

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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CAPSIZE AND SINKING OF STRETCH DUCK 7 *

ON TABLE ROCK LAKE, BRANSON, MISSOURI, * Accident No.: DCA18MM028

JULY 19, 2018 *

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Interview of: JAMES PLYBON
Captain, *Branson Belle*

Showboat *Branson Belle* Facilities
Branson, Missouri

Friday,
July 20, 2018

APPEARANCES:

CPL. STEVE CRABTREE

CPL. NICK MATTHEWS

Missouri State Highway Patrol (MSHP)

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I N T E R V I E W

(6:01 p.m.)

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3 CPL. CRABTREE: Today's date is July 20th, 2018. The time is
4 1801 hours. I'm Corporal Steve Crabtree. I'm with
5 Corporal Nick Matthews. We're going to conduct an interview of
6 Mr. James A. Plybon. He is the captain -- one of the captains of
7 the *Branson Belle*. And we're conducting this interview at 4800
8 State Highway 165 in Branson. It's actually at the location of
9 the *Branson Belle*.

INTERVIEW OF JAMES PLYBON

BY CPL. CRABTREE:

11 Q. And, Mr. Plybon --

12 A. Yes, sir.

13 Q. I'm just going to set this right here. If you would, could
14 you give your date of birth, please?

15 A. Date of birth is [REDACTED].

16 Q. And do you have a -- what's your home address?

17 A. [REDACTED].

18 Q. And do you have a phone number that we can contact you?

19 A. Yes, sir.

20 Q. Is it [REDACTED]?

21 A. Yes, sir. 24 hours a day.

22 Q. And what we're here to discuss is we understand you witnessed
23 one of the ducks -- well, both of the ducks, probably, when they
24 had their incident yesterday. If you don't mind, would you just
25

1 kind of start whenever you were alerted that there might have been
2 something going on?

3 A. Well, what originally happened was I had -- we were boarding
4 our vessel for the cruise. I had stopped boarding the vessel
5 because of the storm had came up. I asked our reserve captain,
6 our tug captain, if he would cover the wheelhouse while I
7 monitored this storm. He's a captain, just like -- he went up to
8 the wheelhouse and took care of it.

9 As I was gathering all my information for the weather, I
10 noticed one duck. I could only see one duck. I guess the other
11 duck had -- was ahead of this one. But I noticed this one duck,
12 and he was struggling to navigate in the weather.

13 Q. And let me ask you -- where were you? Were you in the office
14 when you were doing the weather check? Or were you on board the
15 *Branson* --

16 A. No, no, no. I was --

17 Q. On the dock?

18 A. On the dock. And we had just started boarding at that time.
19 And when I noticed the -- that's just about the time I noticed the
20 duck was having trouble. And then once I realized we had
21 our -- handling our situation, I kind of concentrated on, my eyes
22 on the duck.

23 Q. And what did you observe? Did you hear --

24 A. Well, what I had, what I observed was the duck trying to
25 navigate in choppy water. I, I'm -- I've been doing this a while.

1 I know when boats are struggling, and this boat was obviously
2 struggling. It was, it looked like for a moment it was going to
3 drift into our stiff arms.

4 Q. Could you --

5 A. Stiff arms are what attaches our barge to the land. And our
6 boat ties to the barge. So and we also run utilities and all. So
7 I was a little concerned. And then, you know, I was just -- I was
8 sitting there, he might be okay if he just set right there, I --
9 but he was able to fight around and get along our starboard side,
10 which would be our right-hand side, and he started to walk along
11 there.

12 I was in, I moved up to our second deck theater, where I
13 could see the boat, keep an eye on it through the windows. And as
14 I was watching it, he was still struggling, he was still
15 struggling. People were asking me to go help the boat because
16 people were starting to get nervous. And there was nothing we
17 could do, render assistance in that way. So we -- I just watched
18 the boat. And kept getting radio calls that the boat was in
19 distress, and we're like, we acknowledge that. It looked like the
20 boat was in distress.

21 Q. Was this from the duck boat?

22 A. No. This was not from the duck boat. I apologize. That was
23 from guests and other employees on the boat as I was walking
24 through the theater, people would stop me and say like, you know,
25 do something.

1 Of course, you know, what can you do? And I watched the boat
2 until it disappeared around our stern, which is the back of the
3 boat, where the paddle wheels are. And I went to maneuver myself
4 to third deck where you can -- so I can observe the boat as it was
5 in the stern, because I was really, I was pretty concerned about
6 it.

