The Herald of Free Enterprise Disaster

The Herald of Free Enterprise disaster is often referred to as one of the worst tragedies of its time. From the face of it all, the tragedy appears to have been a case of negligence by officials working on the vessel. However, the cardinal faults laid higher up in the company, social issues such as ignorance towards adopting a safety culture, not adhering to standards and procedures, and unclear definition of roles and responsibilities were all faults which contributed towards the deaths of the 193 passengers.

Events that Occurred

On March 6th 1987, there was a light easterly breeze and the sea was calm. As the vessel departed from the harbour of Zeebrugge, on board there was a crew of 80, 479 passengers, 81 cars, three buses and 47 trucks on board. Upon departure, there was still extra water left in the tanks. Amongst the several crew members directly involved with causing this disaster was the assistant Bosun, namely Mr. Stanley, whose responsibility was to close the bow doors. During the call alert for departure the Bosun himself, left the car deck to go to his assigned station. Diverting the blame, the Bosun later justified his action saying that it had never been his duty to close the doors or ensure they had been closed. Mr. Leslie Sabel, in charge of loading the vehicles, stated that he remained on the car deck until he saw or ‘thought’ he saw Mr. Stanley weave his way through the parked vehicles towards the bow doors. He then proceeded to his assigned position at the bridge ready for departure.

Going back to the arrival, on the day of the tragedy, Mr. Stanley opened the doors on arrival at Zeebrugge and then supervised the cleaning and maintenance duties. Released from this by Mr. Ayling, the Bosun, he went to his cabin where he fell asleep. In a deep sleep, he was not later awakened by the ‘harbour stations’ public address call, alerting crew to take their assigned positions for departure from the dock.
It is important to note that the Herald had newly designed clamshell doors, which opened and closed horizontally. Because as a result of this, Captain David Lewry was unable to see whether the doors were closed. Hence, when the ship backed out and increased in speed, an inevitable bow wave began to build up under the ship’s prow. Travelling at 15 knots, water soon began to break over the main deck at a staggering rate of 200 tons per minute. Like most roll-on/roll-off passenger car ferries at the time, the Herald was a victim of bad design. As these vessels did not have any subdividing bulk-heads, water easily flowed from one end to another. As a result, the ship became unstable and water poured in, eventually causing the vessel to be capsizeing. The disaster unfolded within ninety seconds, just 100 yards from the shore. Eventually, the Herald settled on the seabed at slightly more than ninety degrees.

The final death toll of death was 193; several deaths were as a result of hypothermia whilst suffered by passengers being trapped inside the ship. Upon inspecting the damage, the rescuers almost immediately assumed that the disaster was due to a result of the bow doors being left open [6].