

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

In the Matter of: *
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 *
 ALLISION WITH STATEN ISLAND *
 FERRY TERMINAL MAINTENANCE * DCA-04-MM-001
 PIER AT ST. GEORGE'S, *
 STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK BY THE *
 FERRY ANDREW J. BARBERI on *
 OCTOBER 15, 2003 *
 *

Monday
October 20, 2003

Staten Island, NY

INTERVIEW

LIEUTENANT ROBERT NOLA

PRESENT:

ROB JONES, NTSB
RICHARD GONZALEZ, USCG
BRIAN CLIFFORD, NYPD
JACK CALDERONE, FDNY

P R O C E E D I N G S

1
2 MR. JONES: Okay. This is an NTSB interview
3 with Lieutenant Robert Nola. And my name is Rob Jones
4 with the National Transportation Safety Board. And I
5 will go around the room and Richard Gonzalez from the
6 U.S. Coast Guard. Brian Clifford from the NYPD, Harbor
7 Unit. And Jack Calderone from FDNY.

8 And Bob, if you could just take us back on
9 the night in question, the October 15, when you first
10 received the call and take us from there.

11 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Okay. I first received the
12 call, dispatch information was, we received it over the
13 radio as we were responding, boat hit dock hard. The
14 exact words. We were told to respond to the upper
15 level of the ferry. Upon arrival there was no
16 indication in front of us anywhere, there was nobody to
17 meet us there, nobody gave us any information or
18 direction. The next we entered through the ferry
19 terminal, tried to get onto the ramps, and went to the
20 information booth and the woman said, I don't know
21 anything about what you are talking about.

22 We finally did go around the boat, itself and
23 one of men opened the entrance doors from the ferry and
24 we got into the ramp areas from there. We proceeded
25 through all the ramp areas there is no boats in the

1 docks there. We received a radio communication from
2 the truck company that they were heading towards a pier
3 where they had reports of a man in the water. We then
4 went to the lower level, started heading towards the
5 dock area, towards the pier area where the report of a
6 man was in the water, and before we arrived there, we
7 got a report that we had one man in the water, he is
8 out and the boat was damaged. The next report we got
9 was through the battalion, I believe, where they said
10 they had possibly one DOA, that there was a lieutenant,
11 fire department lieutenant on the boat and that was the
12 only report we got.

13 We then waited at the boat, asking personnel
14 around the area if they knew where they were going to
15 bring the boat in. Nobody had any information for us.

16 Finally, I think it was a PD member said they were
17 bringing it into slip five. And we finally found slip
18 five, waited at the dock as the boat came. We saw the
19 damage on the side, and we waited for the boat to dock.

20 When it was coming there were, I guess they
21 were ferry hands, it looked like a normal docking of
22 the boat. Ferry hands were out there, and the guy that
23 was running the lift, he said, well, you, guys, may
24 want to stand back, you know, if the boat hits it, or
25 whatever. So, we actually stood back a little bit.

1 And then as soon as it came to the dock, we boarded.

2 What had happened prior to that was we didn't
3 know where any victims were or anything. I was in the
4 engine company, the captain of the truck company, we
5 split our forces. I sent him, asked him to take his
6 crew to the upper level, aboard the boat, because what
7 was coming into, there were numerous people on top with
8 life preservers around their neck. And just the deck
9 hands on the bottom. We didn't see any people exiting
10 the boat off the bottom. So, we entered and I gave
11 reports to the battalion chief as soon as I walked in
12 and saw the mass of carnage. One of the first things I
13 saw was, there was a victim to my right. Now this is,
14 I don't know how you want to describe the front of the
15 boat, the back of the boat.

