

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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FIRE ABOARD R/V *QUALIFIER 105* *

NEAR HOMER, ALASKA ON *

Accident No.: DCA23FM015

JANUARY 19, 2023 *

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Interview of: KENNETH WILLIS, Welder
Qualifier 105

via Microsoft Teams

Friday,
January 29, 2024

APPEARANCES:

LCDR [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Lead Investigator
United States Coast Guard

MICHAEL KARR, Investigator-in-Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

JAMES J. DAVIS, Esq.
Representing Mr. Willis

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I N T E R V I E W

(2:36 p.m.)

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2
3 LCDR [REDACTED] Good day, my name is Lieutenant Commander
4 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and I'm the lead investigator
5 with the U.S. Coast Guard for this interview as part of the Coast
6 Guard investigation into the fire on the small passenger vessel
7 *Qualifier 105* on the 19th of January 2023 at the Northern
8 Enterprises Boat Yard in Homer, Alaska. The purpose of the Coast
9 Guard's marine casualty investigation is to identify any causal
10 factors that may have led to the casualty and make recommendations
11 for any actions, on the part of the Coast Guard or other agencies,
12 to prevent such casualty from recurring.

13 Before we begin the interview, I'd like to introduce my
14 counterpart from the National Transportation Safety Board,
15 Mr. Mike Karr. Mike.

16 MR. KARR: Thank you, [REDACTED] My name is Mike Karr, K-a-r-r,
17 and the NTSB has joined in this investigation with the Coast Guard
18 because we share jurisdiction, and my office will write a report
19 on the findings. Thank you.

20 LCDR [REDACTED] Thank you.

21 Now, Mr. Willis, would you please state your first and last
22 name for the record, spelling out your last name?

23 MR. WILLIS: My name is Kenneth Willis. That's spelled
24 W-i-l-l-i-s.

25 LCDR [REDACTED] Thank you. And would you please have your

1 counsel state his first and last name, spelling out the last name,
2 as well?

3 MR. DAVIS: My name is James Davis. The last name is spelled
4 D-a-v-i-s.

5 LCDR [REDACTED] Thank you. And Mr. Willis, have you been made
6 aware that this interview is being recorded for future
7 transcription and do you consent to proceeding with the interview
8 knowing that?

9 MR. WILLIS: Yes, I do.

10 LCDR [REDACTED] Okay.

11 INTERVIEW OF KENNETH WILLIS

12 BY LCDR [REDACTED]

13 Q. Mr. Willis, what is your current occupation?

14 A. I'm semi retired, I have a little business that I do
15 consulting, and I perform services for my oldest son, Jacob, who
16 runs Alaska Marine Field Services (ph.), such as doing operations
17 from just kind of getting off the port with materials and
18 administration kind of things.

19 Q. And was this the same occupation you had at the time of the
20 casualty on the 19th of January 2023?

21 A. It is.

22 Q. Okay. And how long have you been doing this work?

23 A. You mean working on boats?

24 Q. Yes.

25 A. My family had a boat yard in North Carolina, I was born in

1 1957, and I basically grew up in the boat yard and that's what
2 I've done my whole life.

3 Q. Okay. And do you have any sort of specialized training or
4 education for this position?

5 A. I've got project management training and I also have -- I'm a
6 shipyard competent person and have been for about 30 years and
7 I've had that updated time and again along the way. Then there's
8 other training, too, hazmat stuff and things like that. I don't
9 know, I don't keep track of all of it. I've been in project
10 management for a couple shipyards and then some of my own things.

11 Q. Thank you. Could you please explain how you came to be
12 involved with the vessel *Qualifier 105*?

13 A. My son, Jacob, was working for SVA and was doing some
14 repairs. His brother, Michael, was working there, too, and I was
15 doing, as I stated earlier, I did the estimating, I helped track
16 for that. That particular morning, I usually -- just kind of went
17 in there, just kind of see where they were going.

18 They finished, basically, everything was done and the only
19 thing that needed to be done was there was a space up forward and
20 a tank had been discontinued and it needed to be tested. And so
21 I'm just hanging out and they're getting ready to do that and some
22 flooring needed to be put in. So Jacob had to run to the shop to
23 get something and I was getting ready to go and I said well, if
24 you're going to be gone, I'll just stay here with Michael because
25 Michael was putting the floor in and it was basically an existing

1 floor, he wasn't building one, so he was just putting everything
2 back and it's just a tack weld here and a tack weld there, just
3 little baby stuff. And so I said well, I'll just hang out with
4 Mike until you get back and that's how I was there.

5 Q. Okay. So to clarify on this, the actual project, it was your
6 son, Jacob, who was actually doing the welding with Mike
7 assisting?

8 A. At the time Jacob wasn't there, but it was Jacob's job,
9 that's correct. He wasn't there when the -- when the fire took
10 place.

11 Q. Got you. And then Michael was the one doing the tack welding
12 to reattach the floor?

13 A. That's correct.

14 Q. Okay, thank you. Kenny, if you don't mind, could we back up
15 just a little bit and talk about what the general scope of work,
16 what your company's involvement with the *Qualifier 105* was? What
17 was basically the details of the project that you were hired to
18 do?

19 A. Well, we weren't really hired to run a project, we -- they
20 run their own projects, so they have a boat crew that they try to
21 keep busy in the wintertime, they use them in the summer and they
22 keep them busy, so Jacob was just hired as a welder, so they ran
23 the project and he did the welding that they directed him to do.

24 Q. Understood, thank you. Prior to actually starting any of the
25 welding work, were you involved in any sort of safety discussions

1 between the vessel representatives, your son and yourself?

2 A. Yeah, we -- Jacob and I had discussions with Jared and with
3 Mike and they were to run all of that operation. They were to
4 provide whatever clearances were required and they provided hot
5 work, they provided ventilation, they did the competent person
6 checks mornings and they stayed in the afternoon after the hot
7 work was completed, until everything cooled down and they were
8 satisfied with it. Basically, we were just -- well, he was just
9 welding, so they did have control over all of it and we were happy
10 with the way they did it and the plans, and they did a good job of
11 it, so we went along with that.

12 Q. Thank you. You briefly discussed what your role was there on
13 the date of the casualty, but could you kind of walk us through,
14 you know, what your day looked like, starting from your arrival at
15 the *Qualifier* through when the fire occurred?

16 A. Yeah. So I was just kind of hanging out with them and like I
17 said, me and Jacob were talking about he needed to get a T or
18 something and he couldn't do it with the welder and it's just a
19 little donut with a fitting in it so that you actually have the
20 tank forward. And so he said he was going to do that and I said
21 well, I'll stay and help Mike, so we vacuumed out the space and
22 cleaned everything, cleaned the bilges, cleaned all the space out
23 and had everything out of there and after everything was cleaned
24 up, then Mike started putting the floor in and it was existing
25 stuff, just little tiny stuff, a little crimp (ph.) here and

1 there. And so that's what was going on at that time. Yeah, for
2 the morning. It wasn't a lot of welding, it was -- I think he
3 maybe started tacking about 10:00 or something like that and it
4 was like, I don't know, 10 or 11 o'clock when the fire started.
5 We, you know, fought the fire while we could and then left.

6 Q. Thank you. How did you first come to know about the fire on
7 board?

8 A. Well, we were working -- so at the head end, the stair, which
9 was about midship on the port side, and then there's a cross-
10 passageway and it leads to a mid-passageway just aft, we went down
11 to the center of the boat and then aft and there's a bathroom
12 there and the bathroom was where the floor was going in and that's
13 where Michael was there, doing that, and I'm just kind of -- kind
14 of hanging out with him and just helping a little bit, not much.

15 And Josh yelled from a distance "fire." And I didn't
16 understand what he said and I said, Michael, what did he say? He
17 said "fire, fire," and he jumped up and I looked forward and there
18 was a little tiny flash fire going, going up in the bunk room up
19 there, forward of where we were. And then it went from there.

