

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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ENGINE ROOM FIRE ABOARD THE
STATEN ISLAND FERRY *SANDY GROUND*
NEAR STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK
ON DECEMBER 22, 2022

Accident No.: DCA23FM010

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Interview of: JOSEPH AJAR, Captain, *Sandy Ground*
Staten Island Ferry

St. George Ferry Terminal
Staten Island, New York

Wednesday,
March 8, 2023

APPEARANCES:

CWO [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Accident Investigator
United States Coast Guard

BRIAN YOUNG, Senior Marine Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

BARRY TORREY, Director of Operations
Staten Island Ferry

ROBERT BANDEN, Warranty Engineer
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Department of Transportation)

I N D E X

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Interview of Joseph Ajar:

By CWO [REDACTED]

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By Mr. Young

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1 BY CWO [REDACTED]

2 Q. We will start by asking you what's your maritime background?

3 A. I graduated from SUNY Maritime in 2013. After that, I sailed
4 for Edison Chouest Offshore as a mate for about, I think, 2½ years
5 or so, and I came to the ferry as a mate in January of 2016. I
6 was a mate for about a year and assistant captain for about a
7 year, and I've been sailing as captain for about 4 years. I've
8 been here for 7 years; mate and AC I guess made up 3, and captain
9 was 4 or is 4.

10 Q. All right. And could you explain the crew size that was on
11 board the *Sandy Ground*, both the deck and engineer crews?

12 A. Sure. There's a captain, an assistant captain, three mates,
13 and there's seven deckhands. The normal crew size on that vessel
14 is six, but we had an extra deckhand riding with us that day. I'm
15 not sure specifically why. I think he was just extra and was with
16 us, which was good. A chief marine engineer, a marine engineer,
17 and two oilers for below deck. So 16 total.

18 Q. All right. And then how about any NYPD officers?

19 A. There were two NYPD officers on board.

20 Q. All right. From your recollection, how was the vessel's crew
21 alerted to the fire that occurred on board?

22 A. So after leaving Whitehall Terminal, once we cleared the
23 racks, I went down, heated up some food. The assistant captain
24 was steering southbound with a mate and a deckhand on lookout, and
25 they received a phone call from the engine room saying that they

1 had a fuel leak. They contacted me by UHF radio and I went up to
2 the Staten Island pilothouse. And that's how I found out, through
3 them finding out through the -- you know, them getting called
4 through the intercom phone.

5 Q. I see. For communication, how is the bridge able to
6 communicate with the crew, with the engineers?

7 A. So the crew was obviously communicating verbally in the
8 pilothouse by UHF radio, you know, just a handheld radio, and then
9 through the control room through the phone, the IP phone.

10 Q. And then when you say control room, that's the engine control
11 room?

12 A. Yeah, the EOS. Yeah. Sorry.

13 Q. Okay. All right. No problem.

14 A. And by UHF after things escalated to the point where they
15 got. But primarily in the beginning it was all through the phone.

16 Q. I see. And then UHF, just to clarify, handheld --

17 A. Yeah.

18 Q. -- radio?

19 A. Yeah, I'll say handheld.

20 Q. All right. No problem.

21 What were the firefighting efforts, some of the actions that
22 were initiated from the crew after the fire was reported?

23 A. So after the fire was reported, the engine crew left the
24 engine room and turned off the fuel, the emergency fuel valves,
25 and came on deck, broke out a firehose, and we put on the fire

1 pump, secured ventilation to the space, and then after realizing
2 that, you know, there was no chance of entering the space or
3 anything like that, obviously, we made the decision to deploy the
4 Novec system.

5 Q. Were there any firefighting extinguishing systems activated?

6 A. Before that?

7 Q. Beforehand.

8 A. No.

9 MR. YOUNG: You mean in addition to the Novec or --

10 MR. AJAR: You talking about like CO2 or --

11 BY CWO [REDACTED]

12 Q. Yeah -- yes, just --

13 A. No, no.

14 Q. Just so we -- as far as you knew --

15 A. From my best understanding.

16 Q. Okay. So just the Novec system?

17 A. Just the Novec, yes.

18 Q. Okay. And then you mentioned ventilation was secured from
19 the --

20 A. The pilothouse.

21 Q. -- from the pilothouse.

22 A. The Staten Island end pilothouse.

23 Q. Okay. For those actions, what does get secured? Could you
24 just describe what systems and what --

25 A. The mate broke the glass and I think just hit everything,

1 secured everything to that main engine space.

2 Q. I see. And were all the operations successful?

3 A. Yes. As far as I know, yeah.

4 Q. How was other government agencies such as first responders,
5 as the fire department and police department, how are they
6 alerted?