16 MR. JONES: As you are walking into it.

17 LIEUTENANT NOLA: As I am walking into the
18 boat, we would consider the back of the boat.

19 MR. JONES: Yes, that is fine.

20 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Okay. Completely to my right
21 was the first victim that I saw, was sitting up, face
22 disfigured and his eye was popping out, whatever. I
23 sent one man to him. He says he has got no pulse.
24 They moved on to the next one. EMS boarded with us,
25 and to our left where they were away from the debris,

1 were several victims, sitting there waiting, different
2 injuries, whatever. I only had three men with me. They
3 proceeded to perform the triage on the first victims we
4 came upon. I gave a report to the battalion chief that
5 we had numerous injuries. We needed EMS and more
6 personnel on the scene.

7 From that point it gets a little foggy
8 because we were working on them. And I just went
9 looking for victims. By that time the truck company
10 had made its way down the stairs and half the team
11 split their team. They came back down the front stairs
12 and they were with me going through. And they split the
13 rest of the truck up and they went through the top deck
14 looking for victims.

15 There was, I did see, to my left when I was
16 walking around, the first ones that I saw after we made
17 the initial contact, was the gentleman with his legs
18 cutoff with a belt around him. A nurse had already had
19 the belt around his legs and she was with him. To the
20 right of him were the two DOAs. We checked them. We
21 went to the front of the boat, people were yelling,
22 people are trapped up there. At that time the truck
23 company came up with me, and they started just removing
24 debris, looking for people. And at that point, the
25 truck got involved in the extraction. My men were

1 still at the back of the boat waiting for the EMS. I
2 gave another report that we had numerous DOAs, and that
3 we had trapped victims. And from there we just,
4 everybody just started working and getting people out.
5 Doing searches of people.

6 MR. JONES: Let me just ask you to speak up
7 just a little more, so I can hear you.

8 But, when you said that the two victims that,
9 you saw the two DOAs next to the guy with his legs cut
10 off.

11 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Right. They were, as I was
12 walking on, they were to my right and the victim with
13 his legs cut off was to the left, right in that general
14 area.

15 MR. JONES: Can you describe that area,
16 halfway into the boat? By the bathrooms?

17 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I would say they were about
18 a third into the boat.

19 MR. JONES: Okay. Did you see another cluster
20 of DOAs pass that, if you can remember?

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: To the right, that
22 gentleman, a couple of people sitting, I remember them
23 sitting, waiting. And at that point I went directly up
24 to the front of the boat.

25 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: In relation to where

1 the first victim was, against the wall on the right,
2 where were these other two?

3 LIEUTENANT NOLA: On right to the left of
4 that. They were immediately when we got on the boat,
5 maybe 20, 30 steps into the boat, 20, 30 feet into the
6 boat and they were away from the debris, debris was
7 piled on, and they were kind of like in like the
8 center, in like the aisle, that small aisle way that
9 there was.

10 MR. JONES: Okay. So the one to the right,
11 with the eye popped out, was he DOA?

12 LIEUTENANT NOLA: He was DOA.

13 MR. JONES: Okay. So, that is the one, that is
14 the one you were talked about.

15 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Right.

16 MR. JONES: Okay. Then you said two to the
17 right of Paul Esposito, is that the same two or
18 different two --

19 LIEUTENANT NOLA: That was the very first one
20 that I saw. And then the amputee, and to the right of
21 where the amputee was there were two bodies. At the
22 end of where all the wreckage was, but, I believe one
23 was cut in half, or severed in half.

24 MR. JONES: Yes.

25 LIEUTENANT NOLA: So we had them confirmed,

1 too, and then my men were working on, there was someone
2 off to the left of the amputee, sitting there that they
3 worked on. And I started heading towards the front of
4 the boat.

5 MR. JONES: Okay. All right. What we are
6 trying to do is just like I described before, trying to
7 pinpoint where some of these people were, knowing
8 though everybody was just running the whole time away
9 from this.

10 LIEUTENANT NOLA: There wasn't anybody exiting
11 off the bottom of the boat.

12 MR. JONES: All right, that was my impression.

13 LIEUTENANT NOLA: No one came off the bottom
14 of the boat when we went on.

15 MR. JONES: So, it was just injured that you
16 encountered.

17 LIEUTENANT NOLA: That were down there.

18 MR. JONES: Okay. And when you started
19 attending to the first couple of people, were there any
20 other units at that time with you or arriving behind
21 you?

