

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

* * * * *

Investigation of:

*
*
*
*
*
*

CAPSIZING/SINKING OF THE *GOLDEN*
RAY IN THE BRUNSWICK RIVER,
GEORGIA, ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2019

Accident No.: DCA19FM048

* * * * *

Interview of: LT [REDACTED]
U.S. Coast Guard

Military Safety Unit
Savannah, Georgia

Thursday,
January 29, 2020

APPEARANCES:

LT [REDACTED], Investigator
U.S. Coast Guard

I N D E X

ITEM

PAGE

Interview of [REDACTED] :

By Lt. [REDACTED]

4

I N T E R V I E W

(1:35 p.m.)

1
2
3 LT [REDACTED]: Good afternoon. This is Lieutenant [REDACTED]
4 on January 29th, 2020, at 1335. My name is spelled [REDACTED],
5 [REDACTED]. And I am here conducting interviews in response to
6 the *Golden Ray* capsizing. And I'm here with?

7 LT [REDACTED]: Lieutenant Commander [REDACTED]. I am the
8 MSU Savannah Response Chief, [REDACTED] spelled, [REDACTED]
9 is common spelling, [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

INTERVIEW OF [REDACTED]

BY LT [REDACTED]:

10
11
12 Q. And for the response, your role was?

13 A. For the response, I was one of the initial responders that
14 received the call here at MSU as a duty person, the response
15 chief. And I quickly took over the public information officer
16 role for the response.

17 Q. Okay. So walk me through that initial call and what happened
18 and then what your steps were from there.

19 A. The initial call that I received was around 2:00 a.m., I
20 believe it was September 6th if I remember correctly, the date of
21 the incident anyway.

22 And so I was a couple hours behind the commanding officer's
23 notification and our command duty officer, so the response was
24 already underway. Some individuals were being recalled. I met
25 them here at the office to initially assess what had happened, the

1 knowledge that we had. And the commanding officer, [REDACTED] and
2 I, left the office approximately 0400 that morning to head down to
3 get eyes on the scene and see what was going on with the knowledge
4 that, for the most part, it was a search and rescue case at that
5 time.

6 And we were looking at how to establish the ICS structure,
7 where we'd be establishing that, and to start assessing the
8 pollution mitigation strategies that we might employ.

9 Q. Okay. And that was Sunday the 8th, correct, that morning?

10 A. Yeah, yeah.

11 Q. Okay. And then so from there, you arrive on scene, and then
12 what do you do once you're on scene?

13 A. So once we were on scene, we were at Station Brunswick with
14 the first responders who were responding to the search and rescue.
15 So Station Brunswick, there were some firefighters on scene
16 preparing for mission to repel into the skin of the ship, a
17 mission that did not end up occurring. That was the main topic of
18 conversation, was extricating all those individuals that were in
19 the ship, as we were also talking about setting up incident
20 command post.

21 We had an improvised space that we carved out there on the
22 campus where DNR and Station Brunswick are located. It was an
23 empty DNR educational building that we put some people in to start
24 doing some initial assessments, kind of carve out what an ICS
25 structure was going to look like, and we also used that space for

1 the first on-camera interviews for the press. And if I remember
2 correctly, that happened day one that -- the first interviews.

3 Q. And then what were your kind of -- as response chief, you're
4 kind of shifting to your ICS role -- what were your goals to make
5 that shift happen?

6 A. It was -- so we're very focused on putting the right people
7 in the right places. And there was some discussion between me and
8 the CO about my role potentially in Ops, most probably in Ops or
9 environmental unit, somewhere in the -- on the response side,
10 dealing with pollution mitigation. The issue that we had, we
11 didn't have anyone there that was qualified to do the public
12 information officer role, and it was immediately apparent that
13 there was going to be a public demand for information, as well as
14 some need to engage stakeholders.

15 So as we discussed, as we left the search and rescue phase,
16 which was kind of high for the response. Those first few days
17 when we were able to get everyone out, we had some support from
18 the Public Affairs Detachment down in Jacksonville, a couple of
19 petty officers that did a phenomenal job in capitalizing on that
20 success. But as we were going from that good story to now, the
21 very long and arduous task of removing the ship and mitigating
22 pollution, it was pretty clear that the detachment from
23 Jacksonville was not going to be sufficient to handle that.