7 As I was making my way, I didn't have sight of the boat, I
8 hear a radio call that says the boat has sunk and there's people
9 in the water. So immediately I began rescue operations at that
10 point.

11 We were unable to launch our rescue boat to the sustained 70
12 miles an hour wind at the time. It swamped our rescue boat. So
13 we could not do that. So I then began organizing rescue efforts
14 by flotation device, dropping line, and we were pulling people.
15 And we actually had some people that jumped in the water to try to
16 save people.

17 And so I set up, basically, two stern, back of the boat
18 stations for rescue, and we had one on the bow, and we had one on
19 our starboard bow where our rescue boat is, because we have a
20 ladder down there. And we were just, we were just going from
21 there. I was running back and forth.

22 But as far as the boat, I watched it for as long as I could.
23 And as soon as I took my eyes off it, that's when --

24 Q. So you didn't actually physically see it sink because you
25 were making your way up top --

1 A. I was going to go to where I could keep seeing it.

2 Q. -- to kind of just a better position --

3 A. Yeah, yeah.

4 Q. -- to see the boat.

5 A. Yeah.

6 CPL. MATTHEWS: Were you able to see it at all? Or when you
7 got to your vantage point, was it --

8 MR. PLYBON: No. I didn't even get to -- once I heard on the
9 radio traffic that it did, I automatically went to main deck and
10 we just started organizing. I was just directing people. And,
11 yeah.

12 BY CPL. CRABTREE:

13 Q. And your, so then how big is your little rescue boat that you
14 have there?

15 A. Oh, it's --

16 Q. Is it a 12-foot?

17 A. It's -- yeah, well, less than that. I mean, it's just a
18 little two-person rescue boat. It's not inflatable. It's hard
19 plastic. And it's -- like I said, the winds out there, it's just
20 not -- it went --

21 Q. Do you know, and, again, you may not, were those -- do you
22 know if those duck boats had been out on the water and returning?
23 Or were they launching?

24 A. To my knowledge -- I don't know their procedures; I'm not too
25 familiar with that. But what I gathered, and what the consistency

1 has been all season with them and their traffic is they launch
2 here at the south end of a ramp, there's a duck ramp for them.
3 And they go around this island, and they come in up north, just to
4 our stern there's another ramp where they exit the -- so, come --
5 the way he was coming made me think that he launched into the
6 water and was making his way up north.

7 Q. So you bring up a good point there. So about what time --
8 how long would it take for them -- could you estimate? I mean, if
9 you can't that's fine.

10 A. See, I really can't estimate that. I really don't know.

11 Q. That's fine.

12 A. I really don't know. I don't know what his intentions were
13 when he got underway, you know. I don't know what his intentions
14 were getting back, if he was -- I just don't know.

15 Q. Was the storm a sudden storm or was there, I mean, as far as
16 -- I understand there was probably some type of forecast, but --

17 A. Well --

18 Q. -- some of these things you can't anticipate.

19 A. Well, yes, that is true. But I can speak for us. We are
20 very efficient. And I knew that this storm was going to be coming
21 at that time. I kind of knew it was coming around 1:00. I
22 watched the radar for -- there was two systems. One system had --
23 was up north, was -- they were two systems right behind each
24 other, it looked like to me. And when I got underway on my 4:00
25 cruise, I noticed that that was north of Springfield, around

1 Bolivar area. But it was dissipating. So I was, like, okay,
2 well, I've got time to do a nice cruise for my 4:00. But I
3 noticed the storm behind that, which eventually was this storm,
4 was coming. So you could say I felt, imminently knew it was going
5 to hit around 4, just from experience. You know, just dealing
6 with water, being a captain for years.

7 So when I got back to dock on the 4 p.m. cruise, which I
8 would have been all secure at the dock about 10 till 6, I had the
9 crew throw extra lines on because I had received a report, also,
10 too, that said if this hits, there's a chance that it could have
11 70 mile an hour winds with hail, and so I just -- I threw the
12 lines on and, you know, just kind of held on.

13 The -- as far as, like, the storm, storm did not take me by
14 surprise. That's what --

15 Q. And you brought up a question I'd like to ask you, is how
16 long have you been a captain?

17 A. This is -- let's see here, I've been a licensed merchant
18 marine officer for, excuse me, I'm just -- a licensed merchant
19 marine officer for 7 years. Been in the industry about a decade.
20 Yeah.

