

LP 03/2025 Cargo Deck Blaze on Grande Brasile Spotlights Ro-Ro Fire Risks

On February 18, 2025, the Maltese-flagged Ro-Ro vessel *Grande Brasile* (IMO: 9198123) issued a distress call after a fire broke out in the Dover Strait traffic separation zone during its voyage from Antwerp to Le Havre. The vessel, with 28 crew members onboard, was carrying containers and cars, though the exact quantities were unknown.

Grande Brasile is operated by Atlantic Container Line (ACL), a subsidiary of the Grimaldi Group. In March 2019, the company's Ro-Ro ship *Grande America* sank in the Bay of Biscay after a fire originating in a container spread uncontrollably. Just two months later, another vessel, *Grande Europa*, suffered an upper-deck fire near the Spanish coast, which was extinguished. In July 2023, yet another Grimaldi-owned Ro-Ro ship, *Grande Costa d'Avorio*, caught fire in its vehicle hold at the Port of Newark, USA. The blaze burned for nearly a week, claiming the lives of two port firefighters. This series of incidents has prompted the Italian shipping company to call for stricter controls on the maritime transportation of hazardous cargo.

I. The incident

At 0930hrs, UTC, *Grande Brasile* initially called Mayday on VHF Channel 16 but did not request assistance.

By 1015hrs, the situation had worsened, with the fire still not under control. CO₂ had been released, steering was lost, the main engine had stopped, and the emergency pump was inoperative.

By 1212hrs, the fire was extinguished, though there was still a lot of smoke. The crew was cooling the cars to ensure there was no secondary fire. In two hours, they planned to ventilate the area and attempt to restore power.

At 1623hrs, UTC, the fire reignited onboard, and the crew attempted to extinguish it.

II. Rescue responses

The UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) received the distress call at 0935hrs, prompting a multi-agency response involving rescue teams from the UK, France, and the Netherlands.

At 1900hrs, UTC, the vessel was at risk of grounding. SOSREP was aware of the situation and trying to expedite assistance.

At 2052hrs, UTC, the tug *Multratug 35* established a tow line to *Grande Brasile*.

At 2110hrs, UTC, the master of the vessel commenced evacuation. Additional support was provided by the French rescue vessel *Abeille Normandie*.

At 2214hrs, UTC, MRCC Dover confirmed all persons were recovered from the lifeboat.

At 2321hrs, UTC, all persons were recovered to Ramsgate by the Ramsgate lifeboat.

At 0044hrs, February 19, a 500-metre temporary exclusion zone (TEZ) was established around *Grande Brasile*.

Salvage tugs, including *Multratug 35* and *Abeille Normandie*, eventually stabilized the ship and towed it to Antwerp by February 23. Damage was confined to the superstructure near the funnel, with no injuries or pollution reported.

III. Industry context

Data from Lloyd's List Intelligence (1979–2023) reveals Ro-Ro vessels experienced 899 marine incidents, including 78 fires (9%). Vehicle decks accounted for 40% of these fires, underscoring their vulnerability due to enclosed spaces, flammable cargo, and challenges in early detection. Fires in vehicle compartments have led to eight total ship losses, highlighting critical safety gaps.

IV. Safety challenges and recommendations

Structural Risks: Ro-Ro ships' densely packed vehicle decks hinder fire detection and crew access.

Crew Preparedness: Inspections by global maritime authorities (Tokyo, Paris, and Indian Ocean MOUs) identified weaknesses in crew training and emergency drills.

Preventive Measures: Enhanced pre-departure cargo inspections, infrared monitoring systems, and battery hazard detection could mitigate risks. Rapid deployment of fixed fire systems within 15 minutes of ignition has proven effective in past incidents, emphasizing the need for rigorous crew training.

The *Grande Brasile* incident reiterates the urgency of advancing fire safety protocols and technological solutions in the Ro-Ro sector to protect lives, vessels, and marine environments.

For more information, please contact Managers of the Association.