

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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COAST GUARD VESSEL CG 29113 AND
SAILING VESSEL VANGUARD TOWING
ACCIDENT MAY 3, 2017

Accident No.: DCA17PM012

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Interview of:



U.S. Coast Guard Facilities
New Orleans, Louisiana

Thursday,
May 11, 2017

APPEARANCES:

LUKE WISNIEWSKI, Marine Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
Sector New Orleans
United States Coast Guard

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
District 8
United States Coast Guard

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
District 8 Legal
United States Coast Guard

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I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Good morning. My name is Luke Wisniewski
3 with the National Transportation Safety Board. I am here at
4 Sector New Orleans, and I am with the break-in CDO?

5 [REDACTED] Yeah.

6 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Can you state for the record your name, and
7 spell it for the transcription?

8 [REDACTED] My name is [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
9 [REDACTED].

10 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Thank you. We'll go around the room and
11 introduce everyone.

12 [REDACTED] Good morning. It's Lieutenant [REDACTED]
13 [REDACTED] Sector New Orleans.

14 [REDACTED] Good morning. Lieutenant [REDACTED] D-8 Legal.

15 [REDACTED] Good morning. Chief Warrant Officer [REDACTED]
16 [REDACTED] from District 8.

17 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Thank you. So the NTSB is here as an
18 independent federal agency and we were charged with determining
19 the probable cause and contributing factors for this incident that
20 occurred between the Coast Guard CG 29113 and Sailing Vessel
21 *Vanguard* on the night of May 3rd.

22 NTSB, we're not part of the Department of Transportation or
23 the Coast Guard, as you're aware. We have no enforcement powers,
24 but the purpose, like I said, is to investigate, to increase
25 safety. We're not here to assign fault, blame or liability;

1 however, NTSB cannot offer any guarantee of confidentiality or
2 immunity from any legal actions.

3 We would like to record this interview. Is that okay?

4 [REDACTED] Sure.

5 MR. WISNIEWSKI: For the accuracy of it. You will receive a
6 transcript of this in about a month, and it will lay out
7 everything that you spoke here today. On the back there will be
8 an errata sheet that you can make any corrections to.

9 Are you aware that you're entitled to a representative here?

10 [REDACTED] Yes.

11 MR. WISNIEWSKI: And you're okay with not having one here?

12 [REDACTED] Yes.

13 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Okay. Thank you.

14 INTERVIEW OF [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

15 BY MR. WISNIEWSKI:

16 Q. Let's start off with your background, maritime experience.
17 When did you enter the Coast Guard?

18 A. I joined the Coast Guard in 2007, at the United States Coast
19 Guard Academy.

20 Q. Okay. And can you just take us through entering the academy
21 to your stations up and to this position?

22 A. Sure. Starting in 2007, I did four years at the Coast Guard
23 Academy. It's a federal service academy similar to like the Naval
24 Academy or West Point. Following the Coast Guard Academy, I was
25 stationed on the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Gallatin* in Charleston.

1 It's a 378 high-endurance cutter. Following that, I was the
2 (indiscernible) port state security unit coordinator in Pac Area,
3 kind of a navy liaison job, for three years. Following that, I
4 was stationed here this summer, summer 2016, as command duty
5 officer, which is a master level qualification for the command
6 center at sector.

7 Q. Okay. Can you go through and just describe a little bit more
8 of the command duty officer responsibilities?

9 A. Sure. It's the master level qualification at the -- within
10 the command center, and the command center is kind of like the
11 command and control for the total operational picture of the
12 sector. It's also responsible for SAR coordination, you know,
13 broadcast notice to mariners, ensuring that, really, the Coast
14 Guard nexus between the maritime community, the search and rescue
15 community, OGOs, other government organizations, everything, kind
16 of like the representative of the captain, because the captain and
17 sector [REDACTED] cannot be here 24/7.