20 Q. Did you notice any specifics about the fire, where it was in
21 the bunk room or the color of the flame or smoke, anything along
22 those lines?

23 A. Yeah, I did. So I made my way over to it and it didn't take
24 but a few seconds, you know, you move fast when there's a
25 situation, and I started to pat it out, it was just a little tiny

1 flash fire, like little -- like it -- I realized later it was just
2 a piece of plastic, that the boat was encapsulated up the walls
3 and over the overhead with half mil plastic to keep smoke and dust
4 off of it and that's what the ship's guys got put in there. And
5 so I looked up and it was -- it was the overhead, it was in the
6 forward part of the overhead against the forward bulkhead, but in
7 the overhead.

8 So it was on the top side of the plastic and it was that
9 black, heated smoke, just a little bit of it, and the plastic was
10 kind of just -- just kind of dripping off of it and falling on
11 both bunks. And so I don't know how far you want me to go, I
12 mean, do you want to ask me a question or do you want me to kind
13 of give you a little bit of a rundown of what we did from that
14 point?

15 Q. I'm happy to sit here and listen to you give the rundown,
16 please.

17 A. Okay. So I saw the smoke up there and there was a crossing
18 of direct air and it was a little tiny fire. I had gloves on, I
19 could've easily patted it out. But when I saw smoke up top, I --
20 it just kind of gave me -- it just -- it was ominous and I saw it
21 different, it wasn't what I expected. So I went over to the steps
22 to grab -- which was like two steps over to get the fire
23 extinguisher and I looked up the steps and there was heavy smoke
24 up there in the overhead. There was no smoke where we were. We
25 had ventilation down the center passageway that I discussed

1 earlier, and in the very back of that passageway to the -- where
2 the doors open to the outside, to the back deck, there was a hatch
3 and we had a 3,000 CFM fan blowing out of that hatch, so it was on
4 the stop side. So our space was perfectly clear. Other than the
5 smoke above that plastic, there was no smoke in our space
6 whatsoever.

7 But then I looked up and there's smoke up there and I looked
8 at Michael and I said why in the hell is there smoke up there,
9 that hidden smoke, why is that up there? I said run up there and
10 make sure we're not trapped before we do anything. So he runs up
11 the steps, he's young, he's 25, so he moves fast, he runs up the
12 steps, runs through the back door, got a breath, came back and
13 said I can't breathe up there, but there's no flames.

14 So I grabbed the fire extinguisher and when I turned around,
15 our whole -- the whole space that we had been in, the whole
16 overhead had -- was engulfed in black smoke down to just below my
17 waist. So the whole space is now instantly, I mean, I'm talking
18 seconds, is filled with black overheated smoke and the plastic
19 that was in the overhead is hanging down like a bubble, like you
20 blow a bubble with a -- you know, with soap, is what it looked
21 like and the smoke was above it so that I'm standing, I'm standing
22 in the little space right to the foot of the stairs and I've got
23 clean air, fairly clean, and there's a bubble and on the other
24 side of this bubble there's this superheated black smoke. And I
25 stuck the fire extinguisher in there and Michael ran out and I

1 said keep checking up there, so he ran up, he ran out and comes
2 back and checks on me and I said I'm all right, so I kept going
3 until the fire extinguisher -- it wasn't out, but I wasn't getting
4 anywhere, this smoke was everywhere and he said Dad, we got to go,
5 you got to -- you got to get out of there.

6 So I ran out and I ran through the back door and when I ran
7 through the back door, there was flames already coming through the
8 floor into the salon and the salon was on fire. And seconds after
9 that, it was blowing windows out and fire was shooting out of the
10 windows on that floor. I can't hear you. Wait a minute, welcome
11 to Microsoft Teams, chat progress. Are you guys there?

12 Q. Yes.

13 A. Okay, now you are.

14 Q. Can you hear me now?

15 A. Yeah.

16 Q. Okay. So when you evacuated the vessel, did you go up the
17 stairs and then back through the salon out on the deck or did you
18 use that hatch where the fan was to escape?

19 A. No, there's no -- there's no way to go back in the space we
20 just came out of. There was no way. There was that plastic that
21 was hanging down, the fire was up in the overhead, no way
22 possible. So we didn't want to get trapped in there, I went up
23 the steps and I went out the back, but there was flames up there
24 as I was going out, on the sides, on the -- particularly on the
25 starboard side.

1 Q. Thank you. Prior to the -- noticing the fire in that bunk
2 room, did you notice anything else, any sort of equipment or
3 material being stored in that bunk room?

4 A. We had a welding machine in there and I did notice that the
5 welding machine was sitting there fine, it was -- there was no
6 issue with it, there was no issue with it after the fire, either.
7 It was a rental and we carried it back.

8 Q. Was that rented from somewhere local here in Homer?

9 A. No, it was rented from -- let's see. Oh, shoot, I can't
10 remember the name right now. But anyway, it was out of -- it was
11 out of --

12 MR. DAVIS: Someplace out in the valley, right, Kenny?

13 MR. WILLIS: Yeah, it was north of Anchorage. Wasilla,
14 there's a welding company up there. I can't think of the name of
15 them, but maybe I can -- it's available, I can find it, but I
16 can't remember right now. We don't use them very much, we usually
17 use Airgas, we use Airgas Welding when needed. So yeah,
18 everything was fine in there, the fire stayed above that and we
19 just took that later and cleaned it up and wiped the smoke or dust
20 off of it and carried it back to them.

21 BY LCDR [REDACTED]

22 Q. Thank you. So the only kind of difference between what
23 would've normally been there and what you noticed was that there
24 was plastic sheeting up the walls and on the overhead and then the
25 welding machine was in that space, is that correct?

1 A. Well, there was a little bit of stuff on the bunk, there was
2 two welding helmets that we -- that melted (ph.) out and there was
3 a little -- there was a box of zig (ph.) discs still in the box
4 we'd been using out of. And I had a tape measure on there. In
5 fact, I had walked by that space just a minute or so prior to that
6 and picked up -- I picked up the tape measure off of the bunk and
7 was measuring for some -- there in the bathroom, the shower stall
8 was out of position and it needed new framing under it and I was
9 taking a measurement for the framing with that tape.

10 So I was just in there. I didn't see anything in there, I
11 mean, I'm reaching, I'm reaching in there, it's a small space and
12 I didn't look up, I looked -- you know, I looked in and I looked
13 for the tape, which was laying on the bunk, and I picked up the
14 tape and I walked into the bathroom and it was a very short period
15 of time afterwards when Josh yelled "fire."

16 Q. Thank you. Now, once you evacuated the space and got off the
17 vessel, what happened in the immediate aftermath of evacuating?

18 A. Well, everything was in flames. Josh was pretty excited and
19 he was upset, he's young and he started saying what do you want me
20 to do, what do you want me to do, and I said did you call 9-1-1,
21 and he said no. I said call 9-1-1. I grabbed the vent thing and
22 pulled that out of the -- so, you know, we weren't feeding the
23 fire. That's something I did almost immediately. When I got out
24 of the door, I just grabbed the fan and threw that out of the way
25 and shut off the air. And then that was it, I mean, that was just

1 -- it was it, that thing was engulfed in flames in seconds, the
2 whole upper level was. Everything from that floor up was on fire.

3 Q. Did you and your son receive any medical treatment as a
4 result of the --

5 A. Yeah, we had --

6 (Crosstalk)

7 MR. WILLIS: Yeah, we had them check us out and, you know, we
8 were all right. We didn't breathe a lot because of where we were.
9 If we'd have been on the other side of that boat, it would've been
10 a whole different matter. And then the heavy smoke wasn't in the
11 passageway where the stairs were. Where the stairs were, that was
12 pretty clear, it was up above, that's where all the smoke was
13 initially until the ceiling exploded into flames and then it --
14 then it was all down there, too.