24 So I made the recommendation to the commanding officer to
25 give [REDACTED], my IMDC here at MSU, a more substantial role

1 in the pollution side of the response, and I would take the public
2 information officer role to make sure that was managed
3 appropriately. To assist me in that we contacted PIAT, and that's
4 the Public Affairs assist team which is a deployable Coast Guard
5 group that basically responds to these type of incidents to set up
6 a joint information center to do those emergency communications
7 for this type of incident.

8 So I don't remember the exact timeline, but within a couple
9 of days I had that PIAT support. A Chief Warrant Officer [REDACTED]
10 [REDACTED] (ph.) and his staff came to assist me in setting up a JIC
11 to include a lot of local players, and as the situation developed
12 that JIC structure kind of ebbed and flowed in terms of the number
13 of people we had employed exactly what we were doing. But that
14 quickly consumed my every day, was the public information officer
15 role, which I would characterize initially -- when we did not have
16 a liaison officer, I would characterize it as much as taking the
17 tone of public perception and question and making sure that the
18 Unified Command was one aware of that and answering it, one,
19 through their actions and through their public statements, as well
20 as stakeholder engagement, again, until such time we had a liaison
21 officer.

22 And when I say stakeholder engagement and I talk about the
23 liaison officer, what I'm really talking about is those special
24 interest environmental groups that had a lot of focus on the
25 pollution related to this incident. Justifiably so. They had a

1 lot of good questions. They also had a lot of misconceptions
2 about what was going on, so the act of engaging them, taking their
3 feedback, as well as educating them, was a time-consuming process.

4 Q. Okay. And what was your regular avenue for releasing
5 information to your stakeholders and the public?

6 A. So we established a rhythm of daily press releases early on,
7 and we saw that as a means to ensure that there could never be a
8 question in terms of transparency. So every day there was a
9 particular format that we went by. If I remember correctly, it
10 was broken up between the environment, the pollution, and the
11 salvage. So those three main categories would have some new
12 information each day.

13 In addition to that, we would gauge the level of public
14 interest or immediate interest. And when it was justifiable to
15 do, something like a live press event, we would -- that would
16 usually be coupled with some major turn in the response.

17 Q. Did you do any -- was there any discussion about ever doing
18 like town hall meetings or open houses?

19 A. Yeah, we did several things of that nature. There were a lot
20 of private engagements with the, say the labor union. There were
21 a lot of events planned in the area, so more social events than
22 the city of Jekyll had. There were specific stakeholder groups.
23 I forget some of the names of -- like Department of Commerce-type
24 meetings. So we would attend those. I'd say every other day or
25 so, we were attending some sort of public meeting. And then with

1 the public festivals, we would set up booths to educate the
2 populace what it was we were doing, what they should expect to see
3 over the next few months.

4 Q. And how would you rate the -- your efforts in how the public
5 perception changed towards the response?

6 A. Overall, I thought it was incredibly successful. The way I
7 communicated it to the Unified Command during our meetings was, we
8 had a neutral perception across the formal media as well as social
9 media that we were monitoring.

10 In an incident like this, I would say that neutral is kind of
11 a best-case scenario. While there were comments that weren't
12 favorable, I think we were able to address a lot of the legitimate
13 concerns through our press releases or through releases of
14 information and public engagement.

15 It was -- we -- kind of the foundation of our information
16 distribution was transparency. And I thought the Unified Command
17 did a great job, particularly in those instances where we would
18 have the on camera doing interviews, where they would give that
19 factual information that I think other personalities might have
20 been inclined to withhold. And an example would be, say the
21 pollution that was surrounding this incident.

22 So for them to come out and say on camera, hey, there is
23 pollution coming from this boat, the boat's not designed to be on
24 its side, we can expect more pollution, we're staged to mitigate
25 that.

1 But the fact is it's going to be an awareness -- it's going
2 to be a challenge, those type of statements, just to make people
3 aware of the complexity of the situation and what the reality was.
4 I thought was -- I thought they did a phenomenal job of that.

5 Q. Okay. And then other than that, I think as a response chief,
6 acting as a PIO, you probably had multiple communications coming
7 up through you.