18 I run the watch floor. On the watch floor, you have the
19 positions of operation unit controller, whose primary
20 responsibility is SAR, pollution and law enforcement. Below that,
21 you have a situation unit controller, who is more operational
22 picture support of the operation controller, which is OU. And the
23 SU, situation unit controller, here at this sector, specifically
24 they do a lot more of the M side prevention type groundwork,
25 captain of the port orders, marine casualty documentation. And

1 then we also have a CU, a communication unit controller that
2 monitors the radio and various frequencies.

3 Q. Okay. So let's now dive right into your first involvement
4 with the Sailing Vessel *Vanguard*.

5 A. Background; I came on watch at 5 a.m. that day. I believe
6 there was a weather front. I'd have to check exactly what it was.
7 I know there was some thunderstorms rolling through. It was, you
8 know, one of those, you know, typical fronts at this time of year,
9 very narrow, kind of heavy but, you know, fast moving. There was
10 a strong southeasterly wind. I remember that. I was briefed.

11 My first involvement of the case was when the individuals
12 were aground in the Rigolets. The SAR aspect of that case was
13 closed by the time I came on watch in that they said that it was
14 lit, that it was anchored at a location that would be in -- the
15 exact location is in vessel documentation. And, you know, that
16 was kind of -- I made a note of it.

17 The storm rolled through sometime between when I came on
18 watch at 5 a.m. and that morning, during noon of that time. So
19 the second time I heard of the case, you know, not SAR related but
20 of the actual adrift sailing vessel was from St. Tammany Parish
21 Sheriff's Office, who had a boat out near Route 10, Route 11, and
22 they said that there was an adrift abandoned sailing vessel with
23 Florida registration. Of course, from the case before I knew it
24 was Florida. And that it was -- that they could not -- that their
25 vessel -- that they don't do towing, that they don't -- they

1 weren't going to do anything about it. So they just informed us
2 that there was this adrift vessel being pushed heavily with the
3 southeasterly winds at that time.

4 At this point, the conditions had subsided. The front had
5 moved through. At that point, we started doing some investigative
6 work. We contacted the bridge tender at, I believe, Route 11.
7 Again, I would have to check the MSL at exactly which bridge
8 tender. And they actually had eyes on the vessel that was
9 drifting. And that's when we began to coordinate a response with
10 the SMC, our maritime coordinator, which is a next -- a higher-
11 level qualification, which is a direct representative of the
12 captain in terms of search and rescue coordination, that we had
13 this vessel heading towards the Route 11 Bridge.

14 We contacted Station NOLA. They were within parameters.
15 They decided that the best course of action was to -- strike that.
16 You know, I decided as the CDO, decided that the best course of
17 action would be to recover that vessel, which at the time was, you
18 know, still drifting somewhere in the vicinity between Route 10
19 and Route 11, with a 29-foot small boat.

20 At that time during the discussion, this was probably
21 approximately -- again, I would have to check the records --
22 during a watch rotation, where we rotate from the day watch to the
23 afternoon watch. We had a full watch rotation, which really
24 entails -- it's a little bit more formal. I called the SMC and
25 had him on speakerphone while we all kind of discussed and

1 transferred the watch. The reason we did that is when there's an
2 active case, you know, that isn't to the level that I would stay
3 behind but that, you know, at the time it was a relatively
4 straightforward case, we would all be on the same page and that
5 all information was passed between the SMC, the new CDO, the
6 current CDO, which was Ms. [REDACTED] and myself, you know, as I
7 was the break-in. And so I gave a pass down to Mr. Watkins. And
8 that's kind of like the general story of it.

9 Q. Okay. So let's hone in on the decision that you made to tow
10 the vessel. Can you go back through that and give us a little bit
11 more detail now as far as who you notified or who you spoke to, go
12 up the chain and then down to the station.