15 LCDR ██████████ Thank you very much, Mr. Willis. That's the
16 end of my line of questioning. I'm just going to go ahead and
17 turn it over to Mike with the NTSB now for some of his questions.

18 MR. KARR: Right. Thanks, ██████████

19 BY MR. KARR:

20 Q. Mr. Willis, who was on the vessel at --

21 LCDR ██████████ Oh, Mike, it looks like you're still muted.

22 MR. KARR: Oh, I am. I am. Thank you. Mike Karr with the
23 NTSB, some follow-up questions. And these questions will focus on
24 what was going on with regard to the -- up to and -- up to the
25 time the fire started.

1 BY MR. KARR:

2 Q. How many people were on the vessel that morning?

3 A. Oh, (indiscernible) the typical -- I don't know how many,
4 there was at least two or three, but one of them, he was the port
5 engineer, Mike, or one of the engine -- or one of the boat
6 engineers, Chris, always went into the space and cleared the
7 space. We never went down there until they cleared it and then
8 they turned the lights on and the ventilation and then they gave
9 us the okay and then they'd go down there and go to work.

10 Q. All right.

11 A. So that's how that worked out. So I don't know. At the time
12 of the fire, Mike was off the boat and Josh was the only SVA
13 employee there, and then Mike and I were back in our space doing
14 the welding, or he was welding and I was hanging out with him.

15 Q. All right. And can you give me an idea of what time you
16 arrived at the vessel that morning?

17 A. It was about 8 o'clock. Oh, by the way, there's an instance
18 that took place with the -- yeah, you need to be aware of because
19 it really has a lot bearing on why -- on the fire. It was
20 actually probably the source of the fire. Yeah, I know it is, but
21 for you guys to see that, too. So we got there about 8:00 and
22 there was some -- you know, it takes a little while to get going,
23 they had to clear it off for us and they did that at 8:00, so it
24 was probably about 8:30 we were down in there and we're cleaning
25 up. The vacuum cleaner is this -- the bunks forward had

1 receptacles that we'd been using to run the vacuum cleaner and at
2 the time we were running the starboard one off of that receptacle
3 and the vacuum wouldn't come on and I said well, go check the
4 breakers, there's four breakers. So the engineers weren't there.
5 Normally, we would've just gotten them, but they weren't there, so
6 just go check the breakers and see if they're kicked.

7 So he checked the breakers and they were not kicked. I said
8 well, cycle them because sometimes, you know, I know that they're
9 old, so he cycled them and we still didn't have power. So we
10 tried the receptacle in the middle bunk room, the one that
11 ultimately had the fire start in the overhead and their vacuum
12 wasn't working. And I said well, you know what, we don't turn
13 these things -- we don't turn these things on and I don't know for
14 sure if these receptacles are on these breakers or not, so let's
15 just plug it in, in the bathroom.

16 And there was an overhead receptacle in there and we plugged
17 into that and the vacuum turned on and we did our duties. So they
18 had been working on this boat for a month or more and they had
19 used these receptacles every day and this day the receptacles
20 didn't work and the breakers weren't kicked. Now, I can go on and
21 tell you what -- ultimately what we found, if you want to hear the
22 end of the story or if you want to wait.

23 Q. No, please tell that story. When you got to -- but before
24 you do that, I didn't hear exactly what you said about which
25 receptacle you plugged it in when the vacuum did work.

1 A. The one in the bathroom where we were working.

2 Q. You plugged it into the -- okay, in the bathroom. All right.

3 A. Yeah. Yeah. So --

4 Q. And before that, you used the receptacles in which room?

5 A. It would've been -- initially, the vacuum was plugged in
6 almost every time in the starboard bunk room, forward bunk room.
7 So there were several bunk rooms in there, but the one I'm talking
8 about is the one all the way to the forward bulkhead, it would be
9 under the galley and it was the starboard side. And then we tried
10 the middle one and that didn't work, either.

11 Q. Are these the rooms next to Room J where the fire started?

12 A. The one on the starboard is adjacent to it and the one that
13 we tried the second time is the room that started the fire.

14 Q. All right. Thank you. Okay, now continue the story.

15 A. So I went through a process of trying to figure out --
16 because it was -- where we were at, there was no fire and when you
17 go back into the space, there's only fire in the overhead. Our
18 equipment was not -- was not burned. It got water damaged and
19 destroyed, but it wasn't burned, nothing was burned in there,
20 nothing low was burned. We were there, there was no fire, I knew
21 there was no fire. And I told Jacob, when I called him, I said
22 there's a fire and I don't know what in heck is causing it, but we
23 didn't do it because we were right here and there was no fire. So
24 later it started coming to me, these breakers -- this boat's 52
25 years old. Now, some breakers have been changed and you could

1 tell that it was new boxes in some areas, some of the bigger ones
2 like in the engine room, but this box was old and I worked as a --
3 I was a facility manager for Magone Marine and then later Resolve
4 Marine in Dutch Harbor. And a lot of the barges that they had,
5 the dry dock was built and commissioned in 1943, so there was a
6 lot of old stuff. So I have a lot of experience with breakers not
7 doing what they were supposed to do.

8 I had instances where my pumps were running on the dry dock
9 with boats in there and you couldn't get them to quit, you'd turn
10 the breaker off and the breaker just -- it kept providing power.
11 I mean, all kinds of things happen with these old breakers. And
12 so when we inspected the boat, we hired a couple people and I
13 hired Philip Dovich and -- which I have great respect for and knew
14 him in Seattle for years and friends with him.

15 And I told him my -- that I suspected that there was an issue
16 with those breakers and that I didn't know if they fed those
17 receptacles at the time, but if they did, they did not kick and
18 the receptacle didn't work, which means the receptacle is not
19 getting power from the breaker that is not kicked, so there's
20 still power going through that breaker. So we started checking it
21 out, me and Michael did it, actually, and then found that two of
22 those breakers had melted the connection to the power box. Out of
23 a hundred and some breakers, they were the only two in that whole
24 boat that did that. And when the fire inspector, Tom, they pulled
25 the wiring and they tested all this stuff and they found that

1 these breakers were supplying power to those receptacles. So
2 those receptacles were powered by the two breakers that melted the
3 connections, they did not trip and there was no power coming out
4 of the receptacle, which makes sense. That's why the overhead and
5 that forward bulkhead caught on fire and they found some wiring --
6 I don't know if you talked to Tom, he's got pictures so he can
7 show you some of the wiring, there was unusual activity in the
8 box. I know the original marine surveyor, yeah, Jack McFarland,
9 went through and he told me that there were several incidences of
10 hatch (ph.) wire being wired in those boxes.

11 And then when Tom was recording what their finding was, which
12 also had an electrical engineer involved, I don't -- I don't know
13 his name, I think maybe -- there were things that were spliced
14 together, like for example, there was a hatch wire coming out of
15 one of the receptacles and then went to an 18 gauge wire which,
16 when he said that, I said do you normally run electronics off of
17 it, he said yeah, and that had shorted and that is right exactly
18 where I saw the smoke. So I know what started the fire and I know
19 you guys got to have proof and everybody else does, too. I've got
20 a lot of experience with these breakers. I know what old breakers
21 could do.

22 Q. The work that you asked people to do for you, do you --

23 A. I can't hear.

24 Q. The work that you asked people to do for you, did they
25 provide you with reports?

1 A. No. I don't have -- I have a verbal report. I was there
2 when Philip and Michael found -- and they showed me the breakers.
3 Michael actually saw it. Philip was going through them and
4 Michael (indiscernible) he said this is melted. And the other --
5 the insurance company that supported the vessel, Travelers, had
6 already pulled one of the breakers so it wasn't available to us.

7 So I suggested that Philip and Michael go look and see if
8 they could tell where the connection was, if it had melted, and it
9 had melted in that, in the box, so -- indicating that that breaker
10 also had -- electricians call it too much resistance, which
11 basically means there's too much power going through the breaker.

