

UK SHIPS PRAISED FOR RESCUE ROLE

Response 'underlines professionalism and skills of MN crews'

SEAFARERS on two British-flagged merchant ships have been praised for their role in rescuing 19 crew from a cargoship that sank in appalling conditions in the South China Sea.

The Chamber of Shipping said the account of the dramatic rescue operation — carried out in 4m seas — 'underlines the professionalism and skill of today's Merchant Navy crews'.

The rescue operation began on the morning of 8 August, when the UK flagged containership Maersk Kendal — a new vessel only 15 days into her first voyage on the Asia-Europe route — picked up a distress call from the Pailin Maritime, a small Thai cargoship carrying logs from the Solomon Islands to Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam.

Although more than 200 miles away, the Maersk Kendal altered course and was the first vessel to arrive at the scene. Captain Glenn Wostenholme began a systematic search of the area, calculating the likely drift rate and direction of any survivors and their liferafts.

After searching for more than four hours, lookouts spotted a couple of empty lifejackets. By now a second British ship — the Rio Imperial, managed by Zodiac Maritime — had arrived at the scene and was assisting with the search operation.

At one stage Maersk Kendal's rescue boat — which had just picked up two survivors — broke down and had to be rescued itself.

In all, Maersk Kendal and Rio Imperial managed to save 19 of the 24 crew from the Thai ship — working against the clock as darkness fell in heavy seas and squally conditions.

'The whole crew was amazing in their preparedness and willingness to get involved,' said Capt Wostenholme, who has served with Maersk since April 1986.

'Everything they did was carried out professionally and as a team. It was the longest day — and perhaps their finest thus far — in their lives.'

He described how two survivors without a liferaft had managed to survive their long wait for rescue: 'Whilst the chief officer and his companion were afloat with only life jackets, amazingly, one smoke float, one rocket, three life buoys and three survival food packs drifted within reach of them. Without them, I have little doubt they would not have been rescued.'

The chief officer, Thanasan Kumsup, told Capt Wostenholme that he had been so concerned about the condition of the 34-year-old Pailin before departure that he sent a diver down to inspect the hull.

Although the diver found nothing amiss, when the Pailin ran into heavy weather a few days later, an area of one of the holds that had been repaired in the past began to leak. By midnight on 7 August, the hull had cracked and the master had to give the order to abandon ship.

Because of the ship's list, it was impossible to launch the port lifeboat — so the crew had swung out the starboard one, but at that moment the ship rolled, smashing the boat. The crew were forced to throw the two liferafts overboard and take their chances in the sea.

PICTURED from top: the rescue underway; rescued crew; and at the naming, left to right: 3/O John Gray; 2/O Stephen Packer; chief officer Michael Minogue; Captain Glenn Wostenholme; Mrs Insook Roussel, 'godmother'; chief engineer Derek Kevin Bunney; 2/E David Burn; 3/E Thomas Dwyer; 4/E Timothy Hadland; and electrician Cristian Rosu

