



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary – DCA22FM024

Interview of: Charles Murphy – Relief Captain of Karen Koby
Date/Time: July 11, 2022 –1330 to 1552 CDT
Location: Jones Walker Office, 201 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, LA
Interviewed by: CWO3 [REDACTED] – USCG, Adam Tucker – NTSB
Attendees: Alan Breaud – Breaud & Myers (representing Rigid Constructors interests), Jeffery Mizzi – President of Marine Operations Rigid Constructors (Party in Interest), Jefferson Tillery – Jones Walker LLP (representing LA Carriers interests), Tommy Plaisance - LA Carriers Operations Manager (Party in Interest), John Plaisance - LA Carriers (Party in Interest), Wayne Zeringue - Jones Walker LLP (representing LA Carriers interests), Brian Capitelli – Capitelli and Wicker (representing Mr. Charles Murphy)
Accident: June 15, 2022, Capsizing and sinking of the e-crane barge *Ambition* in the Gulf of Mexico, about 18 nautical miles offshore of Freshwater Bayou, Louisiana (NTSB No. DCA22FM024).

This interview summary has been compiled based on Coast Guard and NTSB investigator notes taken during the interview of Mr. Chester Murphy, Relief Captain of the Karen Koby.

- Mr. Murphy has worked with LA Carriers for about 2.5 years as captain. He holds a 1600-ton oceans master of towing and STCW. He has had that license for 25 years. He also sailed on supply vessels for 10 years and has about 25 years of experience working with barges. He has operated with crane barges about 5 to 6 times per year.
- On the Karen Koby, they work 28 days on and 14 days off and it was the same crew for the entire time on board. He was about 10 days into his hitch. On board, he works 6 hours on watch and 6 hours off. He works the front watch from 6 to 12.
- When asked how crane barges handle compared to other barges, Mr. Murphy said there was no difference in their handling noting that sometimes with crane barges, visibility can be obstructed and that it can be hard to see around the crane.
- Related to the *Ambition*, Mr. Murphy said he was notified the Karen Koby was going to pick up the *Ambition* a couple of days before, around the 13th of June. They left to head towards the *Ambition* from Larose, LA. It was about an 18-to-20-hour transit.
- When the Karen Koby arrived at the *Ambition*, Mr. Murphy said he was on watch. He did not recall seeing any drafts of the barge. He recalled the barge was down by the bow probably 4 feet out of trim; the bow was about 4 feet deeper than what it was on the stern.
- When the Karen Koby arrived at the *Ambition*, Mr. Murphy said he called Rigid and told them they were there, and he was told they would send a crew out. They put some lines on the barge and waited for the crew to get there. The crew came on board the barge and Ronnie (from Rigid Constructors) introduced himself to the captain. They had a

conversation about where the barge was going. Ronnie told Mr. Murphy that he needed to take the Ambition to Cameron, to Stone Fuel, so they could fuel and ballast the barge before they were to tow it to mile 55 on the lower Mississippi river.

- Mr. Murphy said the spuds for the barge were on the port side and it was spudded down against the bank. With the trim being like it was, Mr. Murphy said he made up on the starboard bow of the barge.
- The Rigid guys then raised the spuds after they finally got the engine started and Ronnie said he was going to drive to Cameron and the Rigid guys were going to follow the tow down the river on the skiff. Once the spuds were up, he turned the barge around and proceeded southbound through the Calcasieu River.
- After getting underway, Mr. Murphy said he grazed green beacon 89 with the port bow of the barge. He noted the day beacon is a wooden post. He lightly rubbed up against it as he was going by. After that, he heard there was a ship inbound and given that he was not comfortable with the way the barge was handling, noting it was crabbing and riding sideways badly, he stopped and got off the hip and made up to the bow of the barge for the push. He decided to push from the bow because it was 4 feet lower than the stern. When asked how the barge handled when on the push, Mr. Murphy said it handled like a dream. He noted that when the Karen Koby was pushing the barge, they had to operate the vessel from the flybridge above the wheelhouse so they could see better around the crane. When they were pushing the barge, the stern was facing downriver.
- The route to the fuel dock was straight down the Calcasieu River.
- After moving the Karen Koby to the push, Mr. Murphy said he got off watch shortly after getting underway with the tow. He was relieved of the watch about noon.
- When asked if he was aware of any issues from when he was off watch regarding the tows transit to the fuel dock, Mr. Murphy said no. While off watch he took a nap, and he went back to the wheelhouse between 1600 and 1630, noting that he went there when he heard the engines slow down. He wanted to supervise/watch over the docking procedure. There was a crew boat where they intended to dock, so they had to wait for the crew boat to move out of the way. The mate that was on watch at that time attempted to put the barge into the north slip where the fuel dock staff wanted them to dock, but with the current running due to the tide coming in, he couldn't get the tow into the slip. Mr. Murphy said he then tried to get the tow to the dock and he did not have any success either with the current, so he backed out and called the fuel dock and told them he couldn't dock there. The dock staff told him that if he didn't get docked by 1630, then they would have to wait for fuel until the next day because they closed at 1700.
- Mr. Murphy said because the crew boat had left, he was able to dock on the outside slip instead of the inside one with no issue. When at the dock, the Rigid crew got on board the barge and fueled the crane and ballasted the barge down. Mr. Murphy said he was not on the barge. He was in the wheelhouse but the deck crew from the Karen Koby were on the barge to do the barge inspection and check everything out. At the fuel dock they went from being on the push to being on the hip again.
- When asked of the draft of the barge after it was ballasted, Mr. Murphy said he did not know the draft but estimated the trim was about a foot higher in the stern than what it was

