject was particularly relevant with the grounding of the US passenger Ship “Empress of the North” in Alaska earlier in the day.

Philip Wake, Chief Executive of the Nautical Institute introduced the panel of speakers; David Jardine-Smith, acting head of SAR at MCA; Grant Laversuch, Operations Director of Saga Shipping and Captain Martin Scott, Master of the HCMM.

Opening the debate, David Jardine-Smith outlined the recent IMO passenger safety review which looked at IMO regulations to see if they were fit for purpose for the new larger vessels. The emphasis of the review is on casualty prevention, with ships having survivability built in enabling them to return to port without having to evacuate the customers.

Outcomes of the review were: guidelines on external support; remote area planning; cold water survival guide; major incident training guidelines and guide to recovery techniques.

Many factors influence survival times in polar waters – weather conditions, clothing, food and, more importantly, additional ships in the vicinity. Of course remote areas do not just apply to high latitudes. The definition of a remote area is one where there are insufficient SAR facilities to recover everyone at risk within likely survival times. Mid ocean areas and some low latitude coasts are not equipped with dedicated SAR facilities.

Two circulars from IMO - MSC Circular 1184 containing Enhanced Contingency Planning for passenger ships operating in areas remote from SAR facilities and MSC Circular 1182 Guidance to Recovery Techniques using equipment currently available - contain much advice for the mariner. However, is this enough for remote areas?

Grant Laversuch gave a practical assessment of operating cruise ships in remote areas and how Saga Shipping minimises the associated risks. Most Antarctic cruises are to one area – the Antarctic Peninsula at latitudes similar to Bergen/Trondheim in Norway. However, there the similarities end. There are no SAR facilities and no resources in Antarctic Peninsula. Although only staying a short time (3-4 days) in the area, Saga invested a great deal in training, equipment and risk assessments before sending their vessels there.

The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) provides guidance to those organising and conducting tourism in the Antarctic. Partly for environmental and partly for

safety, only 100 persons are allowed to be landed at one time, and only one ship allowed to be at one site at one time.

Each vessel must lodge a contingency plan with IAATO, giving details of itinerary, communication details, facilities on board, etc., and agreeing to sign up to assist all other members operating in the Antarctic.

All passengers are equipped with extra thermal clothing and landing operations personnel have appropriate qualifications. Before landing passengers, equipment must be put ashore to ensure survivability for 3 days in the event of a sudden deterioration in weather conditions. This includes tents, food, first aid equipment and satellite telephone and Grant illustrated this with slides of the landing operations in the Antarctic Peninsula.

In contrast to the cold Antarctic, Captain Martin Scott gave a vivid description of a major incident on a rather smaller passenger vessel in the tropical Pacific Ocean. The vessel carried 220 persons (passengers and crew) and suffered a major engine room fire shortly after leaving one of the Polynesian islands. The fire destroyed a large part of the engine room, resulting in a loss of most of the facilities. The vessel was abandoned in early morning in calm weather, with an experienced crew well used to small boat handling. Although a small inter-island ferry managed to assist, the nearest SAR help was 120 miles away. The outcome was fortuitous as no lives were lost, but what if the fire had occurred farther out into the Pacific?

During the lively question and answer session after the presentations, concern was raised on the ability of merchant vessels to rescue large numbers of passengers, given that there is limited SAR equipment on board. Questions also concerned coastal states in remote areas setting up the infrastructure for rescue facilities. In Antarctica, there is no coastal state. Would the treaty organisations act as a coastal state and put SAR resources in place? Even the UK has no resources in place around the coast for the rescue of large numbers of passengers, relying on other organisations and ships to assist.

However, the discussion ended by noting that definable remote areas, such as the Antarctic, were perhaps less of a problem, because of vessel pairing, co-operation between operators and self regulation and that putting SAR units in place isn't practicable and probably isn't necessary. The sheer size of the new generation of passenger vessels creates problems anywhere, not just in remote areas.

**Harry Gale, MNI**

