

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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FLOODING OF TOWING VESSEL *UNCLE*
BLUE ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER
ON MARCH 26, 2023

* Accident No.: DCA23FM023

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Interview of: CHRIS BARNES, Deckhand/Steersman
Uncle Blue

Via Microsoft Teams

Tuesday,
April 25, 2023

APPEARANCES:

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
United States Coast Guard

MARCEL MUISE, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

COREY PARENTON, Attorney
Alexis Marine

CRAIG BREWER, Attorney
Alexis Marine

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I N T E R V I E W

(10:40 a.m.)

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2
3 CWO ██████████ All right. It's April 25th, 2023, at 10:40
4 a.m. We're conducting an investigation of the Uncle Blue towing
5 vessel that sank on March 26th. The -- we're going to interview a
6 deckhand/steersman, Chris Barnes, who was on watch at the time of
7 the sinking.

8 Mr. Barnes, we're going to record this interview. Is that
9 okay with you?

10 MR. BARNES: Yes, sir.

11 CWO ██████████ Okay. And then I'm Chief Warrant Officer
12 ██████████ ██████████ with the U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit,
13 Baton Rouge. My last name is spelled ██████████. And since
14 it's not a room but can we -- each person introduce themselves and
15 spell their last name.

16 (Crosstalk)

17 MR. PARENTON: I'm sorry, Marcel, go ahead.

18 MR. MUISE: This is Marcel Muise, investigator with the
19 National Transportation Safety Board, M-u-i-s-e.

20 MR. PARENTON: Corey Parenton, counsel for Alexis Marine, P-
21 a-r-e-n-t-o-n.

22 MR. BARNES: Chris Barnes, deckhand at Alexis Marine, B-a-r-
23 n-e-s.

24 MR. BREWER: And Craig Brewer, attorney for Alexis Marine.

25 CWO ██████████ Okay. This is ██████████ ██████████ The lawyers

1 that are present are PIR, parties in interest, representing Alexis
2 Marine for the investigation.

3 INTERVIEW OF CHRIS BARNES

4 BY CWO [REDACTED]

5 Q. Mr. Barnes, I would like to start. Could you give us a
6 description of your background in the maritime industry, what jobs
7 you've had, positions you've held, how long you've had those jobs
8 and those positions. If you have any licenses or professional
9 credentials, include those as well.

10 A. I've been with Alexis for almost a year. Position held is
11 deckhand. I've been with Tarron Service (ph.) for three years,
12 position is deckhand. I've been with Crosby Tugs (ph.) for four
13 years; position held is deckhand. And I started with Tarron
14 Service before I worked for Crosby, position of deckhand. I hold
15 a 100-ton masses, 200-ton mates, I've got a steersman apprentice,
16 which is currently an upgrade to a mate pilot. I have my radar
17 endorsement, and that's about it.

18 Q. Okay. This is [REDACTED] That's a lot of experience. Thank
19 you. And you said you worked for Alexis one year as a deckhand?

20 A. Yes, sir.

21 Q. But you have a -- you have licenses as a steersman and a 100-
22 ton mate. Have you ever operated under those licenses while
23 working for Alexis?

24 A. My steersman, yes. But they -- the steersman requires a
25 captain to be in the wheelhouse with you at all times, so it's

1 still really a deckhand that's just (indiscernible), you know.

2 Q. Yes, yes, I understand. How I would describe it is that
3 you're a deckhand that's an apprentice to be a pilot, so you can
4 only work -- in under supervision. Right?

5 A. Correct.

6 Q. Okay.

7 CWO [REDACTED] Mr. Marcel, do you have any more questions
8 about his work history?

9 BY MR. MUISE:

10 Q. Just how long on the Uncle Blue has it --

11 A. I was on there about three or four days before it sunk.

12 Q. All right. So just three or four days is all you have on
13 that one boat?

14 A. Correct.

15 Q. Total? Okay. All right. So this is your first trip on the
16 Uncle Blue?

17 A. Correct.

18 Q. Okay. Thank you, sir.

19 BY CWO [REDACTED]

20 Q. Mr. Barnes, so you were only on the Uncle Blue for three
21 days. How would you -- can you describe how much time you spent
22 on other towing vessels as a steersman actually steering the
23 vessel?

24 A. I had my steersman the whole time I was with Tarron Service
25 all four years. I had it six months before I left Crosby Tugs,

1 and the whole time that I was with Alexis.

