

# DISASTER

When the Napoli foundered off the Devon coast the calamity was blamed on a storm. But was she seaworthy in the first place? **Jack Grimston and Brendan Montague** report

It was 10.30am when Forbes Duthie heard a loud bang, but it seemed like nothing out of the ordinary for a big ship in a storm. So the 20-year-old cadet from near Inverness lay in his bunk a little longer, then went for a shower.

A few minutes later Duthie was in no doubt about what had happened to the MSC Napoli. A Turkish crewmate came rushing up the steps shouting at him to pull on his lifejacket as the ship was breaking up and the captain had ordered everyone off.

The noise that had woken Duthie was the opening of jagged vertical cracks on either side of the hull of the 63,000-ton container ship. The boat had effectively snapped and seawater was gushing into the engine room faster than the pumps could cope, immobilising the vessel and leaving it at the mercy of the storm.

At the entrance to the boat deck, the cadet took his place among his 25 crewmates and waited to board the ship's lifeboat, a fully enclosed, ridged-hulled capsule that hung on winches buffeted by the force nine gale. Once all were aboard, Captain Valentin Velev, the Napoli's Bulgarian skipper, ordered its launch and the small craft slammed down into the raging sea.

"There were 26 people in there," said Duthie. "There were people saying 'give us air'. There was lots of vomiting from all the crew, including myself."

The following two hours were the most terrifying of the young cadet's life. Unable to see out from the lifeboat, the men could do little but pray as

limit of their capabilities in the storm.

"The relief for me came as soon as I was in the helicopter," said Duthie. "But my parents had heard the ship was sunk and there was a rescue operation to find any survivors. It must have been a terrible experience but they won't talk about it. There were tears when I called, they were over the moon."

The storm that took the 16-year-old Napoli was the worst in Britain for nearly a decade, killing 13 people across the country. The ship was saved from sinking only when an Anglo-French rescue mission towed it onto a sandbank off Devon.

Yet the images that went round the world were not of the relieved crew and the pilots who had risked their lives to save them, but of hundreds of scavengers picking through the Napoli's scattered cargo at Branscombe on the Devon coast. They made off with everything from BMW motorbikes and oak wine barrels to oil-coated packs of Ferrero Rocher chocolates.

An unseemly episode, certainly, but the fate of the Napoli also raises troubling questions about the sea worthiness and regulation of the 8,000 container ships that plough the world's oceans — vessels on which globalisation and the boom in intercontinental trade depends.

