

1999, March 19

Pentland Firth, Great Britain

**Vinyl acetate** (Class 3) in ship cargo tanks; watery liquid, flammable and polymerisable  
TLV 10 ppm (USA)

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**Summary:** On March 19, 1999, the chemical tanker **Multitank Ascania** reported a **fire aboard** in the Pentland Firth. Multitank Ascania was carrying a cargo of 1,800 tonnes of **vinyl acetate**, a flammable and polymerisable liquid. The fire had started in the machinery spaces where an oil leak from a thermal oil pump had ignited. The crew made unsuccessful attempts to settle the fire, first with portable extinguishers and then by flooding the machinery spaces with the fixed CO<sub>2</sub> system. When the rescuers arrived it was decided to airlift the crew off the ship due to the risk of explosion. However, the master stayed onboard in order to anchor the vessel. A tug attempted to tow the ship away from the shore but the tow parted. The master chose to **anchor the ship** and he was then evacuated. An **exclusion zone** with a radius of 5 km was set up. The police of a nearby municipality considered to evacuate 600 local residents but the action didn't become necessary. The ship was examined by a thermal imaging camera from a helicopter. The fire seemed stable and two salvage personnel boarded the ship in order to get more accurate **temperature readings**. The fire was receding and it was decided to tow the ship to Scapa Flow in Orkney. By March 21, the responders were able to make a full assessment of the situation. The ship's machinery had been severely damaged and the ship could not continue its journey. Therefore the cargo had to be transferred to another vessel, which was done by March 30. The Multitank Ascania was then taken under tow to Rotterdam.

**Cause of Accident:** A leak in a thermal oil pump.

**Comments on Response:** The response to this incident was fast and effective, much due to an exercise that had taken place only two days before the accident. The crew on the ship also proved to be professional and capable of handling the proper equipment.

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**Source of Information:** 1) Press release 2000/0487 from the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, UK. 2) "Exercise To Action - Fire Dramas On The High Seas", News release from Briggs Marine, UK.  
(Abstracted July 2002 by Edvard Molitor, Swedish Coast Guard H.Q.)