

# Safety Advisory SA05/23

## Close quarters situations in the Sydney Harbour area

### Safety message

Sydney Harbour is an extremely busy waterway, used by recreational and commercial vessels, from big ships and high-speed ferries to small powerboats, yachts and kayaks. It has busy navigational channels. The normal collision regulations apply to navigation, with additional local rules to assist in the management of marine traffic.

A recent close quarters situation<sup>1</sup> in Sydney Harbour involving two passenger ferries<sup>2</sup> highlights the importance for all operators to understand and apply the rules, monitor the appropriate radio frequencies, and maintain a proper lookout. This applies particularly in congested areas, such as Sydney Cove and the Sydney Harbour Bridge Transit Zone.

### The incident

On the afternoon of Sunday 4 June 2023, there was a close quarters situation involving MV Collaroy, which was conducting a timetabled ferry service, and a charter vessel, MV Sydney 2000. MV Collaroy was tracking from the west to enter Sydney Cove and MV Sydney 2000 was departing Sydney Cove for a route to the east.

As the vessels approached each other, both Masters performed avoidance manoeuvres, with the vessels coming into close proximity. As the two Masters manoeuvred to avoid collision, a third vessel, a small recreational craft, narrowly avoided colliding with MV Sydney 2000. There were no reported injuries or damage to any vessel.

At the time of the close quarters situation, a cruise ship and fuel barge were berthed at the International Passenger Terminal. The presence of these vessels resulted in a significantly reduced channel for vessels operating to Circular Quay ferry wharves.

### OTSI review

Following notification of the incident, the Office of Transport Safety Investigations (OTSI) requested and reviewed information about the occurrence from the involved operators and the Port Authority of NSW. This review identified that there was a misalignment between the involved Masters' plans, and their expectations of the other vessels' tracking intentions.

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<sup>1</sup> A close quarters situation means a situation in which vessels pass each other, or a vessel passes another vessel, a person or an object, in such proximity that a reasonable person would conclude that in all the circumstances, there was a risk of an imminent collision.

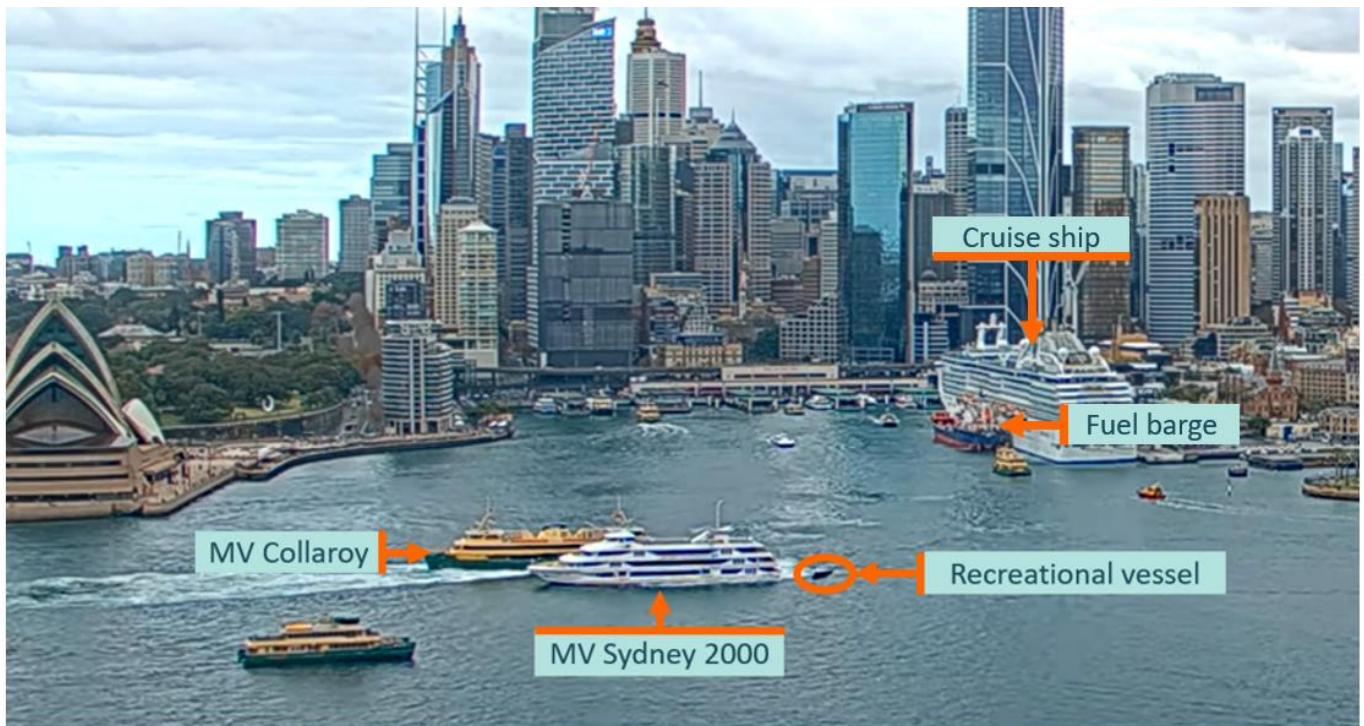
<sup>2</sup> Under the Passenger Transport Act 1990, 'ferry' means-- (a) a vessel that seats more than 8 adults, or (b) a vessel of any class prescribed by the regulations for the purposes of this definition.

