Loss of anchors in the Middle East

Anchors are one of the most fundamental elements of a ship and offer an efficient and fuel-saving way for vessels to maintain their position, whether waiting for a berth or laid up. However, when a vessel's anchor is lost it poses difficult issues. This is not just in an environmental sense, but there are also concerns for the safety of the vessel and these can be heightened if it falls in an offshore field, especially near a cable or pipeline. With these risks in mind, the Club has noticed an increase in the frequency of anchors being lost in the Arabian Gulf region in recent years. This article therefore sets out to explore the cause of such incidents, the P&I liabilities arising and to review some tips on steps that can be taken to avoid similar occurrences.

What does the P&I Club cover?

It is important to start by highlighting that not all lost anchors are dealt with through P&I cover. P&I liability will be triggered only when there is a removal obligation at law. This is commonly seen when the authorities request the removal of the anchor from the seabed under an order, often in a designated anchorage. It could be by a formal removal notice or a sufficiently formal request by the authorities that satisfies the Club that such a removal order is or would be made. In such instances, the Club will cover the removal costs of the lost anchor. The removal costs could include survey fees, diving costs, sonar scans, hire of a retrieval vessel etc.

On occasion, Members have additional cover which encompasses contractual requests for removal, particularly under the Specialist Offshore Packages. In that case, the Club will be able to assist Members with removal of a lost anchor, even where there is no order from the authorities to do so, so long as there is a contractual commitment to undertake the task.

It should be noted that, as with any wreck removal type operation which is dealt with as a liability claim, Club cover will offset the value of the property recovered in mitigation of the costs incurred. This is usually effected by the Members retaining the anchor at an agreed value, or by a salvage sale to a third party.

Lost anchors in the Middle East

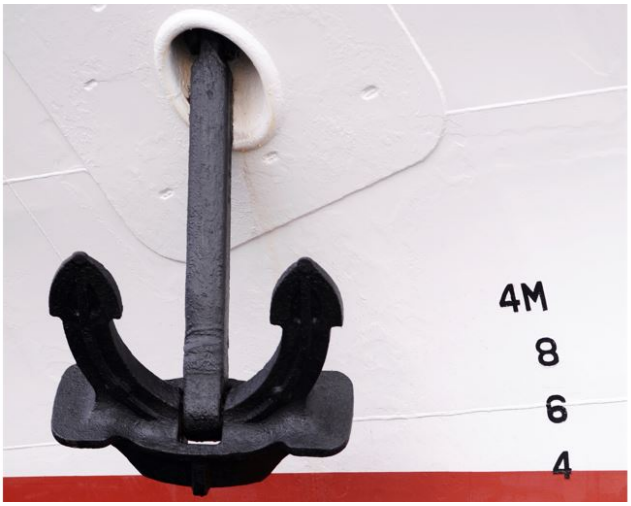
The Club has recorded a noticeable increase in the instances of lost anchor claims during specific periods in the Arabian Gulf region, particularly between April – May and again during September – October. These claims are concentrated mainly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar. The busiest Middle-East ports in these countries have a **high volume of vessel calls, which, when combined with unique weather and seabed conditions,** could explain the prevalence of lost anchors during these specific periods. In the region there are Shamal periods, when a north-westerly wind blows over Iraq and the Persian

Gulf states. The Shamal winds occur mostly during summer but may also sometimes occur in winter.

Source: BBC Weather[1]

The Shamal winds start increasing around April, peaking in June-July. They carry strong wind speeds which increase during the day and decrease at night, meaning vessels are more prone to losing their anchors during those times and when anchoring during the day. Claims received by the Club have mainly been during those periods and this is likely to explain much of the issue. Busy ports also often necessitate vessels to stay at anchorage for **prolonged periods**. Increased demand and growth in the area and the ongoing expansion and investments in the port may be contributors to the issue. For example, with investments for the oil and gas sector in Saudi Arabia, the country is expecting to see a 7.6% annual rise in the offshore support vessel market by 2028[2]. Accordingly, more vessels are waiting at anchorage and/or in oil fields, and therefore we may see more of these claims in the future. The prolonged waiting periods may increase the stress on the anchoring equipment and cause damage, resulting in reduced holding power over a period of time.

