

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: ELIJAH ROMERO

Branson, Missouri

Saturday,
July 21, 2018

APPEARANCES:

MICHAEL KARR, Marine Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

MARY PAT McKAY, M.D., Chief Medical Officer
National Transportation Safety Board

JAMES GILLETTE
U.S. Coast Guard

TRAVIS HITCHCOCK
TROOPER ROBERT WILKINS
Missouri State Highway Patrol (MSHP)

FRANK ENGLISH
Ride the Ducks

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I N T E R V I E W

(11:10 a.m.)

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2
3 MR. KARR: This is Mike Karr of the National Transportation
4 Safety Board. We're in Branson, Missouri. It's, on July 21st.
5 It's 11:33. We're going to go around the room and introduce
6 ourselves as we prepare to interview Elijah Romero.

7 MR. GILLETTE: Hi, Elijah. My name is I'm Jim Gillette. I'm
8 an Investigator with the U.S. Coast Guard.

9 MR. ENGLISH: I'm Frank English, Ride the Ducks.

10 MR. KARR: Just go to you, Mary Pat.

11 DR. McKAY: Mary Pat McKay, with the NTSB.

12 MR. HITCHCOCK: Travis Hitchcock, with the Highway Patrol,
13 Missouri.

14 MR. WILKINS: Robert Wilkins, Missouri Highway Patrol.

15 MR. ROMERO: I'm Elijah Romero. I work as a Deckhand on the
16 Showboat *Branson Belle*.

17 MR. KARR: All right. Thanks.

INTERVIEW OF ELIJAH ROMERO

18
19 BY MR. KARR:

20 Q. And what I'd like you to do is just two basic questions I'd
21 like to start out with. I'd like you to do all the talking. And
22 that is, you know, how long you been a deckhand with, onboard the
23 vessel, and if you've got any other maritime experience, tell me
24 about that. And then tell us the story of what you saw that, at
25 that time, that day, surrounding the events of the sinking of the

1 duck.

2 A. So, I have been a deckhand on the showboat since February of
3 this year. I have no prior experience in the maritime field prior
4 to that.

5 That day I was up top, it was me, Garret Spain and Officer
6 Fields of the Stone County Sheriff's Department, we were up on the
7 landing doing tickets. Garret was searching bags, I was scanning
8 tickets, and we always have an officer aboard our boat when we go
9 out. So, the officer's up there during boarding with us, you
10 know, to make sure everything goes okay.

11 We knew that a storm was going to be rolling in, because our
12 captain had talked about it. And when we came back on the next
13 cruise, we had to, you know, throw all our extra lines on. So, we
14 had all our night lines on to secure our boat.

15 There wasn't really any word to us about how bad the storm
16 was going to be or anything like that. And then, when the storm
17 got closer, it was in a matter of about 30 seconds, went from 0
18 wind to, you know, 50 mile an hour winds. And the ducks were
19 already in the water, you know. When they splashed in, the
20 weather was good. I don't know how updated they keep on the
21 weather. I know that generally all the past experience on this
22 boat, if we have bad weather coming, we always let them know,
23 because they communicate with us every time they're going in our
24 ramp and coming up on the other ramp. So, I don't know if that
25 was communicated to them, though.

1 But, I saw the duck boats fighting the storm, and they were,
2 you know, I can't tell you how many feet off our starboard they
3 were, but I lost sight of the two ducks when they went around the
4 bow, because I'm up top here doing tickets. And they came out
5 from behind the stern. The one duck made it, and then the other
6 duck was coming, and he was broadside to the storm, taking waves
7 to his port. And as soon as the windows in the back of the boat
8 dropped below the water line on the stern, the whole thing went
9 down in 10 seconds, it was gone. The whole thing was under water,
10 and we could see people floating in the water.

11 So, Fields asked for my phone. I don't know who he made a
12 call to, probably his department, or some sort of rescue. And
13 then he handed my phone back.

14 We were running down the stairs from the landing where we
15 take tickets. And I got to our barge, and, or the bridge to our
16 barge, and the whole thing was shaking from the wind and the
17 waves, and looked like it might break off. But just said screw
18 it, and full sprint across to the barge. I put on a work vest,
19 because the work vests were just laying all over our barge. I put
20 on a work vest, and they had already pulled up the ramp to our
21 boat, because I guess the chains had been snapped on it from the
22 winds.

