

Fire tragedy a reminder of Safety Management System requirements



An incident causing the death of a person is always tragic but imagine you that are held responsible for the death of 34 people and you could have done more to protect them.

Fire aboard Conception

On 2 September 2019, 34 people perished in a fire aboard a 22.8 metre flagged passenger vessel *Conception* off the coast of Santa Cruz, California.

At the time the fire broke out, five of the crew members were asleep in the crew berthing area on the upper deck. One crew member and 33 passengers were asleep in the bunkroom below.

A crew member on the upper deck noticed a glow outside and realised a fire was rising up from the saloon compartment directly below.

The master was able to get a distress message to the coast guard, whilst the crew members from the top deck tried to access the saloon deck, but it was blocked by fire and thick smoke.

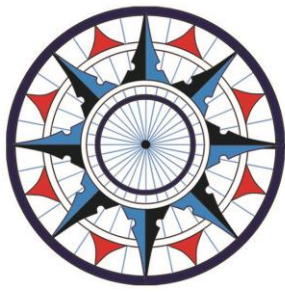
By the time the Coast Guard arrived 90 minutes later, the vessel could not be saved and all on the Saloon deck perished.

Findings

Although, there was no root cause found, there were a range of failures contributing to the deaths, including:

- The electrical distribution system inadequate;
- Unattended batteries being charged;
- Improperly discarded smoking materials;





- The lack of smoke detectors on the saloon deck delaying fire detection and the growth of the fire;
- The absence of roving patrols delayed the detection of the fire;
- The bunkroom escape arrangements were inadequate, as both means of escape led to the same point and fire blocked their escape;
- *Conceptions'* operator provided ineffective oversight of the vessels operations, placing the vessel crew and passengers at risk;
- No Safety Management System in place, therefore, no risk identification or hazard reduction methods implemented to minimise the risk of fire.

Reminder

Under Section 4 of Marine Order 504 – Certificates of operation and operation requirements – national law, requires that when applying for a Certificate of Operation, a declaration is required for the requirements to have a Safety Management System in place for each vessel that the application relates.

Recent Australian Maritime Safety Authority inspection campaigns have across 326 vessels, uncovered some 829 instances of poor fire-fighting maintenance.

AMSA identified the most common types of non-conformances to include:

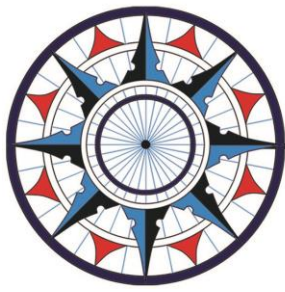
- Fire pumps unable to supply adequate water pressure to fight a fire;
- Fire Extinguishers not maintained in accordance with AS1851:2012;
- Poorly maintained fire insulation, protection and suppression systems;
- Emergency shut-offs not functioning as required; and
- Fire Detectors not functioning.

Recommendations

It is highly recommended to:

- Review your risk assessments for operation regularly and update your safety management plans as required.





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- Review your escape management plans and conduct exercises to ensure that the crew understand their roles and passengers are aware of the requirements;
- Consider the watch requirements for early fire detection;
- Ensure that Fire-fighting equipment are tested and maintained;
- Ensure that smoke systems are installed, maintained, tested and allow for proper coverage; and

Ensure that the electrical system is correctly installed and can cope with large number of potable charging devices, such as phones, tablets, cameras and computers that all use lithium-ion batteries.



Written by:

Anthony (Mick) Apps
Pacific Maritime Lawyers
Law Graduate

