

Circular 17/24
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Use of Tethered (Hadrian's) Rail Systems

Background

The availability of tethered rail systems on Pilot boats has been in place for many years, with the primary aim of allowing a harnessed deck hand to operate 'hands free' to manage ladders, equipment and assist pilots.

During man overboard scenarios, the rail system offers huge advantages in aiding the recovery and securing a 'Mate-saver' pole to the rail whilst guiding a casualty to the stern of the boat. This lends to the practicalities of the rail height being for recovery operations, rather than a height to prevent a tethered fall overboard.

Whilst many pilots welcome to utilise tethering on as part of their established transfer process, to others, it can be viewed as a potential distraction from viewing the integrity of the Pilot transfer arrangements, ensuring the exposure time of the operation remains sensible and a vessel remains on a potentially compromised lee course for as short as time as practicable.

Advice

Given that routinely the boarding and landing process only commences when the Pilot boat has settled alongside in the lee of a vessel, there is no evidence to indicate an incidence rate of untethered falls from Pilot boats. Tethering on should not be considered as a mitigation measure against operating in proper lees and maintaining suitably qualified and experienced Coxswains and Crew.

Users should be aware that the clipping/unclipping process in the forepart of the boat, alongside bag transporting/transferring, can create a distraction at a critical point when it is **essential that the Pilot's full focus** should be centered upon safe transitioning to/from the ladder.

In evaluating the use of the rail system the following should be considered:

- Is the 'D ring' in the PPE (Pilot coat/lifejacket) proven for suspension as a deck safety harness?
- Are the lanyard clips capable of deliberate release under load?
- What are the recovery arrangements and practicalities of recovering someone suspended overboard the Pilot boat?
- Are there sufficient lanyard runners to cover the number of pilots and bags without excessive delay?
- Is the rail system tested and at a practicable height to prevent a fall overboard?
- What length are the fitted lanyards in relation to the user height and 'D ring' position?
- What is the walkway width, given that Pilot Boats built since 31 December 2018 require a minimum width of 400mm? (Section 27 - Workboat Code 3)

These elements should be routinely known by the user and reconciled into an individual's boarding process if they are considering utilising the tether system.

ISO 12401:2009 – Deck Safety Harnesses details “Because a correctly worn deck safety harness and safety line will, in normal circumstances, prevent the wearer from entering the water, no consideration is given to the towing position after a fall” – which highlights potential for other hazards to overcome depending upon the number of persons present onboard and that this standard does not mitigate the risk for boarding and landing scenarios as not continuously connected.

Recommendation

The decision to tether on should be made by the Pilot, based on their experience and familiarity with the equipment. The previous guidance below, presented by the UKMPA in 2013 remains valid and Pilots should consider all factors when making their decision on whether to tether on.

Given the bespoke nature of the role, a Pilot is uniquely qualified and positioned to identify holistic risks that may require them to conduct a Dynamic Risk Assessment as each occasion demands.

It is essential to ensure the integrity of pilot transfer arrangements and complete the operation in a timely manner.

Any local practices must be supported by an appropriate and shared risk assessment that addresses whether the pilot boarding location is not compromised by extended timeframes or lead to unintended consequences set against current practices.

Footnote

Since the introduction of the UKMPA Pilot Ladder Reporting app, data shows that non-compliant transfer arrangements and the risk of falling from height are the greatest threats to pilot safety. It is critical that pilots do not allow other aspects of the transfer process to compromise their focus on ensuring the vessel's arrangements are safe.

References

[The Workboat Code Edition 3 - 2023](#)

[MAIB Report 4/2012 - Lion](#)

[ISO 12401:2009 Small craft — Deck safety harness and safety line — Safety requirements and test method](#)

[Pilot Boarding and Landing – Use of the Hadrian's Rail Study 2013](#)

Yours faithfully,

The Executive Committee