in the bow. There was about 4-foot of freeboard on the bow and about 5-foot of freeboard on the stern.

- When asked what the Karen Koby deck crew did for the barge inspection, Mr. Murphy said they checked for damage to the barge, general condition of the barge, and manhole covers. He recalled one of the deckhands, Tony, called over the radio and said the barge was missing two manhole covers. Mr. Murphy called Ronnie from Rigid since the Rigid crew had already left. He told Ronnie the manhole covers were off, and that he needed to send someone back to secure it for sea. Ronnie asked him if the Karen Koby's crew could do that, and he told Ronnie no that wasn't their job. Ronnie said he would call the guys back. A couple of guys came back on the barge, and they said they secured the manhole covers. Mr. Murphy again called Ronnie and asked him whether there were any restrictions for the barge, recalling the company dispatcher told him that sometimes with the crane barge being the way it was, that there restricting sea conditions. Mr. Murphy said that Ronnie told him the barge was good to go and to have a good voyage. When asked if he confirmed with Ronnie that the barge was good to go, Mr. Murphy said yes, he did.
- When asked at what point where LA Carriers takes responsibility for a barge for a transit, Mr. Murphy said whenever they depart the dock with the barge for the destination. In this case, when they left Stone Fuel. He also noted they would have been in charge of the barge while in transit down to Stone Fuel as well.
- Mr. Murphy stated that the rigid crew at fuel dock were rushing to get finished because the fuel dock said they were going to close at 1700 and if they weren't done by then, they would have to resume the next day. Only the barge was fueled, the Karen Koby did not take any fuel.
- When Ronnie told Mr. Murphy the barge was ready for sea, he told the deckhands to untie the barge, and he then backed the barge into the river and untied the boat from the barge, topped the boat around and put the barge behind the Karen Koby on the tow wire with about 100-foot of wire and towed the barge out through the jetties. Once the Ambition was clear of the jetties he let out about 1000-foot of tow wire and then commenced the voyage to the mouth of the Mississippi River. Mr. Murphy noted that when the Rigid crew was doing the fueling and ballasting of the barge, that was the time he did the voyage plan and risk assessment.
- When asked if he had ever towed the Ambition before, Mr. Murphy said no. He had done the voyage from the Lake Charles area offshore to the mouth of the Mississippi River an estimated 25 to 30 times but never with a crane barge. There was a total of four crew on the Karen Koby.
- When asked if he had worked with the relief captain Jarrod Williams before, Mr. Murphy said he had worked with him before but did not know when. Mr. Murphy said he was the relief captain at that time and Mr. Williams was the mate.
- Mr. Murphy clarified that Anthony Mills is the captain of the Karen Koby and he, (Mr. Murphy) is the relief captain of the Karen Koby. Mr. Williams is the mate of the Karen Koby. When asked if he was the master of the Karen Koby for the accident voyage, Mr. Murphy said yes, he was.