2 Q. So you would say you have about a year's worth of steering
3 other towing vessels?

4 A. Steering towing vessels period? Probably about four years.

5 Q. Okay. When I say steering, like you're actually on the
6 sticks maneuvering?

7 A. Right.

8 Q. Okay. So you have about four years' experience driving
9 towing vessels. Okay.

10 CWO [REDACTED] Okay, Mr. Marcel, are you ready for us to move
11 in -- move on to the events that happened on the 26th?

12 MR. MUISE: Yes, go ahead, thanks.

13 BY CWO [REDACTED]

14 Q. Okay, Mr. Barnes, if you could describe your workday on the
15 26th, like, from the -- what you did before watch, coming on
16 watch, everything that happened while you were on watch, all the
17 way through the event -- or I say the event -- till the Uncle Blue
18 sinking.

19 A. I had took food out to make with the hot dog wieners. I had
20 put them in the sink to defrost. Did my walk-through, I had
21 walked through the engine room, checked the doors, made sure all
22 the doors were done, making sure nothing was on the bilge, no
23 leaks, checked the generators out before I swapped them over.
24 Then I went up to the wheelhouse, talked to the captain and stuff,
25 see what was going on. And then I just started steering for

1 Captain Sweezy (ph.), which is William. And then made my checks
2 about every hour or so again in the engine room and around the
3 boat, checking hatches and all that.

4 Came down before everything happened. I may -- I did a check
5 and then I made the hotdogs. Went back upstairs, and about 15 or
6 20 minutes later, Captain Sweezy had said that he felt like the
7 boat was riding up on us. So he said give slack to the face wires
8 and get it back level. So I gave slack to the face wires and as I
9 was giving slack, the bilge alarm went off. So I tightened up on
10 the face wires and told him I was going downstairs to see why the
11 alarm was going off.

12 And when I went downstairs, I noticed that it was filling
13 with water. I told him what was going on; he rang the general
14 alarm. I made sure everybody had their life jackets on and took
15 off on the barge. And then he made the call that we were sinking
16 or whatever, and he pushed it into the bay. And then I had got
17 the pumps from the other boat that came to assist us and put it in
18 the engine room and try to pump it out.

19 Q. Okay. The last thing I heard was that you tried to pump it
20 out. Did you say anything beyond that?

21 A. No, sir.

22 Q. Okay. The -- so you said not long before the vessel started
23 -- or you were in the pilothouse, you made a round. About what
24 time was that?

25 A. I do not remember.

1 Q. If you had to estimate, like, how many minutes had passed
2 from the time you made the round till the time that Captain Sweezy
3 said that the tug was riding up on you?

4 A. About 30 minutes.

5 Q. Okay. So that's -- on that round, that's when you got the
6 hotdogs and brought them up? Is that correct?

7 A. Correct.

8 Q. Okay. And when you made your round, did you physically go
9 into the engine room?

10 A. Yes, sir.

11 Q. Okay. Did you see, hear or smell anything out of the
12 ordinary?

13 A. Not when I went into the engine room.

14 Q. Okay. Did you notice how much water was in the bilge?

15 A. No, it was dry because they have shallow bilges on there. So
16 I didn't notice any water in there when I went into it.

17 Q. Okay. So did you go down to the lower level of the engine
18 room or did you just do your round from --

19 A. No, sir.

20 Q. -- the upper level?

21 A. Whenever I do my rounds, I go down because I check for leaks
22 or any water that has been added to the bilge. I check for, like,
23 all leaks or, like, water leaks on anything, you know.

24 Q. The -- so you only had three days on the Uncle Blue, but over
25 those three days, did you notice any changes in the way the vessel

1 was riding or handling, a list to port, a list to starboard, the
2 stern sinking or settling down?

3 A. No, sir. It was perfect the three days.

4 Q. And after you made your round and you were -- brought the
5 hotdogs up, you spent the 30 minutes before the -- you guys went
6 to adjust the cables, you were on the sticks doing all the
7 steering command?

8 A. Yes, sir.

9 Q. Could you feel anything different in the steering at that
10 time that had been for the three days before?

11 A. I did not.

12 Q. All right. Did the vessel seem to be losing speed or not
13 being able to maintain speed or course at all?

14 A. No, sir.

15 Q. Okay.

16 CWO [REDACTED] Mr. Marcel, do you have any more questions?
17 I'm sure you do, but --

18 BY MR. MUISE:

19 Q. I just want to ask you. Can you tell me what hatches and
20 manhole covers, if any, were open that night?

21 A. They didn't have any open.

22 Q. Nothing was open, okay, thank you.

23 A. Nothing was open.

24 Q. How about doors, headroom doors?

25 A. No, they all was closed. Soon as I go in there, run my

1 checks, I make sure that both doors on each side is closed in the
2 engine room.