7 A. They were alerted on Channel 13, on 14, I'm assuming VTS
8 contacted them. And as far as I know, that's -- they got the call
9 on Channel 13.

10 Q. And how was the response from the fire department and police
11 department on scene?

12 A. It was good as far as I can tell. We didn't really need them
13 to do anything when they got on board. I'm pretty sure they were
14 down on deck maybe helping with, you know, getting passengers
15 transferred to the other boats. So as far as that's concerned, I
16 think good. But as far as the fire, by the time they showed up,
17 it was already extinguished by the Novec.

18 Q. And for the Staten Island Ferry shoreside personnel, how are
19 they notified?

20 A. They were notified on Channel 19, which is their monitoring
21 channel. And I received a phone call from the port captain, you
22 know, shortly after the incident, and he was notified that way.
23 And then we had a conversation -- sorry -- Barry and I had a
24 conversation probably a little bit after that, not really in the
25 brunt of everything going down, but -- we were offloading people

1 by that time, I would say.

2 MR. TORREY: Um-hum, by the time we spoke because --

3 MR. AJAR: Yeah, yeah.

4 BY CWO [REDACTED]

5 Q. Okay. Do you recall how many other vessels received
6 passengers during that transfer?

7 A. I believe two.

8 Q. Two?

9 MR. AJAR: Is that -- do you know?

10 MR. TORREY: Three. It was two New York City ferries, two
11 different ones, but --

12 MR. AJAR: Okay.

13 MR. TORREY: -- they looked the same for him.

14 MR. AJAR: Three all together? Okay.

15 MR. TORREY: Yeah. So three all together.

16 BY CWO [REDACTED]

17 Q. Okay. Three total.

18 A. Sorry.

19 Q. No, that's fine. Do you know where the passengers were
20 brought to from those other ferries?

21 A. The Waterway terminal and then in the slip, right?

22 MR. TORREY: Correct.

23 BY CWO [REDACTED]

24 Q. Okay. In regards to the decision to anchor the *Sandy Ground*,
25 could you just discuss --

1 A. Sure.

2 Q. -- that process and --

3 A. So the first phone call we received in the pilothouse was --
4 obviously they received it before I got there, just said we had a
5 fuel leak. I got up there as fast as I could, spoke to the chief.
6 He said that we had a fuel leak. I asked him if we were good to
7 return to St. George, just try to get to wherever, you know, the
8 terminal that was closest, figure it out when we get in. We had a
9 strong ebb current. I think we were doing like close to 19 knots,
10 you know, on our southbound trip.

11 So shortly after I spoke with him, he called me back and said
12 that we were going to lose the, you know, propulsion and steering
13 at that time and to call for tug assistance. So knowing that
14 these new vessels have a far better anchor than the other boats,
15 at that point we decided to stop the boat. I ordered the
16 assistant captain, stop the boat. When we stopped, I had the mate
17 go out to the offshore anchor, you know, the stern of our boat,
18 because we maybe weren't going to stop completely and maybe still
19 had headway and I'd rather be there instead of the bow and spin
20 the boat around, something like that.

21 And, you know, we were southbound, so we were on the side of
22 the channel where there's fuel barges anchored most of the time in
23 those Jersey flats. So we kind of got more in the middle of the
24 channel as best we could. There were a couple northbound pushers
25 around that time, I believe. And luckily we were able to bleed

1 off most of our headway, come to pretty much of a complete stop,
2 and at that time we dropped the anchor, the New York end anchor,
3 which was on the stern.

4 Q. And you also deployed the other anchor, the second anchor --

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. -- on the Staten Island end as well?

7 A. Yeah. Once that anchor went in, held relatively well for the
8 time being, I'm pretty sure we found out that we had a main engine
9 room fire and that's when I dropped the second anchor, just
10 because I realized we weren't getting the plant again at that
11 point probably.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. So just with that strong ebb current, knowing that the
14 forecast was for heavy winds out of the north, too -- I didn't
15 know when that was supposed to start, which it did start
16 eventually, just trying to get the boat stopped, not having a
17 collision, allision, or a grounding or anything like that and, you
18 know, maybe getting tugs alongside, then raising the anchors and
19 getting where we needed to go. But the priority at that point was
20 just to lessen the extent of any damage that might incur after.

21 Q. All right. And as far as after both anchors were deployed,
22 how did you gauge the effectiveness with both anchors being
23 deployed and your, you know, position, holding the position there?

24 A. It held for a little while, but I think we -- we didn't have
25 enough scope out primarily. And because they were lowered under

1 power and then we lost power, we weren't able to put out more
2 scope. So that's one of the issues with that, in my opinion.