- When asked what the risk assessment consisted of, Mr. Murphy said it consisted of assessing the winds and seas, the route, current, water depth, air clearances, running lights, and barge running lights, horn, and general alarm. They use a checklist that they print out.
- When asked if there were running lights on the barge, Mr. Murphy said there were, and they were provided by LA Carriers. The tug crew put the lights in place around the time when they left Stone fuel. They were battery operated with solar charging.
- When asked if at any time if he walked the Ambition, Mr. Murphy said no he did not.
- When shown a picture of the barge Ambition, containing a blue railing in the foreground, Mr. Murphy said the picture was taken going down the Calcasieu River from Lake Charles and the railing was from the upper wheelhouse which they call the doghouse.
- When asked of what he recalled being on the deck of the Ambition, Mr. Murphy said there were some cement blocks by the stern, a Conex box, and a generator. There was also a man lift and some portable pumps on the barge. The portable pumps were scattered all over the barge. When asked if any of the items were strapped down, Mr. Murphy said no that he did not see anything strapped down.
- When asked if he noticed anyone check the barges spaces and manholes before getting underway, Mr. Murphy said he had no idea.
- When asked what was reported to him with respect to manhole covers, Mr. Murphy said when they got underway outside the jetties, Tony told him that the Rigid crew placed a pump over one manhole and a piece of angle iron over the other.
- When asked if Tony specified the location of where the items were placed over the manholes, Mr. Murphy said not at that time.
- When asked how the manhole covers on the barge were secured, Mr. Murphy said he does not know.
- When asked about how long it takes to get from Lake Charles to Stone Fuel, Mr. Murphy said it was about 4 hours plus whatever time it took to regroup the tow, maybe 20 to 30 minutes.
- When asked if the barge brushing up against the channel marker was logged, Mr. Murphy said no there was no reason to since they brushed up against it, and it was not enough to cause any damage.
- When asked if there were any issues with the tow before entering the gulf of Mexico, Mr. Murphy said that other than the Ambition being out of trim when they left Lake Charles, no.
- When asked if the current had any effect on the barge when it was under tow in the Gulf of Mexico, Mr. Murphy said he did not recall it being an issue. When asked if there was anything out of the ordinary while the Ambition was under tow in the Gulf of Mexico, Mr. Murphy said there was nothing.
- When asked who made the decision for the 1000-foot tow, Mr. Murphy said he did. He explained that with a short hawser you need that to keep control of the barge. The closer the barge is to the boat, the better it can be controlled. But once offshore with any kind of swell, catenary must be added to the tow wire to keep the bridles and tow wire from

breaking. Mr. Murphy said the seas on this voyage were 2 to 3 feet and that it didn't get over that.

- When asked how far offshore the Ambition was when it capsized, Mr. Murphy said it was 19 miles. They had to go around Trinity Shoal and that they were probably 1 to 1.5 nautical miles off the shoal.
- When asked how barges under tow are monitored while underway, Mr. Murphy said by eyeball. That is something the entire crew is looking at. He personally checks 2 to 3 times during his watch by going outside and looking at the tow gear and making sure the rubbing board is on the bulwarks and making sure the barge is riding good. He would use binoculars and also use the radar variable range marker ring on the end of the barge which would show if the barge is in tow or if the tow wire had parted which would be indicated if the barge gets too far away from the boat. During the accident trip, the barge did not get outside of the variable range marker.
- When asked about what he reported to the oncoming mate at the midnight watch relief, Mr. Murphy said just basic stuff. Traffic, weather, rpms, how the tow was doing during the voyage. It was dark at that time so they couldn't see the barge so he couldn't say much about the tow. There was nothing out of the ordinary at the midnight watch relief.
- When asked when he was informed a problem with the barge, Mr. Murphy said it was about 0330 when the mate came and woke him up and said he thought he had a problem with the barge because the tow had lost about a half a knot of speed. He said he thought he had a problem with the barge, so he got up, looked at his clock, and went to the wheelhouse and looked at the barge using the spotlight. They couldn't really see anything at that time, and probably about 5 minutes later the barge capsized. When asked how he knew the barge capsized, Mr. Murphy said because the boat stopped.
- When asked when he last visually saw the Ambition, Mr. Murphy said that it was about 1800 when they cleared the jetty and let the tow wire out, also the same time he should have started his watch. Once the tow wire was let out, he checked that the barge was riding fine, and it was not taking any spray on the deck. Everything looked good and they had about 2.5 hours where they could see it before it got dark.
- When asked what speed the tow was making, Mr. Murphy said they were making about 4.5 knots when he was on watch.
- When asked if there was anything out of the ordinary that took place during the accident voyage, Mr. Murphy said no. He said he had no idea what caused the barge to capsize.
- When asked, knowing what he knows now, if he would have done anything differently, Mr. Murphy said he probably would have contacted the office regarding the missing manhole covers.
- When asked what the draft of the Karen Koby was, Mr. Murphy said it was 10 feet. The vessel did not have any flanking rudders. The rudders were not able to be split.
- When asked if they have Rosepoint on the vessel, Mr. Murphy said they do. They get speed, position, and AIS information to it. When asked if he was asked to back up the voyage recording from Rosepoint, Mr. Murphy said yes, he was asked to back it up.