23 With all our lines tied, and the boat full astern, you know,
24 as hard as he could go, it still moved us forward about, like, a
25 foot and a half. So, the ramp was already up. I couldn't get to

1 the life ring. But there was a server standing there, and I said
2 hand me the life ring, because it's the one that a 65-foot rope
3 attached to it. And I ran with that to our tugboat where there
4 was people clinging to the -- that were washing up to the side of
5 the tugboat, and people clinging to the stiff arm to our barge,
6 the north stiff arm.

7 And there was a girl, she was probably, like, 14, 15,
8 clinging to it. And I threw her the life ring first, and I said
9 grab the ring. She just looked at me. So, I said grab the effing
10 ring. And she grabbed it. And I pulled her to the stern of our
11 tugboat. And then I grabbed her by the arm and the leg and threw
12 her up onto our tugboat.

13 And then I threw the ring again, and Stacy, another deckhand,
14 was already down there, and Cory West, another deckhand, a senior
15 deckhand was already down there with us, pulling people up onto
16 the tugboat. And I threw the ring to the second lady, and she
17 grabbed it, and she was a little bit bigger lady, and Stacy helped
18 me pull her up onto the boat.

19 Then me and Stacy pulled a much larger lady out of the water
20 that was deceased.

21 And, you know, Stacy has 20 years in the army, 17 of it as a
22 combat medic. So, he was already in his combat mind frame, and
23 said let's just move on to somebody we could help. So, we just
24 left here there on the stern of the tugboat.

25 I went over to the side and helped get a lady out, but she

1 was also deceased, as well.

2 And then there was somebody that was, I guess he was a guest,
3 because he had one of our life vests on. He put our life vest on
4 and jumped in, and he saw up, and I said give me your hand, and I
5 was going to get him out of the water. And he said take the kid
6 first, and he handed me a kid that was probably about the size of
7 my 7-year-old, little black kid wearing a green shirt. And so, I
8 grabbed the kid and pulled him up on the tugboat. And he had,
9 like, a, I don't know, he had all this liquid coming out of his
10 mouth, looked like bile mixed with everything else. So, I turned
11 him to his side to try to get it to come out, you know, the
12 fluids. And then I started doing CPR on him, but no response.
13 And they said let's get him up there to the EMT. Someone picked
14 him up and took him up top.

15 And helped that passenger. Well, he had got up under his own
16 power, but I just helped him the rest of the way onto the tugboat.

17 And then I -- the people, the two people that wouldn't grab
18 the life ring, that were holding onto the stiff arm, people on top
19 of the stiff arm helped them get up onto the stiff arm.

20 And after that, I went to the stern of our boat, but I took a
21 rope from the tugboat with me, because I was going to the paddle
22 wheels, because there were still people in the paddles. A group
23 of I don't know how many people had rotated our starboard side
24 paddlewheel up to get a lady up there. And the deck behind our
25 paddlewheel, you know, is, I don't know, a foot and a half wide,

1 directly behind our paddles. And that's where they had this lady
2 laying. And she was in shock, but she was alive. And my buddy,
3 Stacy, was trying to, you know, get here to better area.

4 And the storm had died down a little bit And, I figured, you
5 know, what's a little rug burn to drowning. So I just grabbed her
6 by her feet and slid her across the deck, and pulled her to a
7 better position. Then he got her on her side, and was, you know,
8 they were doing what he could to keep her from, you know, dying
9 from shock. And I don't remember exactly what county, or who the
10 boat was with, but there was a boat that had a Stokes basket
11 hooked to the top of it. And I said get their basket, get their
12 basket. And there was people standing out on the fantail with us
13 by the paddlewheels, and they said hey, we need your basket. So,
14 that boat unclipped their Stokes basket and handed it to us. We
15 rolled that lady up on her side, and put the basket behind her,
16 flipped her onto the basket, and then we took her from the fantail
17 of the boat over to the barge so she could go to the EMTs.

18 After that, I went over to the other paddlewheel, and there
19 was two bodies floating down between the paddles who were
20 deceased. So, I don't know, there was someone that wanted to --
21 one of our wait staff that wanted to climb down there to get them,
22 and I said they're gone, don't risk climbing down there, you could
23 drown, too.

24 So, from there, after that, pretty much, everybody was
25 already pulled out of the water, and everybody that was still in

1 the water was dead. The boat came around, like a rescue boat,
2 that was just recovering all the dead.

3 And me and our captain, Jacob Shroud, turned the port-side
4 paddlewheel to get the bigger lady that was stuck between the
5 paddles, you know, to push her out the back of the boat to where
6 that boat could grab her. When we did that, I said there was
7 another person floating in the paddles. There was two people dead
8 in there. I guess that other person had floated out, and was
9 between our boat and our barge, but they had already picked them
10 up, because we could fit small boats in there.

