

SAFETY ADVISORY BULLETIN 97-1

Washington State Board of Pilotage Commissioners

December 1997

In an incident this Spring, a Washington State pilot trainee fell at night from a ship's pilot ladder into heavy seas. The incident could easily have resulted in serious injury or death. Fortunately, the trainee was rescued by the pilot boat after some searching without any serious injury, although he certainly was wet and cold. The incident appears to have primarily resulted from the improper deployment of the pilot's ladder, which was compounded by the failure of the ship's crew to react to the emergency. This incident is brought to your attention to remind you that it is important to your personal safety to check the positioning of a vessel's pilot ladder and the readiness of emergency support before you embark/disembark a vessel, particularly in adverse or limited visibility conditions.

Description of the Accident:

The incident occurred at night in heavy swells. Instructions had been given to rig the bottom of the ladder 3-4 meters above water level to avoid contact with the pilot boat and to keep the large swells from engulfing and yanking the ladder sideways. Upon debarkation, it was discovered that the ladder had been positioned only 1-2 meters above the water, but the pilot and trainee debarked anyway. The pilot reached the pilot boat safely, but the trainee lost his footing when the ladder was jerked sideways by a swell and fell into the water. Although a life ring, water light and crew were positioned by the vessel's ladder in the event of an emergency, no one on the vessel reacted to deploy the equipment for the fallen pilot. Fortunately, through the efforts of the pilot boat and a healthy portion of luck, the pilot was located in the dark swells and rescued.

Lessons Learned:

- The embarkation/debarkation of a vessel by the pilot's ladder can be a very hazardous activity, particularly given adverse weather conditions or poor visibility. Although the vessel is required to properly secure the ladder in a manner that will keep the treads horizontal (see **SOLAS** Convention Annex, Chapter V, Regulation 17), it is up to the pilot to check in advance to be sure that it is properly secured at an appropriate height for the conditions. In this case, the pilots continued to debark even though they were aware of the improperly rigged ladder rather than wait for the condition to be corrected.
- In adverse weather conditions or poor visibility, the pilot should consult with the master before embarking/debarking the vessel to be sure that appropriate emergency equipment is available and that the crew is ready to deploy it.