Lost balance while washing down

A bulk carrier was in port and one of the ABs was washing the hatch coaming gutter. He had connected a fire hose to a fire hydrant and was spraying water.
The cargo hatch covers were open and the AB was wearing a safety harness.

The harness became tangled with the fire hose and so the AB briefly unhooked it so he could untangle the safety cord. At the same time the pressure in the hose changed causing the AB to lose his balance and fall 16 metres down into the cargo hold.

First aid was given to the AB by the crew and the Master called for an ambulance. Unfortunately he did not recover and died at the hospital.

What can we learn?
• Working aloft is a high risk operation and all vessels have procedures on how to do safely. It is a requirement to fill out both a risk assessment and a work permit for any job in this category. The risk assessment and COSWP requires that all risks should be evaluated and that the harness should be connected at all times.

• The AB in this case was wearing a safety harness, but at the time of the accident had it unhooked at the same time as he lost his balance. This highlights once again that it only takes one second to make a fatal mistake

• If two persons had been assigned for this job it would have meant that the AB could work on his assigned task by washing down and the other AB could assist with the hose.

• Working at sea is by default a dangerous job and the crew is often involved in high risk operations e.g. working aloft, mooring, securing cargo and other operations. A case like this highlights that a decision to unhook the safety harness when at the same time holding a pressurised fire hose can lead to a fatal fall.

• Everybody looks on risk differently – that is why it is so important that the safety department ensures the crew is trained in evaluating and understanding risks, and the potentially fatal consequences of forgetting this.