11 After that, it was just collecting up the dead people.

12 I went and helped offload the lady that we had pulled up that
13 was the bigger lady, and she was on the stern of the, our tugboat.

14 Then the other lady that was on our tugboat, deceased,
15 everybody was already exhausted. They were trying to pick her up.
16 And I just got my arms under her and said let her go, I got her.
17 Picked her up and carried her over to the boat collecting the dead
18 people.

19 Then I heard them say there's a kid inside. And that was the
20 kid that I had pulled out of the water. And they said is he
21 covered. And I told them no. So, they threw me a blanket, and I
22 tossed it up to a firefighter. And then he brought me that kid
23 back. I just waited on the tugboat. And he handed me the kid
24 down from our barge. And I walked the kid across the tugboat, and
25 handed him off to the boat that was collecting the bodies.

1 Then I went from our tugboat to the bow of our boat where
2 there was another deceased person. And we loaded them into our
3 Stokes basket, and four officers walked them down the stage which
4 is the, you know, ramp coming off the front of our boat to the
5 boat that was collecting the bodies. And I stuck the rope through
6 and put it the way that we do when we're doing man overboard
7 drills. That way if I lock up on it, I can hold all their weight,
8 because it'll lock the rope into place. And that way none of the
9 officers fell. And they carried them down, and offloaded that
10 person.

11 After that, you know, all the bodies were picked up besides
12 the one the divers had to go look for.

13 So, I just worked on calming down the people that were in
14 shock, you know, with our company, and the servers and stuff. And
15 I just told them, look, you did everything that you could. I need
16 you to calm down. You did a good job. I need you to go check in
17 with your supervisor so they can get a headcount and we can know
18 that all our people are all right.

19 After that, it was nothing else, I was just calming people
20 down. Because some of them don't have the life experiences some
21 of us have, so I was already pretty calm and not shaken from the
22 situation. So, I just worked on calming down people that weren't.

23 Other than that, there's nothing really to tell. That's --

24 Q. Thanks for sharing all that information.

25 Going back to what you saw of the duck, you mentioned water

1 going over the stern. Did you actually see that happen?

2 A. Yeah. We were watching from the top, so I --

3 Q. What I'd like you to do is, yeah, give me a detailed, you
4 know, almost second by second of what you perceived was the vessel
5 sinking.

6 A. So, I was standing up taking tickets. And, you know, you got
7 a clear view of the whole, our vessel. They had already cleared
8 our stern, and they were about directly astern of our boat, I
9 don't know, 80, 100 feet. And they were broadside to the storm.
10 Because the storm was coming straight out of the north. The waves
11 were hitting it.

12 Q. I'm going to have to ask a simple question right now. I
13 haven't taken my chart out. But as far the way the
14 Showboat *Branson Belle*, which way is north?

15 A. So, north is, it's pretty much north directly from our stern.

16 Q. So, it's directly facing north?

17 A. Yeah. I would say that's north, and the tugboat's coming up
18 here. And he's trying to make it to the north duck ramp to get
19 out of the water. That's where --

20 Q. When you say that, are you --

21 A. -- the other one had already got out.

22 Q. Where's the tugboat now? Is that on the north or south side
23 of --

24 A. The tugboat is on the north end of our barge. Like, there's
25 the stiff arms, and our tugboat sits right there at that north

1 stiff arm.

2 You want me to draw you like a picture?

3 But they were probably about 80, 100 feet from the stern,
4 like, directly behind the stern of our boat. And --

5 Q. Is the stern of your boat where the tugboat is now located?

6 A. So, here's our boat, we're connected to the barge, there's
7 the stiff arms coming out from it, we're right, that's, the
8 tugboat's right here, connected to our barge and the stiff arm
9 with a cable to it. And their boat was over here somewhere.

10 From the view up here, it looked like it was just about, you
11 know, 80, 100 feet directly behind our boat. And the swells were
12 hitting them, and they were taking it to the port, because they
13 were trying to make it to that north duck ramp. And the storm was
14 blowing out of the north. And you could see them, you know,
15 getting rocked by the waves. And the wave coming up over the bow
16 of their boat. But as soon as -- I don't know if it was water
17 inside their boat shifting, or what it was, but their boat
18 shifted, just like this, and the stern dropped in. And as soon as
19 those back windows went below the waterline, it was no more than
20 10, 15 seconds, and the whole thing went down.