3 Q. All right.

4 A. Had we lowered the anchor, you know, on the brake with the
5 clutch disengaged, we would have been able to put out more scope
6 and maybe that would've bettered our chances of holding position.
7 But for the purposes that we anchored, and then we had the tugs
8 come alongside and we started offloading passengers, it was
9 suitable for the situation.

10 Q. All right. As far as the weather that evening, do you recall
11 any weather impacts, you know, in regards to doing the transfer?

12 A. Right. So in the beginning when we were offloading the
13 passengers, we had the two -- the mates on deck -- I give credit
14 to them for kind of taking the reins on it. They had two tugs
15 off, you know, kind of each bow, and then they were bringing in a
16 fast ferry and kind of like pinching it so that it was -- you
17 know, gave the ferry almost like a bigger beam so it didn't, you
18 know, roll or anything as much. Because the wind picked up, it
19 got a little choppier. And everything went well, but as the wind
20 started to really pick up -- I think it started blowing like 25
21 knots, and I think maybe the tugs were pushing, too, to keep their
22 bows pressed to our bow, we started to slide a lot towards St.
23 George and at that point we called off the evacuation.

24 I think there were 50 or 60 people left on board, and it was
25 at that point we felt good about getting the boat into the slip

1 and certainly didn't want to have an allision with any of the
2 racks off the slips here. And we got guided in or pushed in by a
3 tug and the passengers got off after we got on the hooks.

4 Q. Okay. Do you recall how were passengers alerted to the fire
5 on board the *Sandy Ground*, you know, for example, a public
6 announcement or --

7 A. Right.

8 Q. -- you know, the crew? Could you just maybe --

9 A. Yeah. So there was -- the general alarm was going off
10 continuously. The only way to stop it to make announcements,
11 whether it was by word of mouth down on deck or -- to my best
12 knowledge, I'm sure we made PA announcements -- we had one of the
13 deckhands holding the off button or else the alarm was just
14 continuous and we didn't want that to distract from communications
15 in the pilothouse or everywhere else. So that's one thing that
16 maybe to look, like look into. It was just -- I didn't know if
17 you could step on that alarm by making a PA announcement or
18 whatever, but --

19 Q. I see.

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. And then as far as life jackets and, you know, muster points,
22 how was that process on board and handled?

23 A. So the mates on deck were responsible for supervising the
24 deckhands to hand out life jackets and prepare them for, you know,
25 possible evacuation before that decision was made. And then after

1 that decision was made, they were, you know, ushered down to main
2 deck and one by one, basically, handed off onto the fast ferries.

3 Q. I see. And do you recall any issues with any of the
4 passengers during disembarking?

5 A. No issues brought to my attention, but I did go down on deck
6 once and, you know, there were people like loitering, you know, as
7 if nothing was going on. And I know the crew was making
8 continuous rounds and there were people outside, so -- they
9 were -- everyone -- I had the crew members constantly making
10 rounds on deck to make sure that there was nobody where they
11 weren't supposed to be or not following the instructions to make
12 their way down to the main deck to get off the boat.

13 Q. All right. How were the passengers counted for
14 accountability --

15 A. To my knowledge, they were counted when they were going onto
16 the fast ferry by the vessel that was taking the passengers.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. The passenger count we received was inaccurate from
19 Whitehall, so --

20 Q. I see. So as they were disembarking the *Sandy Ground* and
21 then embarking onto the fast ferries, they were counted --

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. -- as they were --

24 A. That's correct.

25 Q. Okay. I see. Were there any reported injuries from crew or

1 passengers to you?

2 A. I think two injuries from crew members. I think smoke
3 inhalation was the issue.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. No passengers as far as I'm -- or to my knowledge.

6 Q. All right. And then as far as the loss of propulsion and
7 electrical power, loss of propulsion occurred first --

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. -- and then the electrical power? Could you discuss further
10 some of the backup powers that remained --

11 A. Sure.

12 Q. -- that you still had, like up in the pilothouse and --

13 A. Right. So I'm sure when the chief cut the fuel to the main
14 engine space, that's when we lost the propulsion and steering, you
15 know, so the Voith. And that lost our ship service diesel
16 generator. The emergency was on for -- I'm not sure the exact
17 amount of time, but a short period of time. And we lost that and
18 then we were on battery backup in the pilothouse and some of the
19 emergency lighting on deck, I believe. And I'm not sure exactly
20 how long that lasted for, but it was a fair amount of time. We
21 had our radars, our -- we had the VHF radios the whole time, but
22 we lost the radars towards the end when we were getting close to
23 St. George. I remember the radars weren't transmitting anymore,
24 but we had the VHF radios.