22 LIEUTENANT NOLA: There were arriving behind
23 us. I know we were told as to the, all the first alarm
24 assignment was told to report to the upper deck of the
25 ferry and we are SOP in responses that we come up where

1 the bus ramps are and, and come down from there, when
2 we were told to respond to the upper level. So, we
3 actually came down and through the ferry, downstairs,
4 out to the pier, where they said the person was in the
5 water, and then came back and waited for the boat.

6 MR. JONES: But, you were there waiting until
7 the boat came in.

8 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Right.

9 MR. JONES: Okay. And you mentioned an SOP,
10 you have an SOP with the city for dealing with the
11 ferry?

12 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Not with the ferry, itself,
13 in just our response to that area. We get a lot of,
14 the waiting area we access it through the upper level
15 because of all the construction going on down at the
16 bottom, and depending on, we consider one side of the
17 construction site, the other side the access site,
18 coming in off the ramps.

19 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Bob, was that a written
20 SOP or just a company SOP?

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: No, that is a written SOP.

22 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Okay.

23 MR. JONES: Do you ever --

24 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Plus the dispatch
25 information that we got told us to respond to the upper

1 level of the ferry.

2 MR. JONES: Right. You have got to go where
3 you are told.

4 Do you do any drills with the ferry terminal
5 at all? Any mock drills?

6 LIEUTENANT NOLA: With the ferry boat?

7 MR. JONES: With the boat, and you know, with
8 the inclusion of a possible emergency on the ferry a
9 few thousand people.

10 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I have never done one.

11 MR. JONES: Okay.

12 LIEUTENANT NOLA: We have had, what we called
13 our multi unit drill site has, actually for this month,
14 and a couple of past months, has been the construction
15 area involving the ferry to familiarize ourselves with
16 its progress, where things are located. We did have
17 in, I guess, it was six months ago, an accident down
18 there with a death, someone was crushed by a crane.
19 Just so we know locations and how to get to the areas.

20 MR. JONES: Because it is changing.

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes. It is constantly
22 changing as they are pouring concrete, there is steel
23 all over. There is no lighting, there is no lighting
24 down there if you respond at night, just to give
25 yourself some way around, how to get into the site.

1 MR. JONES: Okay. When you were, you were on
2 the lower level as the ferry tied up.

3 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes.

4 MR. JONES: What was the demeanor of like the
5 crew members, the handlers for the gate and the ramps?

6 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Seemed like a normal
7 docking. They were just standing there waiting.

8 MR. JONES: So, they, in your eyes didn't have
9 much knowledge of maybe what had gone on or --

10 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I couldn't see how they
11 could not have, they were just calm it seemed. It
12 seemed like a normal ferry docking.

13 MR. JONES: Okay.

14 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Did they pass on any
15 information to you when you went onboard?

16 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I heard one say there is a
17 lot of people in there that need your help. And one of
18 the first person I ran into was Lieutenant Jimmy Lane,
19 who said you have victims all over.

20 MR. JONES: Okay. Who is he now?

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: He was an off duty member
22 that was on the boat. He was the one that gave us our
23 report.

24 MR. JONES: Okay.

25 LIEUTENANT NOLA: He called on the cell phone

1 to our dispatcher, and said that we have one confirmed
2 DOA on the boat. That was the last report I got
3 because I was out of the truck at that time and I
4 didn't have communication with our dispatcher at that
5 time.

6 MR. JONES: Okay. All right, just so we are
7 clear, I am just, right now the first few people I was
8 talking about was the ones that lowered the ramp.

9 LIEUTENANT NOLA: The gentleman that lowered
10 the ramp, all he asked us was to, he was calm, he asked
11 us to stay back because of the boat coming in. He
12 didn't know if it was going to, as he said, obviously
13 there is a problem with the boat, he didn't know if it
14 was going to hit it hard or not.