13 A. For who I spoke to exactly was, going one up would be, at
14 that time would be [REDACTED] [REDACTED] He was the SAR maritime
15 coordinator. And then going below, it would be the station. For
16 the decision-making purposes, it was between the SMC and myself,
17 the watch floor, whose recommendation was to recover this vessel.

18 And our reasoning behind that was that the vessel was being
19 pushed heavily with the windows and was heading towards the
20 bridge, and at the time we wanted to stop a potential hazardous
21 navigation. The vessel was approximately 32 feet, I believe. I'd
22 have to check the exact documentation. We didn't know the
23 conditions. We knew the winds were rough and that we relayed this
24 information; that we really wanted to stop it before it hit the
25 bridge. And we had eyes on it, so we felt comfortable with it.

1 So the decision really was the command duty officers', ours to
2 make on recovering that vessel.

3 Q. Okay. And what did you actually say, the best that you can
4 recall?

5 A. I would say the biggest thing is to recover the vessel and
6 bring it to the nearest safe haven, which, again, the nearest safe
7 haven, you know, relies on, really, the experiences of the coxon
8 and the location and the environment at the time. So, you know,
9 the minimum response we wanted was to get this vessel and get it
10 to a safe haven where it wouldn't be drifting about within the
11 lake with no real direction; that we could move it to some place
12 so it would be out of the way of, you know, maritime traffic and
13 not hit the bridge.

14 Q. Okay. And at that time, what instruction were you given from
15 the SMC, either the break-in or the --

16 A. The relationship between the SMC and the CDO is, you know, I
17 gave him our recommendation and he agreed that that was the best
18 course of action we could take given all circumstances at that
19 time, is to recover that vessel and bring it to a near safe haven.

20 Q. Did he give you any specific instructions on stuff to push
21 down to the vessel?

22 A. The biggest thing he said is to ensure that the risk
23 assessments were taken and then retaken at the location. So when
24 the vessel leaves, there's a GAR that's given. And it's basically
25 an operational risk management system -- I'm sure you've gone over

1 it, and I don't want to go too in the weeds with it -- which kind
2 of gauges risk versus reward and whether or not we should launch
3 an asset and recover it.

4 We took a GAR and that was the biggest thing. That was the
5 primary concern of the SMC, was to ensure that the ORM process was
6 followed. And that, again, when we made the change, speaking
7 shortly before the new CDO came up on watch, was to ensure that
8 ORM is reassessed. So ORM is assessed, usually, when a vessel
9 leaves a unit. But they can arrive on scene and the conditions
10 could change or the situation could change, so the actual risk
11 assessment changes with the situation.

12 Q. And specifically now, who did you direct that discussion, the
13 ORM risk assessment on scene, the updated assessment, who did you
14 speak to?

15 A. The vessel wasn't on scene by the time I left the watch. The
16 boat was on its way, trailered, towards -- so the 29 wasn't
17 launched yet by the time I left watch, by the time the day watch
18 left. So again, you would have to go through the documentation to
19 find when the 29-foot small boat actually was in the water.

20 Q. But as far as who -- did you direct that pass down: hey, when
21 you get on the scene, we want an updated operational risk
22 assessment?

23 A. That's something -- I'm trying to think. Again, it's policy
24 that it's always done. It's something that's always done before
25 it's left. I don't know if the word came from us, my watch, or

1 the watch that came after me, to redo the risk assessment on
2 scene. So, again, that's something I'd have to look up again. So
3 I can't say with 100 percent certainty that we told the BOV
4 station to redo the GAR at the time I was there.

5 Q. Okay. I'm going to pass the floor over. Thank you.

6 BY [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

7 Q. Good morning. This is [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with sector. Who was the
8 SMC?

9 A. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

10 Q. Okay. And that's who you worked -- that's who you directly
11 called as the break-in?

12 A. Yes.

13 Q. Okay. As the CDO, I want to understand the process. Tell me
14 the process of how an asset is determined for a SAR case.