25 Q. Okay. VHF radios operated the whole time even coming back to

1 the St. George --

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. Okay. And in regards to any lessons learned or takeaways
4 from the event, are there any that you would like to share or
5 discuss?

6 A. Just basically communication. There were times where
7 communication to the engine room, which they were dealing with a
8 lot obviously, was a little difficult. And I remember trying to
9 reach the engine room by having other crew members kind of play
10 telephone with them. And I'm not necessarily saying that's a
11 blame on them because they obviously had a lot going on down there
12 that they were dealing with, but some better communication between
13 the below deck crew and the above deck crew would've, I think,
14 helped the situation.

15 CWO [REDACTED] All right. At this time I'd like to hand it
16 over to Mr. Brian Young.

17 BY MR. YOUNG:

18 Q. Thanks, Captain -- this is Brian Young with the NTSB. Thank
19 you for coming in and helping us out today.

20 Just kind of building on some of Coast Guard questions, can
21 you just talk about -- you have a captain, assistant captain, and
22 three mates. What are the normal duties of each of the deck
23 officers during a transit?

24 A. So the captain's obviously the master of the vessel in charge
25 of everything. The assistant captain, I kind of think of them as

1 sort of like a chief mate role, where they have a great knowledge
2 of the vessel. You know, on the COI they're the pilot, so they
3 know how to maneuver the vessel. They know the systems on the
4 vessel as far as propulsion, you know, anchoring, all of that
5 stuff. A lot of them were mates previously so they have a good
6 concept of what the mate's duties and responsibilities are. And
7 that's basically it for the assistant captain.

8 The mates rotate between being on deck and in the pilothouse.
9 A lot of them rotate every trip. And they're, you know, when
10 they're in the pilothouse as the navigating mate; they serve as a
11 lookout; they serve as somebody monitoring the radios alongside
12 the assistant captain -- the operator is either assistant captain
13 or the captain. The mates are, you know, there for navigation
14 purposes, looking at the radar. Sorry if I said that already.
15 They might answer -- like I'm pretty sure the mate that day
16 answered the phone call from the engine room. So they kind of
17 play a versatile role as far as being on deck and being in the
18 pilothouse and -- yeah.

19 Q. Okay. Would there always be two licensed officers --

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. -- on the -- in the bridge going towards, say, Staten Island
22 as a direction?

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. And would there ever be anybody in the other wheelhouse?

25 A. In the non-operating wheelhouse?

1 Q. Correct.

2 A. Maybe after we leave for a couple minutes or, you know,
3 something like that, but normally not.

4 Q. Right. And are both wheelhouses completely redundant where
5 all the controls are --

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. -- completely accessible and they do the same functions?

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. After you were alerted that there was a loss -- or no, a fuel
10 leak, do you recall that if the propulsion was lost soon after
11 that or did it seem like a while that you lost propulsion?

12 A. It was pretty soon after that. From -- I don't know exactly
13 how long it took me from -- get to the wardroom to the pilothouse.
14 I would like to say it was 20 or 30 seconds, but I don't know if
15 I'm that fast. But they -- I talked to the chief engineer. He
16 said, you know, for that time it was -- we were good to return to
17 St. George. I was kind of assuming that it was a fairly small
18 fuel leak and we were operational. At that point we were kind of
19 looking at traffic, making sure that nothing was going to -- you
20 know, say we did lose something while we were underway, you know,
21 something was going to happen. But pretty -- it seemed very soon
22 after that, in my opinion, that we got a phone call saying we were
23 going to lose everything -- steering and propulsion when I say
24 everything.

25 Q. And soon after the phone call, did that happen quickly?

- 1 A. Yeah.
- 2 Q. Yeah.
- 3 A. Yeah. It feels that way.
- 4 Q. Right. I'm sure.
- 5 A. Yeah. I can't give you an exact time, but --
- 6 Q. Understood. You talked a little bit about the actions that
7 were taken on the bridge such as securing ventilation, and you
8 said you secured everything and maybe broke the glass through for
9 some of the remote shutdowns. What are some of the other
10 shutdowns that may have been shut down from the bridge, do you
11 know?
- 12 A. No. I don't know.
- 13 Q. So would it be mostly machinery and ventilation?
- 14 A. Yeah. It's all machinery.
- 15 Q. Ventilation and dampers, maybe?
- 16 A. Right.
- 17 Q. Okay. How about watertight doors? Is that something --
- 18 A. They were closed.
- 19 Q. From the bridge or from below?
- 20 A. They were closed before we left Whitehall, to my best
21 knowledge.
- 22 Q. So that's normal procedure?
- 23 A. That's normal procedure, yes. They're only open during
24 transit between spaces.
- 25 Q. Okay. When there is a discussion from down below with the

1 chief engineer saying that it's probably a possibility he would
2 like to release the Novec, is that something that you talk about
3 or does he ask for your approval or is it something you demand or
4 order him to do? How does that work?