The Master of MV Sydney 2000 reported that they planned to pass MV Collaroy starboard<sup>3</sup> to starboard, as they expected Collaroy would be tracking to berth at Wharf 3 Circular Quay.

The Master of MV Collaroy, which was heading to berth at Wharf 3, reported that they planned to pass the other vessel portside to portside<sup>4</sup> as they had observed MV Sydney 2000 alter course to starboard to head east.

With differing plans and expectations between the two Masters, the distance and proximity between the vessels reduced. When it became apparent to each Master that the other was not tracking as expected, both Masters manoeuvred to avoid a collision.

**Figure 1:** Close quarters situation near Sydney Cove, 4 June 2023



Source: WebcamSydney. Image annotated by OTSI.

Following the incident, the Master of MV Collaroy reportedly tried to call the Master of MV Sydney 2000 on 'VHF 13', the radio communication channel for that area of Sydney Harbour, but was unable to raise them. Vessel Traffic Services and the Master of MV Sydney 2000 later reported that the radio call from MV Collaroy was unreadable.<sup>5</sup> The two Masters subsequently communicated via radio regarding the occurrence.

## Key points for operators

Schedule 6 'Requirements relating to Sydney Cove' of the *Marine Safety Regulation 2016 (NSW)*,<sup>6</sup> documents key rules and requirements for operating in Sydney Cove. Sydney Cove is defined as the portion of Sydney Harbour that lies south of an imaginary line drawn from the position of the northernmost fixed red beacon on Dawes Point to the position of the fixed red beacon on Bennelong Point. A supporting map for Sydney Cove navigation rules is published by Transport for NSW (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Starboard is the righthand side of the vessel, when viewed from the back.

<sup>4</sup> Portside is the lefthand side of the vessel when viewed from the back.

<sup>5</sup> Radio readability is the quality of the transmission and the ability to hear what has been transmitted.

<sup>6</sup> <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/sl-2016-0308>

<sup>7</sup> [Navigation in Sydney Cove map \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/navigation-in-sydney-cove-map)

Transport for NSW has published the 'Rules for boating on Sydney Harbour'<sup>88</sup> which includes information about operating in the Sydney Harbour Bridge Transit Zone, give-way rules and ferry operations.

OTSI identified increased traffic in Sydney Harbour and ineffective communication between vessels as key contributory factors in close quarter incidents through a systemic investigation into incidents between 2010 and 2016.

The investigation was launched in response to a significant increase in the number of reported close quarters incidents, giving rise to concerns of systemic safety issues associated with ferry operations in Sydney Harbour. OTSI noted that congestion in Sydney Cove increased when cruise ships and servicing vessels, such as fuel barges, were present.

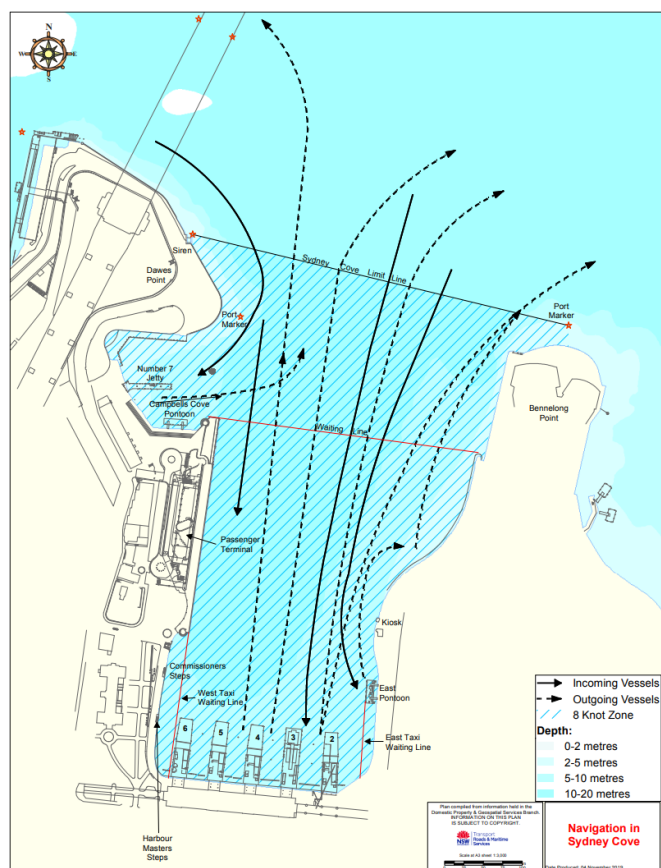
OTSI's objective was to determine the extent of these incidents, identify any commonality, identify the contributory factors, and provide recommendations to prevent or minimise a recurrence.

In addition to communications and congestion, the investigation also identified scheduling and timetabling of ferry services, and ferry design as contributory factors to close quarters incidents.

Through the investigation, OTSI made recommendations to Transport for NSW, the former Roads and Maritime Services (now part of Transport for NSW), Australian Maritime Safety Authority, Port Authority of NSW and ferry operators.

For details on the findings and recommendations, you can read the full investigation report on the [OTSI website](#).

**Figure 2:** Sydney Cove Navigation Map



Source: Transport for NSW

For further information contact: [engagement@otsi.nsw.gov.au](mailto:engagement@otsi.nsw.gov.au)

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.nsw.gov.au/driving-boating-and-transport/using-waterways-boating-and-transport-information/boating-on-sydney-harbour/rules-for-boating-on-sydney-harbour>