8 A. Yeah, yeah.

9 Q. And I think that -- did you feel like the response -- I'm
10 trying to think -- do you think that the communication lines were
11 open properly, even though you were probably getting information
12 that didn't relate to your PIO role?

13 A. That was tough. And I think that in any incident, you're
14 going to find that communication is the pitfall of the response,
15 as particularly with something this complex.

16 And it was certainly the case that as the public information
17 officer having the ear of the Unified Command, as well as having
18 employees who were engaged in the response, who have been
19 entrusted with positions like federal on-scene coordinator
20 representative, when I would run into them and I would receive
21 feedback about recommendations that they had regarding the
22 response, they were not being executed in a field, I would
23 absolutely bend the ear of the Unified Command, if you will,
24 through my position as PIO, I would always try to relate it to
25 those public concerns that I had fielded, so as opposed to

1 bypassing any chain of command within the unified command, which I
2 was sensitive of, it would be inappropriate in my mind. But it's
3 also, I think prudent to make sure that the FOC has visibility on
4 those opinions of his Federal On-scene Coordinator representative.

5 So in the context of, I recognize there is public concern for
6 pollution, Federal On-scene Coordinator representative is saying
7 there are pollution mitigation strategies that could be more
8 effective, I don't know that this information's getting to Unified
9 Command, I'd couple those two bits of information and pass it
10 along, making my position as PIO and my position as response chief
11 somewhat complicated, like coupling those two, and also trying to
12 stay out of interfering with the Operations branch, that part of
13 the response. I'm not trying to have an alternative reporting
14 chain through -- to circumvent Ops, if you will.

15 Q. Yeah, absolutely. That was going to be my next question.
16 But at the same token, I think as you're forming an ICS
17 structure --

18 A. Right.

19 Q. -- do you think that dual role helped you keep the FOSC
20 informed on ways that the -- those communication lines were
21 forming, to make sure that you had a better picture in your role?

22 A. I think that's fair to categorize it that way. And yes, so
23 while it was forming. And I would say that once those channels
24 were formed, it was something I was particularly sensitive to not
25 bypassing those formal channels that had been established.

1 Q. Okay. And I know your schedule's kind of short. But is
2 there anything that you feel that you're really satisfied on this
3 response about?

4 A. All in all, I think it was, and still is, a phenomenal
5 response. I can speak specifically to the engagement of the PI,
6 bring in someone like myself. I mentioned no one had the training
7 to be a public information officer there on scene. That included
8 me.

9 So to have that group come out and stand up with JIC, educate
10 me, and give me the confidence to roll with that position was
11 something that I mark in my mind as a particular achievement. And
12 I think it went a long way in terms of the UC's ability to make
13 best-informed decisions and not have to play off the
14 misperceptions of the public, and to have those stakeholders for
15 the most part, have their trust and confidence in how they are
16 moving forward in making decisions. I thought that seemed
17 particularly important.

18 Q. Yeah, absolutely. We definitely want to keep those
19 relationships positive, you know, even in post-response. So very
20 important. And then my last question would be, is there anything
21 that you would have liked to see go better that you were over-
22 frustrated with and pertaining to the response?

23 A. I -- yeah; having the role of response chief and having
24 worked a lot of pollution cases in this area of responsibility, to
25 not have my FOSCRs be able to call the shots on specific tactics

1 moments of was something that did frustrate me. But it is an
2 extraordinarily complex situation that we're dealing with a
3 complex chain of command and in reporting requirements.

4 So I think it's to be expected that that level of autonomy
5 isn't going to exist with something like this. But it was a point
6 of confrontation for me. It was something that was frustrating to
7 see.

8 Q. All right. Anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

9 A. I think that's it. I appreciate it.

10 LT [REDACTED] I appreciate your time, Mr. [REDACTED].

11 LT [REDACTED]: Yeah.

12 LT [REDACTED]: Thank you.

13 (Whereupon, at 1:51 p.m., the interview was concluded.)
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: CAPSIZING/SINKING OF THE *GOLDEN*
 RAY IN THE BRUNSWICK RIVER,
 GEORGIA, ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2019
 Interview of [REDACTED]

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA19FM048

PLACE: Savannah, Georgia

DATE: January 29, 2020

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.

[REDACTED]

Jeffrey Johnson
Transcriber