Contributed by Rodney Smith (Amended)

Safety at Sea is really important to all those involved at the sharp end of the fishing industry, mainly because of its very high accident and death rates. Fishing is reckoned to be one of the most dangerous occupations in the world, and continual on board safety improvement is paramount. This can be achieved through regular checks and modifications of onboard systems, making sure all boats meet safety regulations, ensuring that emergency equipment is in good condition and in date and introducing written risk assessments with all the crew.

Written risk assessments can be completed in two ways. Firstly, you can do them yourself using the Seafish Fishing Vessel Safety Folder, which contains blank risk assessment forms as well as forms for such things as equipment record-keeping and other relevant vessel details. The Folder comes with an explanatory guide. There is a link to the Seafish website on the SFA home page. Secondly, you can do your risk assessments through the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation (SFF).

The SFF has recently launched an internet-based On-board Safety Scheme (OBS). The scheme is based on a Danish system that is currently used by over 400 fishing vessels and that has helped the Danish fishing industry to reduce accidents and deaths dramatically. For vessels wishing to use the OBS, the SFF offers SFA members a representative that can come and assist with the risk assessment free of charge. The OBS allows skippers to input all their vessel's lifesaving appliance renewal dates, survey dates, lifting equipment records and much more. At the end of the onboard risk assessment, a signature sheet is printed out that all crew are expected to sign. As a fishing vessel's risk assessment is only valid for a year, the system will send the skipper a renewal reminder ahead of expiry. There is a small subscription charge for the OBS, but in my opinion it is money well spent and gives you peace of mind. I would encourage you to contact the SFF for more information, either directly or via the link on the SFA home page.

Note that written risk assessments will eventually become a regulatory requirement in the under 10m fleet, just as they already are for larger boats. And that may be sooner rather than later. Fishermen have an opportunity to get a step ahead of the regulations, and it is always better to jump than be pushed.

The statistics show that the under 10m fleet has by far the worst accident and death rates. As most of these boats are single-handed, the correct safety equipment and safe working practices are an absolute must. They should be at the top of everyone’s list of priorities.

During Shetland’s disastrous winter of 2010-11, when we lost three very experienced and capable creel men within a space of eight and a half months, we all had a stark reminder that even the most experienced of fishermen can face unexpected and possibly disastrous events. Safety has returned to the forefront of many fishermen’s minds, and it's very important to keep it there. The main points that I took from the tragedies were, firstly, the ability to raise the alarm in an overboard situation, and secondly, the possibility of re-boarding the vessel if in such a situation.

Firstly, let’s deal with the ability to raise the alarm in an overboard situation. Simply put, all your safety equipment is aboard the vessel and you are not, and if you have fallen or been dragged overboard it’s most likely that your boat will be steaming away from you. So for the single-handed operator, with nobody else available to help, you will be in a very serious situation. If you are wearing the correct safety equipment, such as fastfind, personal epirb or the MOB Guardian system, and of course some type of flotation device, the situation will be much less serious. With this type of equipment you have a real chance of survival, although note that you have to activate fastfind and personal epirbs. The MOB Guardian system not only raises the alarm automatically but can also stop the boat's engine. That gives you a very real chance of getting back to the boat, knowing all the while that help is on its way. Hope vastly increases your chances of survival. Fastfind, personal epirb and the MOB Guardian system will pinpoint your exact location, effectively removing the Search part of Search & Rescue. Time saved means lives saved.

The second very important point is the possibility of re-boarding your vessel. Some sort of re-boarding aid is an essential, and older vessels can be retrofitted with this type of equipment. Re-boarding ladders come in many shapes and sizes; the difficulty is that when permanently deployed they risk being in the way during fishing operations and can be damaged in port. You could also consider ladders that could be deployed from the water when required. Whichever type you choose, you must be confident in its ability to assist you in getting back to safety.

On some new builds, re-boarding ladders are installed flush to the hull and that would be the best solution. On older vessels, where this is not possible, you would have to make alternative arrangements.

Nowadays more and more fishermen are wearing personal flotation devices. The RNLI have worked very hard on this and have identified through trials and surveys what they believe to be the most suitable types for fishermen. A link to the RNLI fishing safety website can be found on the SFA homepage. These modern lifejackets are not bulky, uncomfortable or expensive. You get used to wearing them very quickly. It’s another issue that may become regulatory, and again I would urge all fishermen to keep ahead of changes in the law.

And finally I would encourage anyone involved in the fishing industry to read the MAIB safety digests. These are published twice yearly and contain accident reports and investigations, backed up with recommendations. These digests are a good read and a great source of information. When confronted with a problem that has caused damage, physical harm or death in the past, knowing precisely what went wrong could give you the chance to take early and effective action to prevent history repeating itself. A link to the MAIB website is shown on the SFA home page.

As far as personal safety is concerned, and in all walks of life and industry, you have a responsibility to yourself, to your family and to the authorities that would come to your assistance if the worst should happen. You should always endeavour to be ahead in all aspects of the safety game.

BE SAFE AT SEA!

Rodney Smith