

Helicopter operations involving Domestic Commercial Vessels

The incident

On 17 February 2021, OTSI received a report of a collision between a privately operated charter ferry and a Blackhawk helicopter operated by Australian Defence Forces. The Blackhawk was hovering in close proximity above the ferry conducting a planned counter terrorism exercise, when a main rotor blade struck the vessel's mast. Following the impact, the Blackhawk made an emergency landing in a public park in Watsons Bay.

Operator follow up

The Chief Investigator requested further information from the ferry operator on the risk management plan in place for the exercise. A review of the information supplied highlighted several areas where risk management processes could be improved.

Vessel – helicopter operations present a distinctive set of risks for mariners which need to be mitigated to ensure safe operations. These risks are not normally encountered in day to day marine operations.

Key points for DCV operators

To provide a safe environment for the crew, vessel, and others in the vicinity of such exercises, effective risk identification and assessment should take place well in advance.

Additionally, relevant authorities such as the Ports Authority of NSW and Transport for NSW, should also be advised by DCV operators of such exercises. This will allow for the establishment of an exclusion zone or an appropriate aquatic licence if needed. In addition, this will enable other vessels operating in the vicinity to be notified.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) provides guidance for vessel – helicopter operations in Marine Notice 09/2016. This Marine Notice contains guidance to ensure vessel – helicopter operations are conducted with a high degree of operational awareness and safety. Aspects to consider include:

- Communication;
- Designated clear spaces on the deck to serve as landing/winch areas; and
- Firefighting and rescue equipment that meets recommendations contained in International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) *Guide to Helicopter/Ship Operations*, 4th Edition, 2008 (ICS Guide).

Safety message

Domestic Commercial Vessel operators intending to conduct vessel – helicopter operations should carry out a risk assessment on the intended operation and put in place procedures to mitigate any identified risks. Marine Notice 09/2016 is the relevant information source for the conduct of a risk assessment into vessel – helicopter operations. Appropriate authorities should also be notified.