12 Q. And where was that box located?

13 A. That box was located at the foot of the steps on the port
14 side, right where the fire extinguisher was. Now, we never dealt
15 with these. The reason I didn't (indiscernible) is we didn't turn
16 the breakers on in the morning, they did. And so when it didn't
17 -- when it didn't work, I didn't know that there was another
18 breaker, there's breakers all over this thing and I had no idea
19 that there was a problem.

20 It wasn't until they pulled the wiring out and as they traced
21 the wire to the receptacle from the breaker. And even when we
22 asked the owner, I asked the owner and I said does that breaker
23 supply the receptacles and he said well, we're not sure. Nobody
24 knew. So it was not until Tom pulled these wires out and they
25 traced them and then they found out. I suspected it the whole

1 time, I pretty much knew it, I knew it had to be. There's no way
2 a boat could explode into flames like that. I've done this my
3 whole life.

4 Q. So what did -- how did Tom describe the condition of the
5 wires that he traced from the breaker to the receptacle in Room J?

6 A. Well, they were all stripped of insulation because it burned
7 off, but there was one, at least one, there were two suspect ones,
8 but one in particular, which is the hatch wire, I believe. I
9 might be off, so don't -- you know, if I'm off a little bit.

10 I know there was wire coming out of one of the receptacles
11 going to an 18-gauge wire and they had a picture of that and Tom
12 says this is a short, for sure, right here and it's right in that
13 front corner where I saw the smoke start. So it was a verbal
14 report on his own. And my camera worked on that one. I
15 apologize, it doesn't work.

16 Q. But was that comment about your camera?

17 A. I said I apologize, it doesn't work. I feel bad that it
18 doesn't.

19 Q. Oh, all right.

20 A. I'm an amateur, that's what I told Jim this morning, I'm a --
21 I'm a Teams, Microsoft Teams amateur.

22 Q. All right. Let me take a look at my notes and see what other
23 questions I have for you about the time of the fire, so just give
24 me a second and I'll ask them as I come up. What type of fire
25 extinguishers were used? I believe three fire -- well, what type

1 of fire extinguisher did you use when you fought the fire?

2 A. You know what, there was several in the space, I grabbed the
3 one at the foot of the steps because I was right there and I don't
4 -- I don't know, I don't know what type it was. I didn't look. I
5 exhausted it to the point where Michael was saying Dad, you got to
6 get out of there, you can't stay in there any longer.

7 Q. Right. Do you know how many fire extinguishers were used to
8 try and put out the fire in Room J?

9 A. That was the only one because I was the only one down there
10 when -- it was just too late, it was just -- the whole thing, the
11 whole -- the galley and the salon were totally engulfed in flames
12 within a minute, within a minute or maybe a touch more from the
13 time that Michael and I ran out.

14 Q. All right.

15 A. We couldn't breathe, you had to hold your breath to get out
16 of there and I -- there was no point, there was just no point,
17 there was flames -- there was flames shooting out of the windows,
18 the windows were breaking out and there was flames shooting out of
19 them, it was covered in no time. I told the owner, I said it's
20 almost like somebody went in there and you couldn't have saturated
21 the carpet with gas and it going up like that, it just -- I had
22 never seen anything like it.

23 Q. Speaking of carpet, did you actually see any carpet burning?

24 A. No, we never had flames the whole time. I don't know if you
25 guys -- I know Lieutenant [REDACTED] probably aware, it's aluminum

1 that we were using, not steel. And I told Jim this earlier
2 because he heard me say it, but it's kind of like the difference
3 between a (indiscernible) cat and a tiger. Aluminum is just mild,
4 it doesn't spark, you can grind it and it doesn't make sparks when
5 you grind it, you weld it and by the time it hits the floor, it
6 hits and it's cold or cool. It's just not like steel. And so we
7 never even had a flash, there was never any instance whatsoever
8 with anything the whole time we were on that boat.

9 Q. All right, let me take you back to Room J. At any time --
10 no, after the fire started, did you enter the room?

11 A. Well, what I did -- so I ran from the bathroom, which was
12 very fast, seconds, and I saw this little fire and I thought I'm
13 just going to beat it out. And then I thought I'm going to look
14 around and so I looked around, I looked at our equipment, our
15 equipment was fine, there's no kind of fire, there was no chance
16 of it getting out of control and I took the time to look around
17 and I looked up and that's when I saw above the plastic.

18 And I saw where the fire was coming from, was that plastic
19 and I saw that black smoke up there and just (indiscernible), I
20 mean, it's a scary thing. And so I thought well, okay, I'm just
21 going to get the fire extinguisher, I'm not going to put my hand
22 in there and I'm not going in there, I'm getting the fire
23 extinguisher. So I go over and then I see the smoke up in the
24 top, you know, in the salon, the galley, in the passageway, in the
25 (indiscernible) and that's when I froze and I told Mike, I said,

1 you know what, we're going to get trapped in here, it's only us,
2 go up there and see if there's a fire. And then it was after he
3 came back in a few seconds, I stepped up to about the second step,
4 maybe the third and my head was above the floor in the galley, you
5 know, above that level and I could look around and I could see
6 there was heavy smoke all in there. Not black, but heavy. And
7 then Mike comes running back and he says there's no flames.

8 And I said all right and I grabbed the fire extinguisher and
9 I turned back, there was that black smoke to just below my waist
10 and that bubble of plastic and I thought I'm going to keep this in
11 that -- in that room, what you're calling Room J, regardless. So
12 I dropped down on my back and I slid under that bubble and I
13 couldn't get to the door, but I got -- you know, I was only like
14 two steps away, just like five or six feet from the edge of the
15 door to the stair landing, and I just shot it in there as much as
16 I could until Michael started yelling for me to -- you got to come
17 out, Dad, you got to get out of there.

18 Q. All right.

19 A. And I slid out from under the smoke and I ran up the steps
20 and I --

21 Q. The nozzle for the extinguisher, could you tell me whether
22 you think it was actually inside the frame of the door or was the
23 nozzle in the hallway and you directed the discharge through the
24 frame?

25 A. The latter, the latter.

1 Q. The latter, so you were in the hallway, the nozzle was in the
2 hallway.

3 A. I couldn't get to that door.

4 Q. All right.

5 A. I couldn't. If I tried to raise up, I raised up one time and
6 I got a breath of that heavy smoke, I couldn't -- I couldn't do
7 it.

8 Q. Yeah.

9 A. I just had to lay flat on my back and shoot it across my
10 waist.

11 Q. All right. To help me get an idea of which way the -- you
12 know, the smoke and the air was going down there, did I hear you
13 say that the stairway was actually relatively clear of smoke?

14 A. Yeah. And it was clear because of that plastic bubble, you
15 know, the overhead had melted down and created a bubble and the
16 black heavy smoke was on the inboard side, so the side I was
17 standing on didn't have smoke.

18 Q. All right.

19 A. And the smoke that was up top didn't migrate down to where I
20 was. So no, I really wasn't breathing a lot of smoke, hardly any
21 at all.

22 Q. All right. Let me ask you about the plastic cover because
23 I'm -- I think I lost -- I've lost track of where the plastic
24 bubble was. Was there a plastic bubble in Room J?

25 A. No, there was heavy smoke above the plastic, you could look

1 through the plastic and see it's black up there. But it was --

2 Q. Oh, okay, let me -- let me ask you about this plastic. What
3 was the purpose of that plastic?

4 A. Well, we didn't put it there, but it's typical when you're
5 doing repairs and welding and things like that to put that up to
6 keep the smoke and smell and dust.