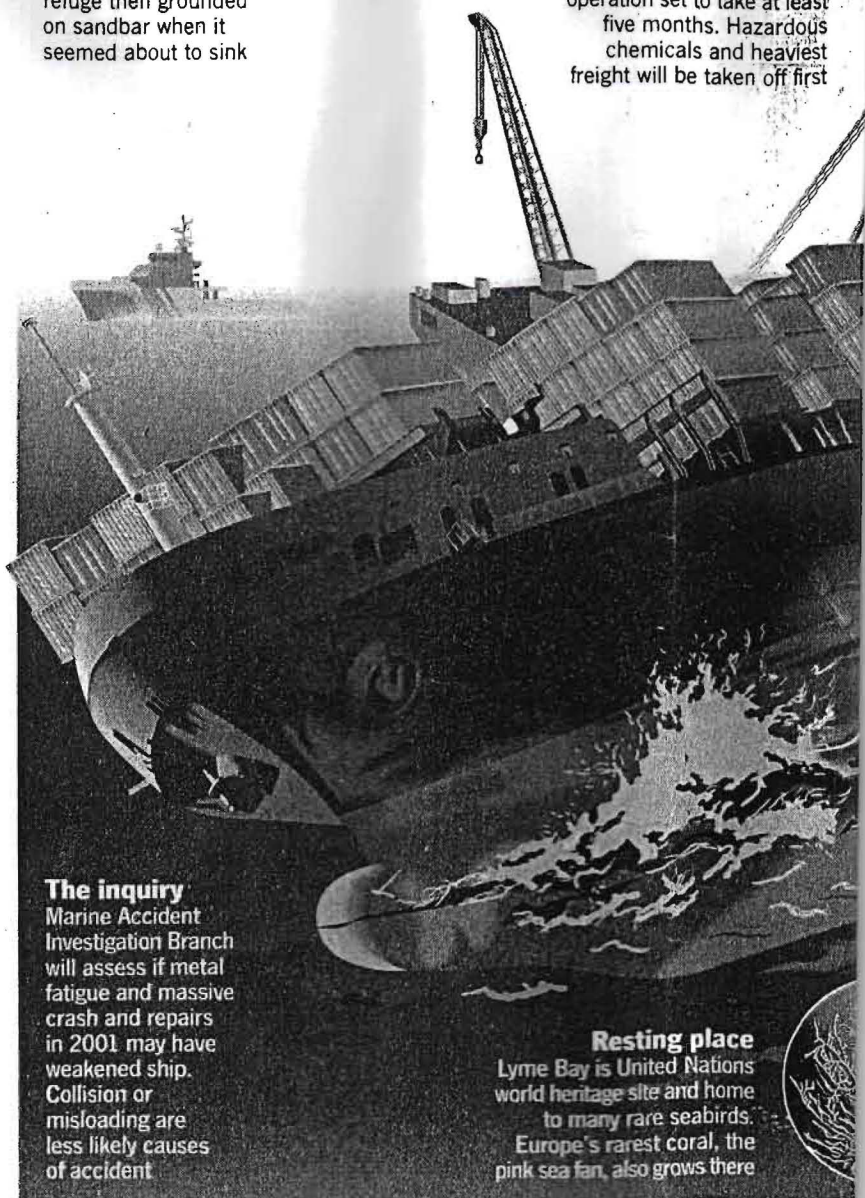
"It is hard to see how a ship could suffer this type of structural failure if she was in a seaworthy condition," said Andrew Nicholas, a partner with the London law firm Clyde & Co. It is representing a consortium of insurers who are

## Beached

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## Offloading

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## The inquiry

Marine Accident Investigation Branch will assess if metal fatigue and massive crash and repairs in 2001 may have weakened ship. Collision or misloading are less likely causes of accident

**Resting place**  
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standards simply snap in what was a bad but not exceptional storm?

THE key to the Napoli's fate almost certainly lies in its battered history. In March 2001, the Korean-built vessel, which for a short time was the biggest

It took more than two months to refloat the vessel, which was then called the CMA-CGM Normandie. It was laid up for four months at a Vietnamese shipyard, where about a third of the underside was stripped out and replaced.

Soon after the repairs a

sea captain from the bay of Naples. Aponte built his into one of the big transporters in the buying up long-term on second-hand tactic has enabled successfully in wha

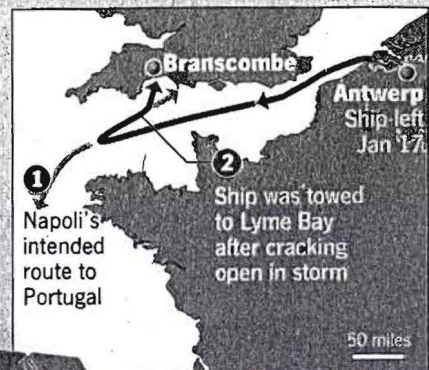
# ER AT SEA



### Offloading

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### How the Napoli was lost



### Damage

Hull cracked down both sides, flooding engine room and putting ship in danger of splitting in half as bow and stern sagged

### Fuel tanks

By this weekend, 663 tons of fuel oil had been removed, 45% of total. Engineers using breathing gear working in dark, cramped spaces, sometimes underwater, expect to take another week to pump fuel from more inaccessible starboard tanks under listing hull

### Resting place

Bay is United Nations heritage site and home to many rare seabirds. The bay's rarest coral, the black fan, also grows there



