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On a November night, a crab fishing boat was off British Columbia’s north coast. The crew members were re-baiting a crab pot on deck when the vessel took a port turn. The buoy line became caught in the propeller and started to pull a trap overboard. One of the crew reached for the trap as it slid over the side of the boat and was pulled into the water with it. As he entered the water, he let go of the trap and remained at the surface. Lines and floating objects were thrown well within his reach but he made no attempt to hold onto them.

The crew member was finally pulled on board after about 11 minutes in the water. He was unconscious and could not be revived.

Neither the victim nor the other crew members were wearing a personal flotation device (PFD), life jacket or immersion suit. The water temperature was 9 degrees Celsius (48 degrees Fahrenheit).

Drowning is a major cause of death wherever people must work on or near the water, such as on fishing boats or tugboats. One of the reasons for these high fatality rates is the cold temperature of the water. Fatality investigations have shown again and again that a person’s physical fitness or ability to swim in warm water will not save him or her from drowning in cold water. Hypothermia can be a factor but that takes time usually more than 30 minutes. The real killing factor is often that first shock of cold water on the body. If you work around water, keep yourself safe by being aware of what could happen to you in cold water. Know what to do to prevent yourself or other crew members from falling into the water and what to do if that occurs.

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