- When asked to confirm they utilizing the main wheelhouse and not the doghouse during the offshore tow, Mr. Murphy said they were using the main wheelhouse.
- When asked if there were any production platforms nearby where the Ambition capsized, Mr. Murphy said the closest one was about 4 miles east-northeast from them.
- When asked what rpms the Karen Koby was running at during the voyage, Mr. Murphy said he believed it was about 1050 rpms on each engine. The maximum rpm is 1600.
- When asked about his reference to about 5 minutes after the barge capsized, Mr. Murphy said it was about 5-10 minutes after he arrived in the wheelhouse when the Ambition capsized.
- When asked to recall what he saw when they were looking at the Ambition with the searchlight, Mr. Murphy said both of the main spotlights are turned aft and they are mirror lens lights so they don't shine a focused beam, and with the crows nest, the stacks and everything behind the wheelhouse, he could only see a vague outline of the barge against the stars and its running lights. It looked like the barge had a bit of a port list to it. He could not tell from that distance if it was down by the bow or stern. He described the crane as being a stark structure and it looked like it was listing to port.
- When asked to confirm the reason they knew the barge had capsized, Mr. Murphy said it was because the Karen Koby had stopped.
- When asked to confirm if the tow line or any apparatus had parted from the Ambition, Mr. Murphy said nothing parted. Describing the tow apparatus, Mr. Murphy said the bridles are 55 foot long made up one-inch braided steel rope with an eye in one end and a thimble in the other end that is shackled to a 15-foot nylon shock line with a 55-ton shackle. The shock line is shackled to the tow wire which is an 1 ¾ inch steel rope.
- When asked about the 1000 foot of wire let out, if that was from the stern of the tug to the rake of the barge, Mr. Murphy said it was measured from the radar. The Karen Koby had three radars, one for the doghouse and two for the wheelhouse.
- When asked if they had a fathometer on the Ambition, Mr. Murphy said no it was just on the Karen Koby. When asked of what kind of depths he recalled seeing, Mr. Murphy said there was about 46 feet under the keel of the boat where the Ambition capsized. The total water depth was about 55 feet.
- When asked where the Ambition was picked up at, Mr. Murphy said it was from the Devall fleet around mile 235 on the ICW.
- When asked when he first saw the Rigid crew on the barge Mr. Murphy said it was when the barge was still in the fleet. They came on and cranked the generator and spudded up. They departed the Devall fleet at 1020.
- When asked to explain why they made up to the rake side of the Ambition instead of the square end, when they regrouped out of the Devall fleet, Mr. Murphy said the bow was deeper than the stern. The barge was about 4 feet out of trim. You always make up on the deep end because it turns so much better. If you make up on the light end, you are trying to turn that weight out in front and the barge won't turn properly.
- When asked if he witnessed any of the barge crew pumping out any water from the tanks or voids, Mr. Murphy said he did not.