7 Q. All right. Did you notice if it was in any other locations
8 other than the stairs?

9 A. It was the whole --

10 Q. Pardon?

11 A. The whole space. The whole space had it in it.

12 Q. When you say the whole space, like --

13 A. From the stairwell in, all the way in, everywhere.

14 Q. To the state rooms?

15 A. Yeah.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. I don't know about aft, we didn't go back there, but every --
18 the two forward ones had it, the passageway had it, it was in -- I
19 think it was in the bathroom, too. I can't remember if it was in
20 the overhead, but all the bulkheads were covered with it. So the
21 bubble was the passageway between Room J and the stairwell because
22 I was standing at the foot of the stairwell and I turned, I was
23 like on step two or three, looking up, waiting for Michael, which
24 was very fast. And when he got back, I stepped down and I looked
25 back and what had been perfectly clear -- because we had a 3,000

1 CFM air pulling out of there, that space was crystal clear. We
2 also had a 40,000 lumen LED light in the bathroom, this whole
3 space, it was like daylight in there and there's no smoke, other
4 than over the plastic in Room J, until I stepped off that
5 stairwell and then the whole place is engulfed in smoke that's
6 just -- I found out later that that smoke has usually got a
7 temperature in it of around 700 degrees, so that would've been a
8 real bad deal for us in about, you know, 15 seconds if Josh hadn't
9 had yelled fire.

10 Q. Right. When you were on the ship at the time, did Room J
11 have a door?

12 A. You know, I don't know. I really don't know. When I was
13 sitting -- standing in there, there's mahogany in there and I
14 thought I was seeing the reflection of the flames off that
15 mahogany door. But I'm not sure the door was there. There were
16 some drawers there and like a cabinet and it was all mahogany and
17 it had -- or some type of mahogany type of wood and it was all
18 varnished-up stuff and I could see a yellow flame reflecting in
19 whatever I was looking at it.

20 I thought at the time it was a door. It looked like, later,
21 maybe the door wasn't there and maybe I saw it in the drawers, I
22 don't know. But I shot the fire extinguisher until the yellow
23 disappeared and I don't know -- you know, I realized a lot later
24 that it was just little flakes of plastic falling from the top and
25 making these little flash fires that went out. I think Josh saw

1 his -- when he saw it, it was on the right bunk. When I saw it,
2 it was on the left bunk. It's just plastic; as it's melting, it's
3 drifting down and flashing. When Philip was here, Philip Dovich,
4 because one of the things they do as a marine chemist is they
5 recreate this stuff or they take materials that they're going to
6 be working around and they test it to see what it does. And they
7 tested that plastic and that's exactly what it does, it drops down
8 and it's almost like a little paper fire and it just flashes for a
9 brief moment and then it goes out.

10 And so that's what we were seeing. And a lot of it, I
11 realize now because of the testing and looking back, that that's
12 what we were seeing. So we saw them on a different bunk and when
13 I saw it go out, when Michael called me the last time, I think he
14 ran back there two or three times and the third time or second
15 time, I don't remember, he said we got to go and I said well, the
16 yellow's out, anyway, the flame is out, which was ridiculous
17 because the whole damn thing's on fire, so --

18 Q. Yeah, which bunk did -- when you patted, when you tried to
19 pat out the flame, which bunk was it on, the one that was on the
20 starboard or on port?

21 A. It was on the port, but I didn't try to pat it out because I
22 had second thoughts on it, because I just -- I just looked around,
23 I just stopped and I looked around and when I saw the black smoke
24 up top, I thought I'm not touching that because there's a problem
25 here and I'm going to get the fire extinguisher. But then I saw

1 -- when I got held up in that because of the smoke in the salon
2 was so heavy, I was afraid we were trapped and there was flames up
3 there. So until Michael got back, I never grabbed the fire
4 extinguisher from the (indiscernible) protection for fire.

5 Q. I'm going to take you back to that, you know, when you
6 thought about patting out the flames, how many -- how many little
7 flames did you see on the bunk?

8 A. I only saw one at the time.

9 Q. Right.

10 A. And it was small.

11 Q. Small. And --

12 A. Well, I'll tell you, let me tell you more, a little bit more
13 about it. When I looked up from the bathroom, it looked like a
14 little paper fire and when I got there, it was just a pile of
15 smoldering goo. So it wasn't a flame.

16 Q. When you said you looked, when you looked at it from the
17 bathroom, what did you see, what were you able to see when you
18 looked at it from the bathroom?

19 A. It looked like a little yellow flame that you could hold in
20 the palm of your hand, it was just a little yellow flame like
21 maybe you're starting a campfire, you're a Boy Scout or something,
22 or if you light a piece of paper.

23 Q. And that was -- that little flame, that was the flame you saw
24 on the bunk?

25 A. Yeah. And then when I got over there, it was just a pile of

1 smoldering goo.

2 Q. When you first got over there, how was the smoke in the room?

3 A. There was no smoke in the room other than above the plastic.

4 Q. All right. Let me keep going down my list. Did you have an
5 opportunity to see how the flames left Room J to move to the rest
6 of the vessel?

7 A. Well, I saw it right after -- yeah. And they were up, I
8 would say waist high and up, the bunk was still -- the actual foam
9 -- well, our welding machine was not damaged, not burned, and that
10 was sitting in between the two bunks. It had plastic, you know,
11 from above where it dropped down on it, but we were able to clean
12 it off and both of the bunks were intact when I went back.

13 Now later, after some of the electricians for the -- for
14 Travelers went in there, it was sort of peachy (ph.), but it
15 wasn't like that originally. The foam was burnt some, but not
16 much. It had little -- it almost looked like a delta, where
17 flames kind of went through and kept little paths in it.
18 (Indiscernible.).

19 Q. That tape, the tape you -- the tape measure you said you
20 picked off the bunk, how far up -- you know, how far up the bunk
21 was it in port or starboard side?

22 A. It was on the starboard side. Yeah, I mean, I didn't -- I
23 didn't study the room, I only looked up, it could've been smoke
24 going on up there then. It probably was. I don't know, I didn't
25 look. I just went in, I walked from -- from the starboard side,

1 all the way against the side down that passageway and I walked
2 from there over, looked in there, located the tape, picked it up,
3 walked aft, down the passageway to the bathroom and leaned down
4 behind the shower and was measuring under the floor area there or,
5 you know, in the floor area for a couple of pieces of angle that
6 needed to go there to hold the shower up and that's when I heard
7 the call from Josh. So it was --

8 Q. All right. So --

9 A. It was fast.

10 Q. -- when you picked up the tape, how many -- how many feet
11 were you inside the room, Room J, when you picked up the tape?

12 A. I probably had like one foot in there because the welding
13 machine was on the floor, there wasn't a lot of room. So --

14 Q. Oh, yeah, how deep in the room was the welding machine?

15 A. The welding machine was just inside the door, it's the XMT,
16 little Miller, blue Miller, they weigh about 70 pounds or so and
17 they have handles on top (indiscernible). It's probably 15, 16
18 inches wide, maybe 26 or 8 inches high and probably maybe 30 --
19 no, it's not 30, it's probably the same length.

20 MR. KARR: All right. [REDACTED] I -- Mr. Willis, thank you.
21 I've got some more questions, but what I'll do is let [REDACTED] know
22 that I'm done asking like fire questions and now I've got some
23 background questions on welding. Is it okay to go ahead?

24 LCDR [REDACTED] Absolutely.

25 MR. KARR: All right.

1 BY MR. KARR:

2 Q. So now help me understand welding for background information,
3 Mr. Willis. So do you know when the welding -- can you tell me
4 when the welding machine was placed into Room J? Do you know?

5 A. Well, I'm trying to think. I think we started about -- or
6 they started about the end of November and it was probably in
7 there the whole time. I don't -- I really don't recall. I know
8 there was work in there and there was some floor, but I think they
9 just ran leads from there. I don't think they moved the machine
10 or if they did, it was back. I don't recall, but it could've --
11 it was probably in there at least a month and a half.