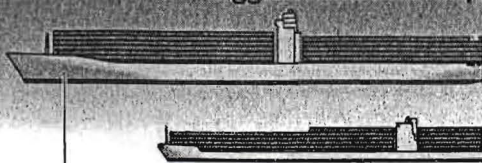
### Cargo

Ship was carrying 2,394 containers, of which 103 fell overboard. Cargo included BMW motorcycles, nappies, VW car parts, empty wine barrels, nickel, bulk packs of Ferrero Rocher chocolates, hydrogen peroxide, personal belongings

### Pollution

60-100 tons of oil have washed up on coast, covering at least 1,000 birds. Officials argue pollution would have been worse if Napoli had sunk at sea

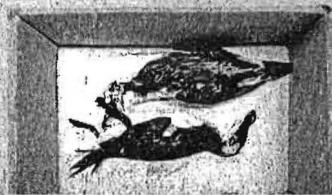
### How Napoli measures up to world's biggest container ship



Emma Maersk

MSC Napoli

...an two sea captain from Sorrento to the bay of Naples. Aponte built his company into one of the biggest freight transporters in the world by buying up long-term charters on second-hand ships. The tactic has enabled him to bid successfully in what is a fiercely competitive market.



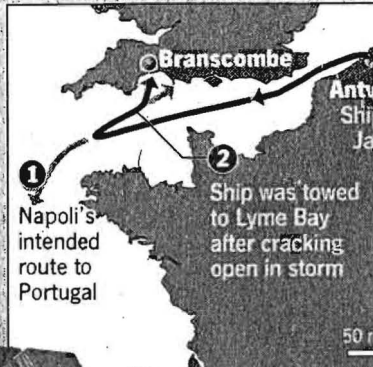
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The only other container ship believed to have been lost after snapping at sea was another of Aponte's vessels, the MSC Carla. It had buckled in two (known as hogging) on top of a wave in the north Atlantic during a storm in 1997. It later emerged that before MSC took it on, Carla had had major reconstruction. It had been cut in half and had a new mid-section welded in to lengthen it.

Yet according to the paperwork, the Napoli was up to scratch — its most recent inspection had been conducted in Antwerp just five days before it broke open off the Devon coast en route to South Africa, via Portugal.

The year before it had undergone a "class renewal survey", the toughest a ship can experience, which includes ultrasound testing on the strength of its steel. Again no structural problems were found.

The inspectors may have found no evidence of problems, but the possibility that the previous crash had caused long-term damage that lurked undetected is at the centre of the British inquiry.

A source close to the investigation, who has been on board the Napoli several times since it was grounded, said one of the first things the team would do would be "to check the quality of those repairs and re-examine the damage".

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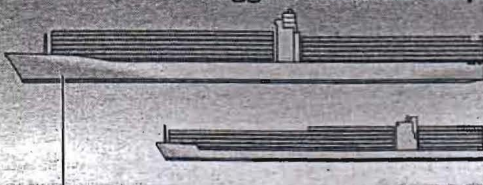
Of the 8,000 container ships, known as "box boats", at sea, the biggest is more than twice the size of the Napoli. But with traffic growing at more than 10% a year, the Asian shipyards that knock them out are struggling to keep up, meaning existing vessels are under pressure to travel further and faster.

The strains may now be starting to show.

"These ships are really worked hard and they thunder through the seas," said John David, a former sea captain who works as a technical consultant. "They are fairly robust, but it wouldn't take that much for them to develop fatigue."

Further questions are being raised over the role of the British authorities in the disaster.