When anchoring in these conditions, there are several solutions which may improve the anchoring performance of the vessel and put less strain on the anchoring equipment. With the daily changing wind speed during the Shamal periods, it is important that anchoring conditions are assessed by the Master for all expected conditions, especially if anchoring at night. This may result in the vessel placing more chain than expected for the current conditions. Greater lengths of anchoring chain not only provide a greater holding power but disperse the stress on the chain over a greater distance, reducing the effect on any one particular area of chain. The increased waiting time at anchorages may also require using more shackles of chain.



In the event the Master believes the conditions may cause a danger to the vessel or potentially damage the anchor, they should consider heaving the anchor and either re-anchoring in a safer position or using engines to hold position. They may even decide to leave the anchorage and head for deeper or more sheltered waters to ride out the storm. Thus, it is important for the Master to assess the situation with ample time to decide and act accordingly.

Another factor that would affect the loss of the anchors in the areas is the depth of the water at anchorage. For example, in Fujairah, UAE the **water depth** varies between 80m – 120m. It is important to ensure that a designated anchorage is of a suitable depth and in a location that allows the vessels to swing safely. If the vessel is walking back[3] and letting go the anchor, at these depths this can be difficult to control resulting in burn out of the windlass brakes/damages to the windlass and other issues.

The nature of the seabed in some of the major ports in the Middle East can vary from sand to mud or clay. When assessing the seabed suitability, the Master must be aware of the holding ground to ascertain the optimal anchoring procedure. This information can be found in navigation charts or in local pilot books.

From a claims handling point of view

When an anchor loss incident is notified to the Club, it is crucial that Members inform the Club whether a wreck removal order has been issued. What is considered as a wreck removal order? Some authorities in the region may not issue a formal wreck, anchor or debris removal order, but they may instead submit the request in an email sent to the Members or their local agents. Such communications may be deemed sufficient enough to constitute a request for the Club to consider it as a lawful wreck removal obligation as per the Club rules.

Once the Club is satisfied that a removal order has been made, the next step is to gather background information on the incident to commence the search and recovery operations. The accurate location of where the anchor was lost is particularly important. This will make it easier for the divers to find the location and achieve a successful recovery. Further details of the anchor and any lost shackle cables provide useful information which will help narrow the search, expedite the contracting process and allow the operation to be signed off as concluded more promptly.

It is important from a P&I perspective to establish the value of any anchor and other equipment being recovered. If the value of the recovered property exceeds the operation costs, then there will be no P&I claim. If the recovered property has a value lower than the recovery operation costs, then this may be deducted from those costs before reimbursement. Once a quotation is received for the search and removal operation a review is necessary to assess whether the costs are reasonable. Things to note include whether the costs are for a lump sum, based on success, or pro-rated or capped at a fixed number of dives for a fixed number of days. In the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar a search and removal operation may be more expensive than in other areas, especially if there are restrictions on which contractors can carry out work in the relevant area. In Qatar, the ports often have internal resources to deploy divers and invoice the Members for each dive at an agreed price. This avoids the need for approvals and paperwork if a third-party company is to be employed. Even where a daily or hourly rate contract is agreed, it is recommended to receive an estimate of the costs beforehand and acquire interim updates after each dive rather than leaving the operation open for an indefinite period. In complex cases a local correspondent can normally assist in running a tender of suitable local companies.

Conclusion

The Club has seen an increase in lost anchor claims in recent years, and it can be anticipated that without positive action being taken to highlight the risk locally, this trend will continue in the future. Absent any action being taken, this trend combined with an increase in the offshore growth in the region, with more OSVs operating in the waters, is likely to result in a higher frequency of lost anchor incidents that require careful attention and management. We hope Members find this article useful in creating awareness and avoidance of such issues. As always, the Club's Claims and Loss Prevention teams and our local correspondents are available to assist Members with any advice and assistance they require on the above subjects.

For further information on safe anchoring procedures, please see the Club's Loss Prevention page: Guidance on Anchoring.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Capt. Atul Shukla of Inchcape Shipping Services in Dubai for his kind assistance with the contents of this article.

[1] BBC Weather https://www.bbc.co.uk/weather

[2] Saudi Arabia Offshore Support Vessel Market Growth [2028] (fortunebusinessinsights.com)

[3] This is a method of controlled lowering the anchor under power of equipment, rather than letting it drop freely under its own weight.