



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary

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Meeting with: Microsoft Teams conversation with Mr. [REDACTED]
Date/time: August 19, 2021 0900 EDT
Location: Online
Interviewed by: Marcel L. Muise, NSTB
In attendance: Captain T. Phillips
Case: DCA21MM024

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OVERVIEW

10 I met online with Mr. [REDACTED] of the Coast Guard's Office of Search and Rescue on Thursday, August
11 19, 2021. Mr. [REDACTED] is the Deputy SARSAT Program Manager within the Coast Guard's Office of Search
12 and Rescue. The conversation was intended as a follow up and update to a March 2016 NTSB and Coast
13 Guard interview of the NOAA SARSAT staff which followed the 2015 sinking of the SS *El Faro*. The
14 transcript of that interview is available in the NTSB docket.

15 Captain Phillips, Chair of the Coast Guard Marine Board of Investigation, joined the meeting. Unless
16 specifically delineated by quotes, the text that follows is not a verbatim record of the conversation. It
17 has been developed from notes taken of the online conversation.

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CONVERSATION SUMMARY

19 The SARSAT system's capabilities have been improved since *El Faro* with Mid-Earth Orbit (MEOSAR)
20 satellites and infrastructure now close to initial operating capability. There are only 4 or 5 Low Earth
21 Orbit (LEOSAR) satellites still in use. The system also now has close to global coverage (except for one
22 small area near Guam.) The system should now quickly calculate a position unless the beacon's antenna
23 is moving or otherwise does not have a clear view of the sky.

24 EPIRB alerts reach Regional Coordination Centers (RCC's) without human intervention in 60 to 120
25 seconds. There's a table in the Coast Guard Addendum to the National SAR Manual that describes
26 various types of beacon alerts and corresponding emergency phases. Procedures for resolving EPIRB
27 alerts are on locally generated Quick Response Cards (QRC). MEOSAR alerts, which require three
28 satellites to calculate a position, are always considered distress until downgraded. Most training on
29 handling EPIRBs is through local On the Job Training (OJT) as only watchstanders assigned to Districts or
30 RCC's investigate them. The first step in investigating an alert is the point of contact on the registration
31 as a "very high percentage of false alerts", especially following weather are for moored vessels or
32 disposed of beacons. A new Coast Guard wide SAR procedure (known internally as Tactics, Techniques,
33 and Procedures or TTP) is currently being drafted with more specific guidance. A revised Coast Guard
34 SAR Addendum (to the National SAR Manual) is also being developed, to be formatted similar to the
35 IMO's IAMSAR Manual.

1 It is not uncommon for District and Sector watchstanders to work on the same SAR case. Sectors are
2 usually quicker to notify District counterparts. District will call Sectors to issue radio broadcasts and as a
3 courtesy for aircraft launches, but otherwise Sector watchstanders may not be aware of EPIRB alerts in
4 their AOR. SARSAT data is saved in a folder accessible to other units, though not monitored by those
5 subordinate units.

6 False distress alerts are a significant problem. The FCC has authority to issue civil penalties but currently
7 does not. False alert data is available from NOAA on their SARSAT web site.

8 Mr. [REDACTED] stated that use of Personal Locating Beacons (PLB) is “catching up” to EPIRBs, as they are half
9 the price, smaller, and easier to carry. It is easy for mariners to update their PLB contact information in
10 the registration but does require individual initiative to do so. Other non-SARSAT related devices are
11 also becoming more popular such as man overboard alerting equipment.

12 Mr. [REDACTED] was not aware of any regulatory projects to require PLB on certain vessels, or of any mariner
13 outreach or marine inspector training regarding the FCC regulation for certain vessels to upgrade to
14 Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) capable beacons that transmit their position by 2023.

15 Leadership for the SARSAT program will transfer from NOAA to the Coast Guard by 2025, primarily due
16 to retirement of LEOSAR for which NOAA’s SARSAT funding is tied to. The Coast Guard will split funding
17 with the Air Force while NASA will be the technical advisor. NOAA will retain the EPIRB registration
18 database although NASA has been chartered to improve the registration process. The Coast Guard will
19 represent the United States at COSPAS/SARSAT.

20 **END SUMMARY**

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