21 Q. And when you say the back windows, are there windows on
22 the stern that you're talking about? Or windows --

23 A. There's windows all across. It's a bus. There's
24 windows across the whole side of it. So, when the stern dropped,
25 those windows there at the back went below the water line. And

1 once those went behind the water line, it was 10, 15 seconds, and
2 the whole vessel had gone under.

3 Q. Were you close enough where you could actually see the water
4 flowing over the side of the boat into the --

5 A. No. I just saw it dip down below the waterline. And once it
6 did, it was 10, 15 seconds, and it was gone. And I was all the
7 way up here where we take tickets, at the top of our --

8 Q. And you saw that?

9 A. -- landside.

10 Q. All right. Thanks for answering that.

11 MR. KARR: Any?

12 MR. GILLETTE: Yeah.

13 BY MR. GILLETTE:

14 Q. I just have a few follow-up questions on what you were just
15 talking about. One, did you hear any type of announcements from
16 the duck, any type of PA announcements or anything like that?

17 A. No.

18 Q. And then the other one has to do with passengers exiting the
19 duck. When you were talking about the water coming in, when did
20 you start seeing passengers leaving the duck? Can you kind of --

21 A. Didn't see anyone. I watched the duck go under, but I
22 honestly never saw anybody jump out of it. Like, I watched it for
23 having a rough time getting to the ramp all the way to the stern
24 dropping under and the duck going under. And after the duck went
25 completely under, I saw the people were already out in the water.

1 Q. So, you didn't see any people before --

2 A. Actually jumping out.

3 Q. -- the duck went under?

4 A. No. I didn't actually see them jumping out.

5 Q. Thank you, Elijah.

6 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I have no questions.

7 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I have no questions.

8 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: You mentioned, so you put a PFD on when
9 you went and started going the rescues? Is that what I
10 understood?

11 MR. ROMERO: We put on, I put on a work vest.

12 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: The PFDs -- what is a work vest, I
13 guess?

14 MR. ROMERO: So, the PFD is, it goes over their head, and the
15 strap goes around them. And it'll float you with your face up,
16 like, if the person's unconscious, or just waiting for rescue.
17 Our work vests are more mobile. They have stuff to help you
18 float. But it's on the back. And then right here, and you clip
19 it around in front of you, it's not as big and cumbersome. It's
20 not meant to float you, you know, it's meant for more of a
21 conscious person to help you keep buoyant if you were in the water
22 if you fell in or something like that.

23 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Do you know if those are Coast Guard
24 approved life jackets then, or -- if you don't know, that's fine.

25 MR. ROMERO: I honestly don't know. But, I mean, as much as

1 the Coast Guard comes and checks us, I don't think that they're
2 not. But I'm not going to make a statement on whether they are or
3 not.

4 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: And did anybody that you rescued or
5 pulled from the water, did any of them have on lifejackets or
6 PFDs?

7 MR. ROMERO: No. So, not a, that was one thing that
8 dumbfounded a lot of us is not a single person that came out of
9 the duck had a lifejacket on.

10 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Thank you.

11 MR. ROMERO: The only people with a lifejacket was one of the
12 guests that I was helping pull out, that handed me a kid. And he
13 was one our guest that put that on before he jumped in to get
14 people.

15 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Thank you.

16 BY MR. KARR:

17 Q. And the, do you know the name of that guest? Or does your
18 company know the name of that guest?

19 A. Not that I know of. No.

20 Q. And the child that he had, did he -- did the child survive?

21 A. No. He was dead. Because when the boat was coming around
22 and collecting the bodies, they said hey, we got a child up here.
23 They passed me the blanket, I handed off to the firefighter, like
24 I said. And he brought me back the kid. But I could still his
25 face and his shirt. It was the kid that I pulled out of the water

1 and did CPR on. He was deceased.

2 Q. All right. Thanks.

3 MR. KARR: All right. Any other questions?

4 MR. GILLETTE: I just have one.

5 BY MR. GILLETTE:

6 Q. Just, did you have to do any medical attention yourself?

7 A. What do you mean? Like seek medical attention for myself --

8 Q. Yes.

9 A. -- afterwards?

10 Q. Yes. Yes. Okay. Thank you.

11 MR. KARR: All right. Well, good. Thank you.

12 MR. ROMERO: Okay.

13 MR. KARR: Well, that ends the -- let's see, it's 11:54. And
14 this ends the interview.

15 (Whereupon, at 11:54 a.m., the interview was concluded.)

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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 Elijah Romero

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA18MM028

PLACE: Branson, Missouri

DATE: July 21, 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