### How Napoli measures up to world's biggest container ship



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Weight 157,000 tons  
Capacity 14,500 containers  
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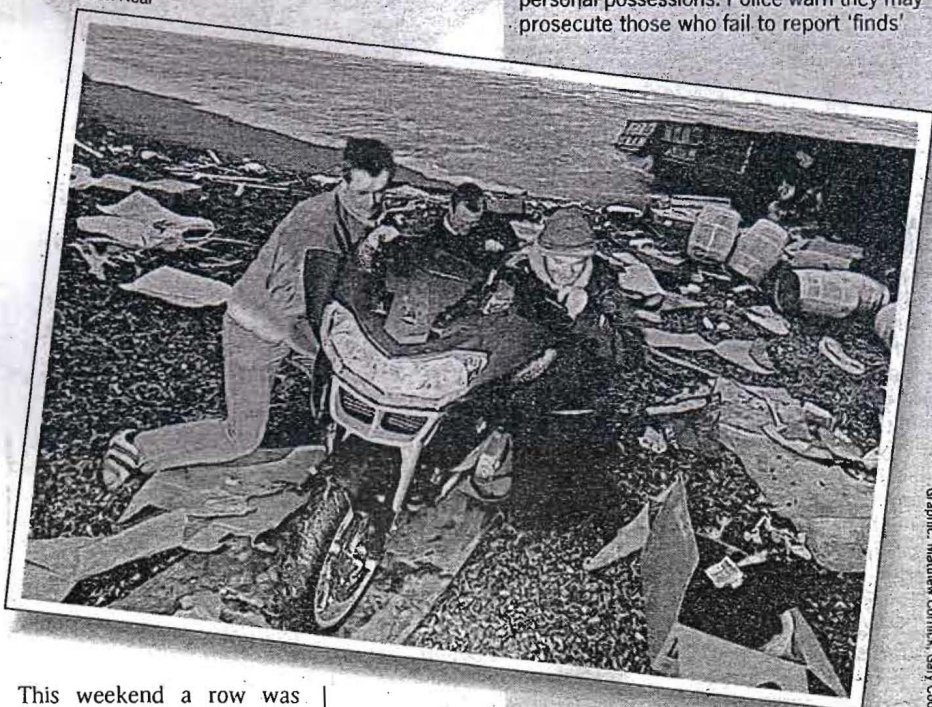
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### Looting

Thousands of scavengers descended on Devon beaches to rifle through containers, taking £9,000 motorbikes, trainers and personal possessions. Police warn they may prosecute those who fail to report 'finds'

Leon Neal



Graphic: Matthew Cornish, Gary Cook

This weekend a row was growing over whether it had been right to beach the ship off a coastline recognised by Unesco as a world heritage site. Environmentalists complained of being ignored. "We told them 'nowhere in Lyme Bay, it's too important'," said Julian Wardlaw, who represents a consortium of environmental groups and councils.

As the beachcombers melted away last week, more public-spirited residents began to clean up.

Billy Bragg, the singer, who lives near Chesil Beach, 20 miles across the bay from Branscombe, helped to organise one group.

"The beach became strewn with debris on Monday at high tide," said Bragg. "It was covered with confectionery litter. Can you imagine six miles of oil-coated Mars bars and Ferrero Rocher?"

The loss of the Napoli may have been a rarity, but if similar accidents are to be averted in the future it is not just inspections, building techniques and emergency planning proce-

address in the British Virgin Islands. Metvale is owned by a Monaco-registered holding company.

Zodiac, the firm that manages the ship, declined to provide contact details for the owner while MSC declined to answer questions about it, beyond saying it was "way off the mark" to suggest its ships were anything but first rate.

A spokesman said whether the vessel was seaworthy was a "technical" question that should be put to the owner.

Technical, maybe, but not academic.

Duthie and his 25 crewmates came close to losing their lives on the Napoli and the salvage and clean-up will take months.

While waiting to board the lifeboat, Duthie leant over the safety rails to see what the problem was. "There was one big gash and two smaller ones on my side ... the steel had bent outwards," he said. "It happened to both sides at the same time."

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Dead-man's Bay was the name Thomas Hardy gave Lyme Bay in his fictional Wessex. The 50-mile curve of water along the Devon and Dorset coast is the graveyard of at least 200 wrecks. But when the wind is blowing from the southwest, as it was when the Napoli came to grief on January 18,

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The ship sailed under Britain's red ensign but was chartered by MSC, a Swiss-based shipping line. The owner is listed as Metvale, a shell company with an office in London

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The back quarter of the 904ft container ship had simply slumped and was in danger of breaking off.

"This ship was 16 years old, she had a difficult life and underwent extensive repairs," said Allan Graveson, senior national secretary at Nautilus, the shipping union. "This was

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