15 A. Like whether, like, an asset is launched to a SAR case?

16 Q. Or what type of asset is sent.

17 A. What type of asset really depends on -- again, there are so
18 many factors that are put into each individual case. It's the
19 conditions. Again, in this AOR, a lot of times it's draft. You
20 know, a lot of assets are limited by draft, you know, a lot of
21 shallow water, maneuverability, and then the size of the vessel.
22 You know, at this time it was, like, a 32-foot vessel. Like, you
23 don't want a vessel that has a towing capacity too small to
24 respond to a vessel of this type.

25 And again, it's a certain situations that even a vessel may

1 be in parameters with the risk assessment, you want to always side
2 on the -- always side with the case of, you know,
3 overcompensating, because usually, the larger the vessel, the
4 safer the situation is when it comes to, like, conditions and
5 towing and things like that.

6 Q. Great. Thanks. Does the CDO have input into the crew makeup
7 of an asset?

8 A. No. Like the individuals, like, onboard the --

9 Q. Correct.

10 A. No, that lies at the station level of who actually is within
11 in. Like I can't pick, like, you know, like, I want this coxon to
12 go, or that crewmember, or this person. It's, you know --

13 Q. Okay. Great. Thanks.

14 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I don't have any more questions.

15 BY [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

16 Q. Good morning, sir. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Okay, so your -- from
17 what I heard, SMC made it a point on this particular case to say I
18 want to get a updated GAR when they get on scene. Is that a
19 correct --

20 A. I would say, like, yeah, definitely, especially with the
21 climate, is that GAR is very important. They just want GARs to be
22 passed up.

23 Q. Right, on-scene weather conditions, on-scene conditions. And
24 was it your assumption that the -- it was the intention that we
25 were going -- that this boat was going to get towed, is that

1 correct?

2 A. That, yeah, it was going to be moved to a safe haven.

3 Q. Who actually spoke with the station OOD to send out tasking?

4 Was that you that spoke with the station's OOD?

5 A. That's again something -- I don't believe. It could have
6 been the operations unit watch standers.

7 Q. And who might that be, sir?

8 A. I believe during that watch it was -- again, you'd have to
9 look exactly who was on watch. I can't recall. I don't want to
10 say. I'd have to check. I believe it could have been a break-in
11 as well.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. I want to say Mr. Powell, but, you know --

14 Q. Okay. And it was your understanding that -- were you told
15 which asset they were going to launch for this towing platform?

16 A. It's definitely -- in terms of big asset, it was a 29.
17 Again, that's something that station and -- you know, they're
18 really the experts when it comes to the AOR. They're closer to
19 the ground than we are.

20 Q. What was your understanding of the weather conditions in that
21 portion of the lake at the time that this was going down?

22 A. Again, I know that recently a front had moved through. I
23 knew that -- I can't say exact numbers. I knew that it was within
24 parameters. And I can't, again, I say exactly what it was.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. The only thing I can recall is I remember the GAR being,
2 like, a 21.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. With a high environment. So, like, it wasn't perfect
5 conditions by any regards. I mean, if --

6 Q. When you get a GAR score received from the station, do you
7 query as to what the highest score was, i.e. environment or
8 supervision or --

9 A. Yeah. That's pretty much -- yeah. So it was, like, 21, the
10 GAR, like, 21 green, high in environment.

11 Q. All right.

12 A. That's the big thing.

13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I don't have any further questions at this
14 point.

15 BY MR. WISNIEWSKI:

16 Q. Okay. Luke, NTSB. I just wanted to go through the
17 capabilities of the 29. Are you familiar with the limitations or
18 weather restrictions of the vessel?

19 A. Yeah. I mean, I don't want to quote myself and board myself
20 right now. I know it was, like, a 10-foot towing capacity. You
21 know, it has -- you know, it's 25-knot wind maximum, and it has, I
22 think, 6-foot seas. But that's the biggest thing, is the sea
23 state and the wind state, is, you know, the biggest thing for my
24 level that I really want to see. And again, on the ground, that's
25 just because, like, a NOAA assessment says something doesn't

1 necessarily mean -- because, you know, localized weather, it can
2 change. And that's really where, like, the -- again, redoing the
3 GAR is like, hey, this situation is not what we expected, it's
4 worse, or not as bad, or, you know. As CDO, we have to reassess.