21 Q. 17 years pretty much, around about?

22 A. Well, the whole industry. I've been in -- I'm still
23 relatively new, but I've done a lot of driving.

24 Q. Yeah.

25 A. So -- um-hum.

1 Q. So you were nowhere around any kind of radio to hear
2 their -- I mean, I don't know if you can their frequency or
3 whatever or not?

4 A. We can from the wheelhouse. Like I said, I had our
5 Captain Jake up in the wheelhouse. He was freed up; I had him up
6 in the wheelhouse doing a wheelhouse watch.

7 And we were having -- when that storm came, we had to bring
8 up our propulsion to keep our boat, you know, to help the lines,
9 to keep our -- that's how bad this storm was. We were fighting
10 our boat to stay at dock, even with the lines -- you know, the
11 lines probably would have held. But you don't want to -- you
12 know, you don't want to risk that with your people on board, so
13 you're taking actions to do that.

14 So we had started boarding some people, and then we cut off
15 boarding when the storm arrived. So we were, you know, we were
16 just trying to save our vessel too.

17 And, yeah, and like Jake was up in the wheelhouse, and I do
18 believe he had some contact with the ducks. But it was mainly the
19 ducks were wondering what our intentions were. They thought we
20 were getting underway, and we said no, we're just trying to hold
21 the boat to the dock.

22 And that, to me, to my knowledge, that's the only
23 conversation that happened between our vessel and their vessel.

24 Q. And this Captain Jake, was he up there with you?

25 A. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

1 Q. Is he the one that (indiscernible) --

2 A. He's the Carnival Cruise Line. Um-hum. Yeah.

3 Q. So he is going to be contacted.

4 A. Yeah. He's -- they said, yeah.

5 Q. What's his last name, Captain Jake?

6 A. Stroud.

7 Q. Stroud.

8 A. S-t-r-o-u-d.

9 Q. I understand you've probably been interviewed several times,
10 probably --

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. -- by the Coast Guard and everything. Is there anything that
13 you might want to let us know, that you, maybe they've asked or
14 that you might think's pertinent, or --

15 A. I mean, to be honest with you, as far as what happened with
16 the duck, I have no idea. Obviously, I knew he was in distress.
17 He's a, you know, he's a pretty good size boat. I mean, there was
18 nothing we could do for him except for, you know, we would -- I
19 mean, we would have -- you know, I mean, it's just, I don't know
20 what his intentions were. I don't know what his plan was, what he
21 was doing in that weather, what he thought he could handle in that
22 weather, I don't know any of that. All I -- like, generally, I
23 just watched it. And there's just, I kind of knew we were going
24 to need to be ready, just in case. And we were. We were able to
25 start a rescue operation. So I'm, you know --

1 Q. So basically, I just want to make sure you -- the first boat
2 had already probably passed when you initially saw --

3 A. The first boat -- everybody talked about two boats, and this
4 was later after the rescue, that they talked about two boats. I
5 must have just been so focused on the one, because I could really
6 tell he was -- it just looked like he was, he -- you know, he
7 looked like he was listing. It looked -- it didn't look right.

8 I did see video of the other boat, the first boat that I
9 didn't know was there. And that boat looked a little more stable.
10 I don't know. Like I said, that's just me, you know, being an eye
11 -- you know, just being a spectator at that point. I was watching
12 and just, you know, I was rooting for him, you know.

13 Q. All right. Mr. Plybon, if there's, for any reason, we come
14 back, or we have something --

15 A. Yeah.

16 Q. -- that we might need to ask you later on, do you mind if we
17 come back and contact you?

18 A. You can contact me anytime. You have my number, 24/7.
19 That's what I'm here for. And, like I said, I just appreciate the
20 Missouri State Highway Patrol, and all these agencies. Yeah.

21 Q. Appreciate your cooperation.

22 A. Yeah.

23 CPL. CRABTREE: We're going to conclude this interview. The
24 time is 18:14 hours.

25 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD


IN THE MATTER OF: CAPSIZE AND SINKING OF STRETCH DUCK 7
 ON TABLE ROCK LAKE, BRANSON, MISSOURI,
 JULY 19, 2018
 Interview of Captain James Plybon

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA18MM028

PLACE: Branson, Missouri

DATE: July 20, 2018

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.



Karen Coen Brooks
Transcriber