



Having an abandon ship drill anytime soon?

Make sure the ship's crew conduct a thorough visual inspection of the lifeboat and davit installation and a 'test lowering' prior to operating the lifeboat with crew onboard.

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Lifeboats are designed to save lives, but over the years many serious casualties have occurred during drills, routine maintenance operations, and inspections of davit suspended boats. These accidents have also resulted in seafarers losing confidence in the lifeboat launching systems.

In a recent safety alert, the US Coast Guard describes yet another lifeboat incident - one that could have had a catastrophic outcome if it had not been for the quick action of a crew member who activated a davit winch brake lever from the ship's deck. In this particular incident, failures in the remote control wire arrangement, probably due to poor spooling of the wire, were identified as the causal factors. However, the investigation also identified that the crew did not follow company policy, which required a 'test lowering' of the lifeboat without crew prior to embarking crew.

This recent incident serves as a reminder of the importance of visually inspecting lifeboat and davit installations prior to testing with crew members onboard and to ensure that the crew is familiar with company policy related to life-saving appliances testing. The Coast Guard further advises ships' crews to pay particular attention to the following inspection points:

- Verify the proper spooling of the remote control wire, expand inspection as necessary.
- Verify the proper position of the remote control wire weight. If the weight is very close to the top of the lifeboat, this may indicate the remote control wire is too long.
- Verify material condition of the shackle that connects the pull cable to the remote control wire within the lifeboat. These steel shackles can corrode in the elements and may be overlooked during weekly/monthly/annual inspections.

Please refer to the US Coast Guard's [Marine Safety Alert 07-22](#) for additional details of the incident and the lessons learned.

Drills must be safe

Regular and frequent abandon ship drills is the best way to ensure seafarers are familiar with the functioning and operation of the life-saving appliances on board their ships. Drills improve their ability to cope with and handle complex emergencies and provide an opportunity to verify that the life-saving appliances are working and that all associated equipment is in place, in good working order, and ready for use.

It is a requirement under SOLAS Reg.III/19.3 that every crew member shall participate in at least one abandon ship drill every month and that the drills shall, as far as practicable, be conducted as if there were an actual emergency. While this means that the drill should cover all relevant steps of an emergency, including notification and mustering, donning of lifejackets, and the launching of life-saving appliances, it does not mean that unnecessary risks should be taken. The lowering of a lifeboat with its full complement of persons is an example of an element of a drill that may, depending on the circumstances, involve an unnecessary risk.

Abandon ship drills must therefore be planned, organised and performed in accordance with relevant company policy so that the recognized risks are minimised. Procedures for holding safe drills should be included in a ship's Safety Management System (SMS) should be evident from workplace assessments adjusted to the relevant life-saving appliance. The IMO's guidelines on safety during abandon ship drills ([MSC.1/Circ.1578](#)) should be incorporated in the procedures, noting that:

- **When drills are to be performed with persons on board the lifeboat**, it is recommended that the boat be lowered and recovered without any persons on board first to ascertain that the arrangement functions correctly. In this case, the boat should then be lowered into the water with only the number of persons on board necessary to operate the boat.

- **Before conducting drills**, it should be checked that the lifeboat and its equipment have been maintained in accordance with the ship's maintenance manuals and any associated technical documentation, as well as noting all the precautionary measures necessary. Abnormal conditions of wear and tear or corrosion should be reported to the responsible officer immediately.
- And, last but not least, **drills should be conducted with an emphasis on learning** and be viewed as a learning experience, not just as a task to meet a regulatory requirement to conduct drills. Lessons learned in the course of a drill should also be documented and made a part of the follow-up shipboard training discussions and the planning of the next drill session.

Further reading

- Gard publications:
 - [Failure or accidental release of the lifeboat hooks can be fatal](#)
 - [New IMO procedures for maintenance and inspection of life-saving appliances](#)
 - Loss prevention poster - type: asset-hyperlink id: 4f658b941808426086f7f121ee164d2d
 - Case study - type: asset-hyperlink id: a82516f14af04649b8e297b6349723d2
- US Coast Guard Marine Safety Alerts:
 - [07-22: Unexpected Dangers: Lifeboat Remote Control Wires](#)
 - [03-20: Check your lifeboat cables](#)
- IMO: [Prevention of accidents involving lifeboats](#)