15 MR. JONES: Okay. And you got a little --

16 LIEUTENANT NOLA: And as the boat came in, it
17 was coming in slow, so we, us and EMS, there was an EMS
18 unit with us, started slowly approaching the, the end
19 of the ramp where the boat was coming in. As soon as
20 the boat hit the dock, we were all on the boat.

21 MR. JONES: And you got more information from,
22 did you access whether they were deck hands as the crew
23 came in, as the boat came in? The deck hands do tie
24 the boat up. What kind of assistance or information
25 did they give you?

1 LIEUTENANT NOLA: We didn't have any
2 information. We had no idea, I had no idea what, what
3 had gone on with the boat, or how much damage or how
4 many, we had no report of how man casualties or
5 anything like that. I didn't know anything until I
6 stepped onto the boat.

7 MR. JONES: Okay. If you can remember, you
8 said none of the passengers came off from the lower
9 level.

10 LIEUTENANT NOLA: No.

11 MR. JONES: Can you remember their state on
12 the upper level as they exited?

13 LIEUTENANT NOLA: On the upper level, they
14 were all crowded on the out, on the outside, on the
15 ramps. The people in front, many people had life
16 preservers on. And as they came in, they were above
17 me, because the ramps stick out.

18 MR. JONES: Yes.

19 LIEUTENANT NOLA: So.

20 MR. JONES: Do you remember if it was orderly,
21 panic, running?

22 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I didn't see any of them
23 exiting off the boat.

24 MR. JONES: Okay. So just passengers with
25 life jackets.

1 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes.

2 MR. JONES: Do you know offhand, talking to
3 your own men, were any of the injured up there and
4 exited the boat that way?

5 LIEUTENANT NOLA: There was, they said that
6 the crowds did rush off the first, they did come across
7 one victim, a woman, who was laying on the deck, she
8 was complaining of chest pains. And they gave a quick
9 assessment of her, called down to the Battalion Chief,
10 which was below, said we need EMS and they are not CFR
11 trained. And they called down we need EMS up here
12 right away. And then they continued on towards more
13 victims that were on the top level.

14 MR. JONES: Okay. Do you know, again this is
15 hearsay, but, it is, you know, I don't want to have to
16 do every one of your guys, did, was there any
17 participation by the crew in assisting the fire
18 department or EMS that you know of?

19 LIEUTENANT NOLA: At the initial stage?

20 MR. JONES: Or throughout.

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes, I do remember, I don't
22 know who it was, I couldn't really tell you if they
23 were a deck hand or, or with the ferry, I remember
24 there was ferry workers waiting as we got on the boat,
25 because they didn't even know, one guy had a radio and

1 he didn't even know which, where the boat was coming
2 in.

3 MR. JONES: Okay.

4 LIEUTENANT NOLA: But, I remember somebody
5 telling me, as I got, as I know when I got up to the
6 front of the boat, there was a pile of wreckage and we
7 had one DOA, decapitated at the front of the boat, and
8 I was trying to go over the pile, and somebody said
9 there is nothing underneath there. There is nothing
10 underneath. Don't stand on that, don't stand on that.
11 And I was assuming that he was somebody from the ferry
12 or because there was, that was the initial --

13 (Pause.)

14 MR. JONES: Were there any passengers
15 assisting you or assisting other, the victims as you
16 walked through, except for the British girl that --

17 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes. Yes, there was people
18 sitting with some of the, the victims. I don't know if
19 they were passengers or at that point, or whether they
20 had come on behind me and passed me. I don't really, I
21 couldn't tell you who they were, whether they were
22 passengers or not. But, I know there were people with
23 some victims, sitting with some of the victims. And I
24 know they didn't have any, I know it wasn't EMS because
25 they didn't have any medical kits with them or

1 anything. They were just --

2 MR. JONES: Okay. Assisting.

3 When you come onto a scene like this, you now
4 are the eyes for the rest of the department, almost.
5 And you see the damage that is there and you are the
6 best person to assess it, do you radio back now what
7 you might need in addition to what you think is being
8 sent?