12 Q. Do you know when the job started?

13 A. Just about late November.

14 Q. Well, let me ask you this, do you know when they started
15 working on the starboard fuel tank?

16 A. That would've been about that time.

17 Q. End of November?

18 A. Yeah. Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, it was late
19 November or very early December, but I think it was late November.

20 Q. Yeah. I'm going to ask you, let me preface this question,
21 were you on the vessel on any other previous days?

22 A. Yeah, I usually went in in the morning and I just went in and
23 helped them set up and kind of looked around and -- yeah, we'd
24 talk a little bit and I mean, I've been doing it a long time, my
25 boys are smart. Basically Jacob, Jacob's been in shipyards for

1 many years and he's very (indiscernible.)

2 Q. For your sons, was this pretty much a full-time job for this
3 period of time because it sounds like it was, end of November, I
4 mean, were they in the -- were they in the boat yard all day
5 helping out the SVA folks?

6 A. It was pretty much every day, yeah.

7 Q. And --

8 A. Yeah, it was.

9 Q. -- would you say a full day?

10 A. Well, their days run really pretty full, but probably seven
11 hours a day -- you know, there's eight-hour days right there by
12 the time you get started and quit.

13 Q. All right. And you can -- I looked at a photograph that
14 showed yellow cables running out of Room J, would that be cables
15 connected with the welding machine?

16 A. No, there was -- we had a cable supplying power from the
17 engine room, that went through the hatch that had the ventilation
18 in it, which would be about -- back where the two sliding doors
19 are in the back of the salon. So it would come out of the engine
20 room, which you had to go down a set of stairs and there's a cover
21 on that, so it had (indiscernible) four cables and it went out
22 that (indiscernible) and down and then through the center
23 passageway to the welding machine. The cable was black, but it
24 had a yellow plug on it, a yellow receptacle and a yellow plug.

25 Q. So can you describe how the welding machine was connected to

1 the main panel in the engine room? I mean, is it just an outlet
2 that plugged into an outlet in the engine room or was there some
3 special connection? I have no idea, so help describe it to me.

4 A. In the back of the engine room there's at least three main
5 breakers that supply the whole ship and SVA's electrician
6 hardwired it into breakers, directly to the breakers, so it had a
7 breaker protection.

8 Q. And that would've been hardwired back in the end of November?

9 A. Yeah.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. So the machine --

13 A. That wouldn't take much.

14 Q. All right. So the machine was -- all right, so the machine
15 was probably in Room J all this time?

16 A. I would say most of the time. If it got moved, I don't
17 recall, it could've gotten moved, but I don't think so, I think
18 they just ran everything from that. Most of the work was in
19 there, other than the port forward tank, they did an insert in the
20 bottom of the hull and part of the bulkhead and that was the last
21 thing that had to be done that day as we were there, is to test
22 that and put the floor in and we would walk away. At the end of
23 that day, the job would've been done and all of our stuff would've
24 been off of there.

25 Q. All right. And what type of welding were you doing? You

1 know, MIG, TIG, what --

2 A. We were doing MIG.

3 Q. MIG?

4 A. Aluminum MIG.

5 Q. Aluminum MIG?

6 A. Yeah.

7 Q. Describe the -- well, do you know the make and model of the
8 machine?

9 A. It was an 835 MIG gun that -- with probably about 25 or
10 30-foot lead and it ran right off, directly off of the -- off the
11 XMT welding machine.

12 Q. And what type of machine was it?

13 A. It's a Miller.

14 Q. Miller?

15 A. It's called an XMT, yeah. And I think it was 350 amp.

16 Q. Do you know how old the machine was?

17 A. No, I don't. It was rental. It was -- you know, it was in
18 good shape. So they rent them out, I mean, they don't keep them
19 very long, they rent them for a year or two and then they sell
20 them and get another one.

21 Q. Right.

22 A. So it was all nice, it was all good.

23 Q. All right. Do you know if the machine was grounded?

24 A. The machine was grounded for the welding purposes to a
25 cross-member in the bunk room. Under the bunk room, so it

1 would've been in the bilge.

2 Q. All right.

3 A. And that had been -- had been on there for the whole period
4 of time, as well.

5 Q. All right. So the rental, you returned it, you returned the
6 machine to the rental company, did the rental company have any
7 complaints to you about the condition that it was returned in?

8 A. No. No, we cleaned it up before we headed in, it wasn't
9 damaged, it was just that plastic, you know, what dripped on top
10 of it.

11 Q. Right, but they didn't call you back and said oh, you know --
12 they didn't call you back and say there was something wrong with
13 it and it's your fault?

14 A. No.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. No, no.

17 Q. All right. On the day of the fire was a grinder ever used?
18 Did you ever see a grinder being used that day?

19 A. Yeah, there was. It was used in the bathroom only, but I
20 don't -- I wear a pair of -- I wear gloves that are dexterous.
21 They're made out of nylon, they're made by Carhartt. The bottom,
22 though, I don't know what the inside is, it's kind of like that
23 thick leather where your fingers are, where your palm is, but the
24 back of it is nylon and I used -- I actually did the grinding and
25 it wasn't really grinding, it was -- the aluminum was 52 years old

1 and there were these little pucks (ph.) that were kind of -- they
2 were round on one side -- then on one side they're flat and there
3 are crisps (ph.) and they weld to the bottom of the angle and then
4 the floor plates just set on them. And so all I was doing is
5 taking off the oxidation. If you're familiar with aluminum, it
6 gets oxidated, it doesn't rust, and so I was just taking that off.
7 And I just held it in my hand with these nylon gloves on and used
8 the wheel to just polish the oxidation off so the weld would take
9 hold.

10 Q. How was the grinder powered?

11 A. One ten.

12 Q. And where was that -- where was that plugged into?

13 A. In the bathroom.

14 Q. All right. The same receptacle as the vacuum?

15 A. I don't -- I believe it was. I think there was one
16 receptacle and we weren't using the vacuum anymore, we just used
17 that initially to clean the whole space up. We didn't want to put
18 the floor in until everything was wiped clean and all dust and if
19 there was any rags or whatever, anything in there, just get
20 everything out.

21 Q. Yeah. Back to the vacuum, was the vacuum used when you were
22 there?

23 A. Yeah, we used it that morning, we used it that morning a
24 little bit.

25 Q. That morning, okay.

1 A. But not after we started putting in -- we didn't start
2 putting those little crisps in until after everything was clean.
3 They were just cleaning, the floors were clean, everything was
4 clean and wiped down and -- yeah, it was done, everything was
5 finished. Let me go back, let me go back to -- I want to tell you
6 the final on that.

7 So I had used this on this aluminum and my gloves -- I helped
8 from time to time with stuff and I had not burned the gloves, it
9 doesn't burn them because it's too cool, it doesn't do that. So
10 even when you grind, it doesn't do it. And then I had the same
11 gloves and I'd been used to doing that, so I'm over on one of the
12 other boats because they moved our equipment to one of the other
13 SVA boats and it was steel and I just wasn't thinking and I
14 grabbed this little bit and instantly blew a hole through the
15 glove. I mean, instantly.

16 So I just want you to understand the difference between
17 grinding oxidized aluminum to clean it and grinding steel to get
18 rust off. My gloves never burned, I used the same gloves all
19 winter and I helped them from time to time and I just -- just one
20 instance with steel and it immediately burnt in my glove.

21 Q. All right, thanks. I think I understand, so thanks for that,
22 thanks for that explanation. Back to the welding machine, was
23 there a bottle attached to the machine?

24 A. No. No, see -- yeah, wait a minute. Yeah, there was a
25 bottle, but the bottle was down on the ground and the hose just

1 went up there and it was argon and helium.

2 Q. All right.

3 A. It was 75 -- 75 percent argon and 25 percent helium, I think.
4 I think this one here. So it was all inert gas.

5 Q. Pardon? Pardon me?

6 A. It's all inert gas, in other words it won't burn and that's
7 the purpose of it. It creates a bubble of air over the weld that
8 won't burn. So it eliminates the oxygen from the weld.