- When asked if there was any wind when they were having difficulty putting the Ambition alongside at Stone fuel, Mr. Murphy said there was not. The current was running, an estimated 1.5 knots. When asked when trying to get the barge alongside if it hit anything like the dock or bottom, Mr. Murphy said no it did not. There was about 24 feet of water under the boat when they got the barge tied off at the dock, so depth was not an issue at all.
- When asked of the current when they were in transit in the Gulf, Mr. Murphy said there was a westerly current at the time the barge sank, maybe 0.5 knots.
- When asked the sources of weather information he used to looking at the weather forecast for the trip offshore, Mr. Murphy said he used multiple sources. He used an app (Windy) on his phone, NOAA VHF broadcast, and the weather forecast on Rosepoint.
- When asked, based on the knowledge the fuel dock was going to close at 1700, if he noticed the barge crew in a hurry, Mr. Murphy said no, there was no one running around, but they did have some “pep in their step” and they were talking about “hurry up and get this done”. There was a sense of urgency amongst them.
- When asked if he was under any time pressure to get the barge to where it had to be, Mr. Murphy said not that he was aware of. He did not have a deadline. He did feel rushed “generally”, to get the barge there, noting the sooner he could get it there, the better.
- When asked what Ronnie told him related to after the guys came back to put covers on the manholes, Mr. Murphy said Ronnie said the barge was secured and ready to depart with “no restrictions”.
- When asked if there was another route for the Ambition to go instead of offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, Mr. Murphy said offshore was the only option. When asked about how the route was planned, Mr. Murphy said he used the Rosepoint system to plot the voyage. He adjusted the plan to keep clear of shoals, and shallow spots and known obstructions.
- When asked if steering, propulsion, communication, and navigation systems, were functioning on the Karen Koby at the time of the accident, Mr. Murphy said everything was good.
- When asked about checking the engines and maintenance, Mr. Murphy said the deck crew does engine checks every hour.
- When asked if he witnessed the fueling and ballasting of the Ambition at the fuel dock, Mr. Murphy said he could see from the wheelhouse the fueling but he did not see any ballasting. He noted that before they got underway, they were a lot closer to an even keel than what it was when they got at the fuel dock. He noted that LA Carriers does not ballast barges. The freeboard was 5 feet on the stern and 4 feet on the bow when they departed the fuel dock.
- When asked how he knew of the freeboards, Mr. Murphy said it was a “guesstimate” by visual means.
- When asked about when he was informed about the plate and portable pump being placed over the manholes, Mr. Murphy said that was outside the jetty and the barge was already under tow which was about 1815. When asked if this was of any concern to him, Mr. Murphy said no. He noted he watched the barge for about 2.5 hours until it got dark, and

it looked like it was riding fine. He said he assumed the manholes that had the metal plate and pump over them were the ones on the stern, the ones they had put ballast in.

- When asked about when he was in the wheelhouse at 1600, Mr. Murphy said he was not on watch, but he was awake and being in the wheelhouse was better than sitting in his room.
- When asked if he had worked on the Karen Koby before as captain, Mr. Murphy said yes. He made three hitches on the Karen Koby.
- When asked what deckhand works with him on the same watch as he does, Mr. Murphy said that is Tony.
- When asked if he witnessed any special precautions in preparing the barge for tow in the Gulf of Mexico, Mr. Murphy said no he did not.
- When asked where he brushed up against the piling, Mr. Murphy said that was just after coming out of the fleet and into the Calcasieu River.
- When asked if a 1000-foot tow is normal for in the Gulf of Mexico, Mr. Murphy said that for shallow water, yes it was.
- When asked where the destination of the Ambition was, Mr. Murphy said it was mile 55 in the Lower Mississippi River. Across from Electrico was what he was told.
- When asked when taking the barge under tow if there was any paperwork done, Mr. Murphy said there was not.
- When asked if there were any other known hazards or obstructions on the intended passage, Mr. Murphy said no. You have to watch out for shrimp boats though.
- When asked about the time the Ambition sank, Mr. Murphy said it sank at 0400.
- When asked if he personally did anything to make sure the Ambition was safe for transport, Mr. Murphy said no. He walked out on the bridge wing and did a general overall view of the barge.
- When asked the last time the tow bridle was strength tested, Mr. Murphy said he did not know but noted the tow bridles were new.
- When asked how long the Karen Koby remained on scene with the sunken Ambition, Mr. Murphy said he did not know because they had a crew change out there which was about 3 or 4 days after the capsizing.
- When asked of the swells at the time of the capsizing, Mr. Murphy estimated it was about a one-foot ground swell.
- When asked if at any time he requested an on-charter survey of the barge, Mr. Murphy said no.
- When asked what kind of logs the Karen Koby had, Mr. Murphy said it was paper logs.
- When asked how long the barge was listing before it went under, Mr. Murphy said that as far as they knew, it was about 30 minutes. He said for him personally witnessing anything, it was only 5 to 10 minutes before the barge went over.
- When asked if he saw the Ambition capsize, Mr. Murphy said he did not see it. He knew the barge went over because the Karen Koby stopped.
- When asked if the weather conditions changed from when they cleared the jetty and where the barge sank, Mr. Murphy said they did not.

- When asked if he noticed any list of the Ambition at the fuel dock, Mr. Murphy said he did not.
- When asked of any visibility issues at the time of the accident, Mr. Murphy said the visibility was good and the skies were clear.
- When asked when he was made aware of where the pump was placed over the manhole, Mr. Murphy said that after the sinking Tony told him that the very port bow hatch cover was the one that was covered up with the pump.

End of summary