9 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes.

10 MR. JONES: And did that take place?

11 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes. I called to the Chief
12 in charge, and I told him we had numerous casualties.
13 We were going to need a larger EMS response. And we
14 were going to need more units on the scene.

15 MR. JONES: And how about when a vessel like
16 this, although you don't do vessels all the time, you
17 know, how do you assess structurally what you can out
18 of that? I saw the shoring that was done, but, I mean,
19 do you guys usually carry that kind of timber with you?

20 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Not as a first duty unit or
21 anything like that. And that is, for us on a response
22 like that, that is really not our first concern. We
23 had visible victims that needed to be cared for right
24 away. And to tell you the honest truth, all the
25 structurally members, I didn't even take notice of

1 being gone right away, until I had, I had stopped and
2 looked around.

3 MR. JONES: Right.

4 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Saw the amount of
5 destruction.

6 MR. JONES: Right. That is all I have right
7 now. I am going to turn it over to Mr. Gonzalez from
8 the Coast Guard.

9 MR. GONZALEZ: When you came into the vessel,
10 did you hear anybody that appeared to be from the crew
11 or from the ferry issuing commands or taking control of
12 the situation?

13 LIEUTENANT NOLA: No.

14 MR. GONZALEZ: No.

15 LIEUTENANT NOLA: No.

16 MR. GONZALEZ: And when you guys were
17 responding, did anybody from the ferry or the crew come
18 to approach any of you guys to talk to you?

19 LIEUTENANT NOLA: No.

20 MR. GONZALEZ: And you mentioned that you
21 believe some of the, some of them might have been
22 assisting the victims.

23 LIEUTENANT NOLA: They were on the boat, I
24 don't know if they were assisting victims. I know I
25 got a piece of information that, you know, when I was

1 going over a pile, that somebody knew something about
2 the boat, itself, I was assuming he was somebody from
3 the ferry.

4 MR. GONZALEZ: That is all I have.

5 MR. JONES: Well, they didn't give me much
6 time to think of the next couple of questions here.

7 How about traffic wise, you were the first on
8 the scene, so, pretty much, I think getting down there
9 was okay.

10 LIEUTENANT NOLA: There was no problem for us.

11 MR. JONES: How about units, the last unit to
12 respond, are they all the way back up the ramp or, I
13 mean, is there --

14 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I couldn't tell you.

15 MR. JONES: Okay.

16 LIEUTENANT NOLA: I couldn't tell you.

17 MR. JONES: Or was it just a bottleneck. I
18 don't know, how do you, how would your department
19 normally handle a bottleneck of, when that many units
20 are trying to respond to one area?

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Usually they coordinate with
22 PD, that would close streets and give us access.

23 MR. JONES: Okay. The only other question
24 that has come up and it has just raised by passengers,
25 that especially victims that were sitting there

1 waiting, which when you are hurt, I am sure it seemed
2 like an interminable length of time, was backboards.
3 Do your units carry backboards?

4 LIEUTENANT NOLA: We carry one backboard. And
5 I did give a report that EMS, to tell them to come in
6 with backboards, we had numerous, to the chief in
7 charge, that we were going to need numerous backboards.
8 We had numerous victims. And I remember victims
9 waiting to be transported but we didn't have
10 backboards.

11 MR. JONES: Okay. And is that regular policy
12 for a victim or for assessing a victim that they always
13 should go on a backboard or --

14 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Yes.

15 MR. JONES: Okay.

16 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Especially in a crash
17 situation like that, they are always suppose to be
18 boarded with collars and --

19 MR. JONES: Okay. All right, well, that is
20 it. I appreciate it.

21 LIEUTENANT NOLA: Okay.

22 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)