3 Q. How about windows?

4 A. The windows was closed. There's two, I think.

5 Q. Okay. All right. Thank you, sir.

6 CWO [REDACTED]

7 Q. Sorry, I was just reading back through my notes. Sorry for
8 the awkward pause because you can't see me. The --

9 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Glad you're still there.

10 BY CWO [REDACTED]

11 Q. How often are -- did you make rounds on the vessel when
12 you're on watch?

13 A. It's supposed to be every hour, but by me steering, I try to
14 time it out it was, like, an hour fifteen. No more than an hour
15 twenty.

16 Q. Okay. When you got employed by Alexis, did they give you a
17 training program or orientation about making rounds, and how to
18 check them, what to check for?

19 A. I mean, I've done -- I came over there with experience. So,
20 I mean, I kind of already knew what all IO had to do. Normally,
21 you have somebody walking behind me, making sure you're doing
22 everything right on your first day over there, you know.

23 Q. Did you ever hear anybody talk about any of the voids having
24 leaks and having to dewater them throughout your time on there?

25 Did you have to dewater any voids?

- 1 A. No, sir.
- 2 Q. So -- and that was two questions. So no, you never heard
3 anybody talk about any of the voids taking on water and having to
4 be dewatered, and then also yourself had never had to dewater any
5 of the voids?
- 6 A. Correct.
- 7 Q. Okay. Had -- and in your short time on there, did you ever
8 check the voids --
- 9 A. Yes, sir.
- 10 Q. -- open the hatches and look at them?
- 11 A. Yes, sir.
- 12 Q. You did?
- 13 A. Yes.
- 14 Q. When did you check those, like --
- 15 A. That was part of my check, but I don't really -- most of the
16 time I don't open them whenever we're running.
- 17 Q. Okay. So all the voids on the Uncle Blue you had checked.
18 But when did you check those on your three days --
- 19 (Crosstalk)
- 20 A. -- stopped and got fuel the day before.
- 21 Q. And you looked in the stern voids --
- 22 A. Yes, sir.
- 23 Q. -- at that time?
- 24 A. Yes, sir, when I was topping off fuel, yes, sir.
- 25 Q. And did any of the voids have any water in them or appear to

1 be leaking?

2 A. None of them was leaking.

3 Q. When you checked the voids, did you log that anywhere?

4 A. No, sir.

5 Q. Okay. Do you know if the captain or the pilot log that when
6 you did it or did they direct you to do it or you just did it?

7 A. I just did it. It's kind of like a habit.

8 Q. Okay.

9 CWO [REDACTED] Marcel, do you have any questions?

10 MR. MUISE: No, sir.

11 BY CWO [REDACTED]

12 Q. I don't -- is there -- Mr. Barnes, is there anything you can
13 think of about the Uncle Blue that you would like to point out to
14 us that could have led to the sinking or been a contributing
15 factor?

16 A. No, sir.

17 Q. From you being on board and going through it, what do you
18 think happened?

19 A. I have no idea.

20 Q. Have you heard anybody give their theories or opinions on
21 what they think happened?

22 A. No, sir.

23 CWO [REDACTED] Marcel, I don't think I have any more
24 questions. Do you?

25 BY MR. MUISE:

1 Q. Is there anything that went -- obviously we don't -- not all
2 of us get to be on boats that are sinking beneath us, so tell us
3 what went right. Was there some training that you've had or some
4 piece of equipment or a procedure that helped you guys that night?

5 A. I mean, I've seen boats go down, so I kind of knew what to
6 do, you know. Everybody really just stayed calm and did what
7 they're supposed to do. That just helped us out a lot.

8 Q. Okay. Thanks for that.

9 MR. MUISE: [REDACTED] I have nothing else really.

10 CWO [REDACTED] Okay, yes. I have nothing else either, so we
11 can -- it's 1100. We can stop the recording.

12 MR. MUISE: Does the parties have any questions?

13 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Negative, thank you.

14 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: No. Thank you very much for your time
15 this morning. Thank you for allowing us to sit in.

16 CWO [REDACTED] All right. With that I'll secure the recorder.
17 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD


IN THE MATTER OF: FLOODING OF TOWING VESSEL *UNCLE BLUE*
ON THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI RIVER
ON MARCH 26, 2023
Interview of Chris Barnes

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA23FM023

PLACE: Via Microsoft Teams

DATE: April 25, 2023

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.



Maria Socorro R. Abellar
Transcriber