9 Q. All right. Background question, had you and your sons worked
10 on the vessel in prior years?

11 A. No. No, this was our first time working. Actually, I knew
12 SVA from doing some work and deck because of the facility I ran
13 out there, their boats would be out there on hire and they would
14 come in from -- occasionally, and we would change the
15 (indiscernible) or weld something for them or do something for
16 them. And I probably did some work on that boat, but I don't -- I
17 don't -- I think we did, I think we changed some (indiscernible)
18 out on it, but we had not done any work for SVA here in Homer.

19 Q. All right. Some final questions. What was the nature of the
20 repair work that your sons were doing to the fuel tank?

21 A. Well, they had somebody weld on that fuel tank the previous
22 year and they replaced some of the metal and the way they did it
23 is they used a heavy aluminum, three-eighths aluminum, and the
24 existing was quarter, so when they welded it, they didn't get a
25 full penetration weld. In other words, they welded one side but

1 they didn't clean the weld out. And so then, when they welded it
2 on the other side, it left contamination stuck in the middle and
3 then what happens is it creates heat in there and it blows bubbles
4 in the weld, or a pinhole, so when you test the tank air goes in
5 there and travels down these little channels and it comes out.

6 And so basically, what Jacob was doing -- or him and Michael
7 -- is they were grinding out, they would find these welds, these
8 pinholes, and they would grind it out to get to clean metal. So
9 they would grind one side until they'd get to the other side and
10 then they'd clean it because it wasn't clean before. And then
11 they would put a new weld in there.

12 So what happens is, because these panels are in there, it
13 goes up and down, so it went on for a long time chasing these
14 pinholes. And so basically, they were laying in the bilge and
15 doing the face of the tank and chasing these pinholes back and
16 forth and it went on for several weeks.

17 Q. So for clarification, I understood that -- well, I guess on
18 the day of the fire they were working on the top of the tank, is
19 that correct?

20 A. No. The tank was completely done and tested the day before.
21 It was completely finished, it was tested, it was witnessed by
22 Mike and bought off by SVA, the tank was a hundred percent done.
23 So when we went in that morning we were done, we were cleaning up
24 and putting the floor plates back and that's all we were doing.
25 There was no welding on any tank and all the production welding

1 was over, all testing was completed except for the forward tank
2 which was welded but untested. But in the space we were in, it
3 was all tested and completed the day before.

4 Q. All right. I'm going to ask the obvious question, do you
5 know what the problem -- so you told me there were pinholes in the
6 tank, but you got -- but your sons were called to repair it. When
7 SVA called you, what did they say was the problem? I'm going to
8 lead you and say did they say, "we had pinhole leaks"?

9 A. Well, they told us what they did and then when we got in
10 there and started grinding them open, we started finding -- I call
11 it corrosion and other stuff in there, and we started trying to
12 fix it and it turned into kind of a little nightmare trying to
13 find these --

14 (Audio feedback.)

15 MR. WILLIS: -- the stuff, it was too grueling, you'd fix it
16 here and it would pop up over there. But that's what we were
17 doing and it was all -- it was pretty much all confined working in
18 the bilge area on the starboard, it was in the starboard tank, so
19 it was at the inboard bulkhead of the tank. That was where the --
20 that's where all the work took place.

21 BY MR. KARR:

22 Q. All right. My last question is do you know who -- do you
23 know how the fuel tank was declared gas free so that your sons
24 could weld on it?

25 A. SVA, that was their deal and they handled all of that, they

1 still do. When we work on SVA's boats, they handle all the
2 regulatory agency -- they handle all the clearing, they do -- we
3 do a safety meeting with them in the morning, they provide fire
4 watches, ventilation, they tell us when to weld and when we can't
5 and when to stop. So we're basically --

6 (Crosstalk)

7 BY MR. KARR:

8 Q. I just -- I was just curious if you knew, you know, who the
9 competent person was and when they, you know, declared --

10 A. Oh.

11 Q. -- that the tank was gas free.

12 A. Yes, I do. I do. Okay, so I don't remember -- I don't even
13 know Mike's last name, he's always Mike to me. Jacob works with
14 him more than I do. Mike would clear it or Keith would clear it
15 every morning and we weren't in there and they (indiscernible)
16 down there, we never went down there. They'd go down the steps,
17 they'd clear the space, they'd turn the lights on, hit all the
18 breakers, turn the ventilation on and say okay, it's all clear,
19 you can go and send us down (indiscernible). So it was done every
20 day, I mean, they're good at it, they did it every day. They
21 still do, if we go on the boat, that's the procedure.

22 Q. All right.

23 A. And there's a safety meeting prior to that.

24 Q. Were you at the safety meeting that morning?

25 A. Yeah, probably. I can't remember if I went in early or if I

1 just was in time for something and stopped by to check on them and
2 see how they were doing. I really don't recall.

3 Q. All right.

4 A. But there was always a safety meeting every morning.

5 MR. KARR: All right. Well, Mr. Willis, thanks for answering
6 my questions, I may have some more depending upon what else we
7 ask, but [REDACTED] I'm done for the moment.

8 LCDR [REDACTED] Thanks, Mike.

9 BY LCDR [REDACTED]

10 Q. Just a couple follow-up questions from that line of
11 questioning. With regard to the plastic bubble that you kept
12 mentioning you witnessed, about how large was that bubble?

13 A. It started at the ceiling and it went about to my thigh. And
14 I got to be honest with you, I turned around and I looked at that
15 and I'm thinking what in the world is that? And I took my -- I
16 took my hand and like I said, they're dexterous gloves, I can do
17 anything with them and so they don't stop a lot of heat, which is
18 -- so I kind of ran my hand through it, like what is that? I
19 couldn't tell, it didn't register, I didn't know it was plastic, I
20 didn't know what it was, it's just this bubble and then there it
21 is, a big giant bubble. So I ran my hand through it and I could
22 feel the heat from it, it parted but it self-healed. It was
23 weird. It didn't open, it just stayed flat and it stayed solid.
24 And then I reached my hand out again and I thought I'm not
25 touching that and that's when I dropped down and I just shot some

1 -- shot the fire extinguisher in the room from underneath. But
2 yeah, it was -- it was just above my knees, it was from the
3 ceiling to just above my knees and it was right -- if you're
4 standing, if you were standing at the bottom of the stairs, it
5 started immediately at the end of the passageway that comes in
6 across towards you.

7 MR. KARR: That's the bubble?

8 MR. WILLIS: Yeah.

9 MR. KARR: Okay.

10 MR. WILLIS: Yeah, it sealed off that space and --

11 (Audio feedback.)

12 MR. KARR: Oh, could you repeat that?

13 MR. WILLIS: Everything was from above it.

14 MR. KARR: Could you repeat --

15 MR. WILLIS: I said every -- yeah.

16 MR. KARR: Could you repeat that? The audio was garbled.

17 MR. WILLIS: All the smoke, it was -- it was the plastic that
18 was initially in the overhead had melted down and all the smoke
19 was above it, on the other side of it.

20 LCDR [REDACTED] Mike, did you hear that good enough the second
21 time?

22 MR. KARR: I did.

23 LCDR [REDACTED] Okay.

24 BY LCDR [REDACTED]

25 Q. And then with regard to the cabling for the welding machine,

1 I apologize if you said this already and I'm just not visualizing
2 it, but I understand it was hardwired into a connection to the
3 vessel's electrical system in the main engine room and then did it
4 run through via the hatch where the fan was, down that hallway
5 into Room J where the welding machine was or was there a different
6 path routing that cabling?

7 A. That's where it went, that's exactly correct.

8 LCDR ██████████ Okay. Thank you, that was both of my
9 follow-up questions.

10 Mike, any last questions?

11 MR. KARR: Let me double-check.

12 (Pause.)

