



ASSESSMENT OF THE RESPONSE FROM THE NATIONAL SEARCH AND RESCUE SECRETARIAT TO MARINE SAFETY RECOMMENDATION M04-04

DISTRESS COMMUNICATIONS AND COORDINATION OF SEARCH AND RESCUE

Background

The *Lady Duck* was an amphibious vehicle based on the conversion of a Ford F-350 truck chassis and arranged to carry up to 12 passengers on combined road and water-borne tours in the National Capital Region and on the Ottawa River. The vehicle was developed and built by the owner and entered commercial service at the start of the tourist season in June 2001.

The *Lady Duck* started the amphibious tour at about 1500 on 23 June 2002, with the driver, 10 passengers and a tour guide on board. When the vehicle entered the water at the Hull Marina, the main bilge pumps were switched on to clear the hull of any shipped water. Because no water was seen to be discharging from the outlets, the emergency bilge pumps were also switched on. Water was then seen to be discharging intermittently from outlets on both sides of the vehicle. The vehicle was driven to the Ottawa side of the river to various points of interest. The river was calm, with waves caused by wakes from boats and other watercraft in the tour area. On occasion, the vehicle encountered waves that washed over the hood and up to the windshield.

Toward the end of the tour, while returning to the Hull Marina, the driver noticed that the front end of the vehicle was floating lower than normal and that water was being continuously discharged from both sides of the vehicle. The driver then ordered the four foremost passengers and the tour guide to move to the back of the vehicle to try to decrease the forward trim.

The forward trim continued to increase and, realizing that the safety of passengers was at risk, the driver instructed the tour guide to tell passengers to don personal flotation devices. The driver then broadcast a MAYDAY on very high frequency (VHF) radio. The situation deteriorated rapidly as more floodwater accumulated in the forward end of the vehicle. The driver then called on the passengers to abandon the sinking vehicle. The driver, tour guide and six passengers managed to get free of the sinking vehicle. The remaining four passengers became trapped under the fabric awning and sank with the vehicle in 8 metres of water.



In addition to this occurrence, since 2000, there have been 10 occurrences involving commercial vessels carrying passengers on the Ottawa River reported to the TSB. As a result of an investigation into one of these occurrences, in which a passenger fell overboard, the Board issued a safety concern that “channel 16 VHF radio communications in the Ottawa area still cannot be monitored by MCTS [Marine Communications and Traffic Services] stations, and that local communications and SAR [search and rescue] resources are not effectively organized or coordinated by CCG [Canadian Coast Guard] SAR.”

In a subsequent TSB investigation into an occurrence involving a passenger vessel, the investigation revealed a similar safety deficiency. Consequently, the Board reiterated its safety concern. The Board further encouraged the CCG SAR organization to “reassess the area plan.” Although the need to address communications and coordination was recognized by CCG and local public protection authorities, no further effective action has been taken to date to address these issues. There have been some efforts by some of the local police and fire services to equip their marine units with VHF radios; however, there is no coordinated means in place to ensure that VHF radio distress calls are monitored and that resources can be effectively organized or coordinated. Consequently, responses to emergency situations on the Ottawa River may not be effectively coordinated.

Board Recommendation M04-04

The National Search and Rescue Secretariat (NSS), an independent government agency reporting to the Minister of National Defence, has responsibility for promoting the national SAR program. The program is a collection of SAR services provided by all agencies and individuals in Canada, regardless of the type of activity or jurisdiction.

Given NSS’s leadership role to work directly with federal, provincial and local authorities, and other organizations, to develop and standardize the quality of SAR services, and mitigate risks associated with an improperly coordinated SAR system, the Board recommended that:

The National Search and Rescue Secretariat, in collaboration with local authorities and organizations, promote the establishment of a system to monitor distress calls and to effectively coordinate Search and Rescue responses to vessel emergency situations on the Ottawa River between Ottawa and Carillon.

M04-04

Response to Board Recommendation M04-04

In a 17 July 2004 letter from the Minister of Defence, the following comments were provided:

- NSS accepts and concurs with the recommendation and will pursue meetings with the relevant authorities to implement it.
- NSS will inform the TSB of follow-up action.

Board Assessment of Response to M04-04

Follow-up information provided by NSS indicates that a working group has been set up by NSS to review the communication and coordination problem on the Ottawa River. Meetings with the four police forces with primary jurisdiction and other authorities have been held. Thus far, it appears that a radio monitoring system for the Ottawa River will be too expensive and not justified. Several options are available to address the issue, including warning leaflets and notices for boaters on the access locks to the river and monitoring of radio communications ashore, possibly by the companies that operate commercial tour vessels during the summer months.

Although initially assessed as Satisfactory in Part, subsequent information received indicates that local police forces have agreed to set up a marine operations coordinating committee to better organize marine operations, including SAR, in the National Capital Region. The committee, known as the National Capital Region Water Safety Committee, met in May 2005 and included the following representatives: police forces for the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, the cities of Ottawa and Gatineau, the municipalité régionale de comté (MRC) des Collines, the RCMP, fire departments, paramedics, boat and yacht clubs, marina operators, power and sail squadrons, Parks Canada, and the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary. The committee, which will meet twice annually, will be investigating and coordinating the different areas of SAR response and prevention.

The committee concluded that the only practical alternative to expanding VHF radio coverage was the use of the 911 telephone system. However, information pamphlets will also be given out and notices will be posted in time for the beginning of the boating season to inform and prepare boaters for emergencies needing external assistance. The proposed action should substantially reduce the risks associated with operating in an area that is outside CCG's continuous VHF radio monitoring. The response, therefore, is considered to be **Fully Satisfactory**.

Next TSB Action: M04-04

No further action is warranted.