5 Q. And at any time during when the station called back to the
6 command center, was there any restrictions or limitations from the
7 boat itself discussed?

8 A. Again, they didn't -- they weren't even at the launch
9 location by the time my watch was over, during the day watch.
10 They were in I don't know what process of trailering the boat.
11 They weren't even on scene yet.

12 Q. Okay. Nothing was relayed from the station up to you?

13 A. After the initial GAR and when they left the station? Not
14 that I can recall but, again, I'd have to look at the records.

15 Q. Okay. Well, I'm going to now focus in just a little bit more
16 as far as -- we learned that the coxon had a daylight time only
17 restriction. I'm just asking were you made aware of that?

18 A. I did not know that at the time of the watch.

19 MR. WISNIEWSKI: That's all I have.

20 BY [REDACTED]

21 Q. I do have another question. Again, this is [REDACTED]
22 [REDACTED] Sir, would you have an expectation on a
23 case where if you didn't get an on-scene weather, on-scene
24 conditions, and an on-scene GAR score, would that heighten your
25 concern? Would you relay, perhaps, a safety stop or let's get an

1 assessment before you decide you're going to go any further with
2 this case?

3 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] real quick. Just the form of the question
4 as a hypothetical. You can just ask him (indiscernible) if he had
5 that here.

6 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Did you have a -- can we take a break for just
7 a second?

8 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Yeah, let's take 90 seconds.

9 (Off the record; on the record.)

10 MR. WISNIEWSKI: The time is 9:59. Reconvening the
11 interview.

12 BY [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

13 Q. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] again. Sir, so just tell me, is there a
14 protocol for when a vessel gets on scene, if there is -- if they
15 don't furnish you with on-scene weather conditions and a GAR
16 score, is there a protocol for all actions to stop until you get
17 briefed?

18 A. Hmm. That's an interesting question. So you're saying,
19 like, if we don't hear, like, an assessment of the scene, that we
20 would stop? That's definitely -- yeah, that's something that is,
21 like, again, with the apprehension of the command duty officer,
22 and again, that fluctuates with, you know, what the conditions
23 are. You know, if it's a pitch perfect day with, you know, zero
24 environmental, you know, we kind of -- we don't expect, you know,
25 the vessel -- but, like, a situation like this, you know, if a

1 vessel doesn't say anything, or the situation changed, we
2 definitely have to be -- we're very -- we're trained to be
3 proactive in getting that information and disseminating it up the
4 chain of command.

5 Q. And I just want to clarify. Again, it would appear, from
6 what I heard, that SMC made it very clear that his expectation,
7 both the break-in and the SMC, that their expectation was I want
8 on-scene weather conditions and a GAR score and then we'll talk
9 about what to do next. Is that a correct -- am I framing that
10 correctly, that expectation?

11 A. Yeah. It probably wasn't that formal but, yeah, it was
12 definitely an expectation that, you know, with the higher
13 environment that we want the situation reassessed when they're on
14 scene.

15 Q. And that was conveyed during -- when you were off-going. So
16 oncoming and off-going you did that phone interview, or you did
17 that phone conference. That was clearly articulated to both, to
18 the oncoming section as well?

19 A. Yeah, to maintain situational awareness of that case.

20 Q. Right.

21 A. That was the whole reason for the -- and there was a call
22 immediately prior to that phone conference, as well, that was just
23 between me and the SMC that was like these are my plans. And then
24 that's where SMC relayed to me that, you know, his concerns, my
25 concerns, and then, again, that's when I decided that we should,

1 you know, make sure that everyone is on the same page. You know,
2 when I say that, that's an informal way of saying, like, ensure
3 that situational awareness is maintained at the environment on
4 scene.