13 BY MR. KARR:

14 Q. Oh, Mr. Willis, was there a fan operating at the time that
15 you were down below deck working in the bathroom and the fire
16 started?

17 A. Yes. So the fan, there's --

18 Q. Yes. You know what, I'm sorry, you did say that, so I'll
19 just ask --

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. -- where was the fan located?

22 A. So there's a hatch that's just inside of the double doors
23 that go from the main deck to inside the salon. The salon doors
24 were open and there's a hatch there that's just to the right side
25 of the step, you know, one of those industrial blower fans in,

1 it's -- I don't know what they call them. They're 12-inch fans,
2 just they're rated at about 3,000 CFM, they're 110 power, and so
3 we just set it in there on a 45-degree angle, so it was pulling
4 out from the overhead and blowing it straight out the back door
5 into the atmosphere. And so that was pulling air down the
6 passageway of the steps and step passageway and across the middle
7 and then straight down the back.

8 So like I said earlier, we had LED lighting with 40,000
9 lumens, we had that fan pulling out the back, it was just crystal
10 clear in there. It was, you know, lit up and the air was clear.

11 Q. So when you exited the vessel into the salon area, what was
12 coming -- when you exited the salon area to leave the vessel, you
13 went out the back doors, what was coming out of that escape hatch
14 and was the fan --

15 A. Fire.

16 Q. -- still running?

17 A. Fire.

18 Q. Actual flames?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. All right.

21 A. Yes. And it was only running until I got there. I grabbed
22 it and the flames weren't giant, they were coming up around the
23 edges, I grabbed it by the handle and I threw it out on the deck.

24 MR. KARR: All right, thanks for telling me that. I have no
25 more questions.

1 BY LCDR [REDACTED]

2 Q. I did think of one final question and that's just -- I know
3 you said there were a variety of experts who came on to do
4 analysis of the vessel and the electrical system following the
5 casualty and you mentioned that one of them gave a report to you
6 verbally via a Zoom meeting. Are you aware, did any of the
7 experts issue any sort of written reports either on the marine
8 chemist side or the electrical or fire investigation side?

9 A. No, nobody did. The marine adjuster, Jack McFarland, and the
10 fire inspector for Travelers, a guy named Ernie, they both told me
11 -- we went in there the next day, I was invited in with --

12 (Audio feedback.)

13 MR. WILLIS: -- we walked through and we looked around and
14 both of those guys told me that it had nothing to do with welding.
15 Ernie told me that. I said my equipment's not damaged. He said
16 no, none of it is because the fire started up there, and he
17 pointed up in the top of Room J.

18 Now later, Travelers (indiscernible) telling me that oh, I'm
19 worried about money and not the crew, they shut all that down and
20 he doesn't remember any of that. But I know Jack real well and
21 Jack told me the same thing. Jack also said the grinds, where the
22 welder was grinding, you asked me about that, Mike, he checked
23 that and told me that there was no marks on it whatsoever and he
24 has pictures and everything. So these guys are telling me right
25 from the beginning that we didn't have anything to do with that

1 fire, which I already knew that. So everybody knew it except
2 Travelers doesn't want to accept it because they don't want to pay
3 the whole deal and that's just the way the world works. I didn't
4 realize it was going to be like that --

5 (Audio feedback.)

6 BY LCDR [REDACTED]

7 Q. And then along those lines, I know back in October, I believe
8 it was, they did some sort of joint inspection of the breakers
9 down in -- somewhere in a facility in Colorado or something like
10 that. Did you participate in that at all?

11 A. They didn't actually test until -- was that October, Jim? It
12 was October, wasn't it?

13 MR. DAVIS: Yeah, it was back (indiscernible) was October,
14 back to late fall.

15 MR. WILLIS: Yeah. I did not go, but the fire -- I hired
16 Tom, Tim (ph.) and Jim and I did, hired Tom as our fire inspector.
17 He got picked up by our insurance company and they sent it, but he
18 reported to us all he found and he hired an electrical engineer
19 with himself. We, in essence, were represented. And that's where
20 I was telling you we saw the pictures and got his own report of
21 the wiring and that they traced the wiring and it went to the
22 receptacles and they had some examples where they have wiring
23 (indiscernible) like that's a short right there and it's right
24 where -- right where you said you saw the smoke. So we, in
25 essence, were represented there.

1 LCDR ██████████ Great, thank you. And I do -- I have
2 Philip Dovich's contact information, but if I could ask, after the
3 conclusion of this interview, if we could get Tom's information as
4 well, I think it would be a great perspective to have on analyzing
5 this, as well.

6 MR. WILLIS: Yeah.

7 MR. DAVIS: We'd be happy to send that to you guys.

8 MR. KARR: Well, is that just -- is that just the contact
9 information or do you have documents from that, from the lab, that
10 you could share with us?

11 MR. WILLIS: They have it all. We don't have anything. I
12 don't. I don't think Jim does, either, other than you might have
13 some pictures, Jim, I don't know.

14 MR. DAVIS: I don't have anything. Yeah, I don't have --

15 (Crosstalk)

16 MR. DAVIS: I don't know what Tom has, if he got anything
17 from the lab, but we're agreeable to whatever Tom has, Tom sharing
18 it with you guys. So what he has, you guys can have.

19 MR. KARR: All right. Well, let me ask you this, is there --
20 Mr. Willis, are you -- are you still part of the discussion with
21 having responsibility for this from -- from the insurance company
22 or --

23 MR. DAVIS: Yeah, yeah. The situation, apparently, Travelers
24 is still trying to say Kenny started the fire and Kenny's -- I
25 think the insurance Kenny has is a million dollars and Travelers

1 is saying the boat is worth \$7 million, so you know, there's still
2 some -- there's still some risk that Travelers is going to point
3 the finger at Kenny for the ship and dollars in uninsured loss.

4 MR. KARR: Right. And [REDACTED] is the vessel -- has the vessel
5 been scrapped or is the vessel still around?

6 LCDR [REDACTED] As of the other day, it's still sitting there.
7 I know Travelers said they were going to be proceed with scrapping
8 around September or something, but it doesn't look like anything
9 has progressed there.

10 MR. KARR: All right.

11 MR. DAVIS: Yeah, we were -- we were telling Travelers to
12 keep the boat intact until the inspections and the evaluations and
13 your investigations were complete, but they've been trying to
14 dispose of the boat even though the storage fee is pretty minimal,
15 I forgot what it is, \$900 a month or something.

16 LCDR [REDACTED] Okay. Well, that's all I have on the Coast
17 Guard side.

18 Mike, one last chance if you have anything.

19 MR. KARR: No, I don't.

20 LCDR [REDACTED] All right. On behalf of the Coast Guard --

21 (Crosstalk)

22 LCDR [REDACTED] On behalf of the Coast Guard, I just want to
23 say thank you, Mr. Willis and Mr. Davis, for both of your time and
24 cooperation in the investigation. A lot of great information we
25 have to analyze and hopefully it leads to us determining, you

1 know, not only the cause, but how we can prevent it from happening
2 in the future.

3 MR. DAVIS: Thank you, guys.

4 MR. KARR: All right, thank you. Thank you for your time.

5 MR. WILLIS: You're welcome. And thank you.

6 MR. KARR: The recording ended at 3:57 p.m. Eastern time.

7 (Whereupon, at 3:57 p.m., the interview concluded.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

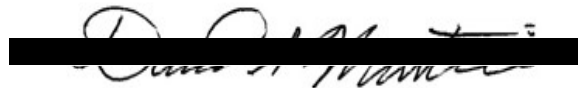
IN THE MATTER OF: FIRE ABOARD R/V *QUALIFIER 105* NEAR
HOMER, ALASKA ON JANUARY 19, 2023
Interview of Kenneth Willis

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA23FM015

PLACE: via Microsoft Teams

DATE: January 29, 2024

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.



David A. Martini
Transcriber