5 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Okay. Thank you.

6 [REDACTED] No further questions for me.

7 MR. WISNIEWSKI: NTSB, Luke Wisniewski. Is there anything
8 you'd like to add or change?

9 [REDACTED] No, not that I know of. I mean, if you have
10 any -- I mean, I might have misspoke on little things but, again,
11 I'm trying to recall exactly what happened on the day. I'm better
12 with, you know, the generalization of the direction we were going
13 as a team.

14 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Okay. Now, obviously, you've had a week now
15 to process this and it's going through your mind a lot. You
16 haven't had a hot wash or any type of lessons learned but, looking
17 at this situation, do you have any suggestions you'd mind sharing
18 with us as far as how to prevent this type of reoccurrence?

19 [REDACTED] Prevent this type of reoccurrence. Hmm.
20 That's something I really would have to think about. I mean,
21 again, I think the policies are in place and I think the training
22 is in place. I guess the largest thing I could say is just ensure
23 that there's absolutely zero fear to speak up. And I think,
24 again, the Coast Guard has recently done a pretty good job of --
25 you know, the whole ORM process in itself was made so individuals

1 at all levels, no matter how junior or how senior, could say, you
2 know, there's an issue here, you know, make a note of it.

3 You know, of course, there's always going to be situations,
4 you know, where it's tough to do that, and I would say, you
5 know -- and things happen very quickly. In one moment, things can
6 be perfectly fine, one can be bad. So in a situation like this,
7 the only thing I could say is just ensure that members are
8 proactive and there is zero fear to speak up if a situation is
9 changed and they need to (indiscernible).

10 I think from the CDO to the SMC point of view, we were -- I
11 can't speak for the station, and I think even with my interaction
12 with the station, we have a lot of trust in the station and that,
13 you know, they do -- they're good at what they do and they do a
14 very good job of, you know, giving us information and what they
15 believe. I know for a fact that, going back in my watches, the
16 station has no issue with telling me if they have a problem with
17 something or giving recommendations, you know.

18 MR. WISNIEWSKI: Okay. Thank you very much. This will
19 conclude the interview. The time is 10:05.

20 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded at 10:05 a.m.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: COAST GUARD VESSEL CG 29113 AND
SAILING VESSEL VANGUARD TOWING
ACCIDENT MAY 3, 2017
Interview of [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA17PM012

PLACE: New Orleans, Louisiana

DATE: May 11, 2017

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.

Lisa Fuerstenberg
Transcriber



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Transcript Errata

Subj: USCGC NOLA RB-S 9113 and S/V Vanguard towing accident on May 3rd, 2017

Accident No.: DCA17PM012

To: [REDACTED], USCG

Dear [REDACTED],

Enclosed with this email is a copy of the transcript of interview for the towing accident that occurred on the evening of May 3rd, 2017 with United States Coast Guard Station New Orleans CG NOLA RB-S 291113 and S/V Vanguard in Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana. Kindly review this transcript for accuracy and provide corrections, if any, in the attached table. Please print, sign, and return it to me via email by September 15th, 2017.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. If you have any question regarding the process please feel free to contact me.

I look forward to your response.

Best Regards,

Luke Wisniewski

Investigator-in-Charge (IIC)
Office of Marine Safety
National Transportation Safety Board
490 L'Enfant Plaza East, S.W.
Washington, DC 20594

Office: [REDACTED]

Fax: (2 [REDACTED])
[REDACTED]



National Transportation Safety Board
Washington, D.C. 20594

Transcript Errata

If, to the best of your knowledge, no corrections are needed kindly circle the statement "no corrections needed" and initial in the space provided.

NO CORRECTIONS NEED. _____
Initials

Printed Name of Person providing the above information

Signature of Person providing the above information

07 AUG 17

Date