5 A. I've never been through it before, so when he -- you know, it
6 was in the back of my mind that that's a possibility, we have a
7 main engine room fire. And, you know, I wasn't sure exactly where
8 it was at that time. I don't even know if they were exactly sure.
9 I'm sure they were. I'd like to think that they were. But once
10 he suggested it, it was -- if -- as long as everyone's out and
11 everyone that was down there is now on deck, do it.

12 Q. Okay. Great.

13 A. The sooner the better.

14 Q. Right. But there was definitely a discussion, it seems --

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. -- and you communicated with the chief engineer --

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. -- about what his intentions were and --

19 A. Right.

20 Q. Okay. You had mentioned also that VTS was notified and they
21 notified the police and fire department harbor units. Was that
22 some of the first notifications that the *Sandy Ground* had made, do
23 you think?

24 A. Yeah. I'm pretty sure the assistant captain made a PAN-PAN
25 call on 13, and that probably got their attention as well, I would

1 think. And I'm pretty sure the assistant captain was kind of
2 doing all the radio calls while the mate and I were figuring out
3 other -- he was kind of navigating and making calls, and we were
4 looking at what was possibly going to happen next, I guess.

5 Q. Would you say your team worked well together --

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. -- between the captain, assistant captain, mates, and --

8 A. Yes, definitely.

9 Q. -- bridge management and all that, resource management?

10 A. Yes. For sure, yeah.

11 Q. Is that anything you ever train for?

12 A. Yeah. Yeah.

13 Q. Yeah?

14 A. I mean, maybe not that specifically, but -- and I don't think
15 we've ever trained for that all at once as far as the emergency
16 procedure manual being thrown at you and saying this is -- this
17 whole book is going to happen right now. But --

18 Q. But some of the events --

19 A. Absolutely.

20 Q. -- you probably have trained for individually --

21 A. Absolutely. Yes. Yeah.

22 Q. -- such as a fire, right?

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. And how about the at-sea evacuation?

25 A. So --

1 Q. Is that something you train for?

2 A. -- I don't think anyone's ever trained for that exact
3 situation with small ferries. We've done, you know, ferry-to-
4 ferry transfer drills with our boats, you know, together. But
5 kind of very similar, I guess you could say, and it worked out, it
6 worked out with well. But the mates on deck were very good. They
7 kind of set it up how they thought was good and I trusted their
8 judgment and we went with it.

9 Q. And so you actually have been part of a training activity
10 that actually used two --

11 A. I never have, no, not physically.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. But as far as tabletop and walking through it, looking at
14 pictures, stuff like that, hearing other people that have done it.
15 So --

16 Q. So it has been done?

17 A. But it has been done, yes.

18 Q. And those lessons learned --

19 A. As a drill. I don't think it's ever been done in real
20 time --

21 Q. Right. Right. As a training exercise?

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. But you've been advised of it?

24 A. Yes.

25 Q. Are there always two New York City police officers on board

1 when you are transiting?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. And do you feel that during the emergency that the passengers
4 were calm or was anyone excited or --

5 A. I've seen some videos after on social media and, you know,
6 obviously stuff like that and hearing -- I wasn't down on deck
7 really. But I think it was, overall, everyone was pretty calm and
8 cooperative.

9 Q. There were no issues that --

10 A. No.

11 Q. -- were brought to your attention by any passengers?

12 A. No, no. Not during the situation, no.

13 Q. Okay. You had mentioned that the newer class vessels have
14 better anchors compared to the --

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. Can you talk about that a little bit?

17 A. They're heavier. They're on a cable and not a line. They
18 can be deployed, I think, faster and easier, much faster.

19 Q. Have you ever dropped the anchor on any of these new vessels?

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. You have?

22 A. Yeah.

23 Q. In a normal situation or an emergency?

24 A. In a drill situation, yes.

25 Q. A drill situation. So you've practiced dropping --

1 A. Yes.

2 Q. -- the anchors off?

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. And is that part of like an SMS training or --

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Do you have any idea what the water depth might have been
7 where you did drop the anchors?

8 A. Between 45 and 50 feet probably.

9 Q. Okay. And you had mentioned there were three other vessels
10 that assisted in disembarking passengers.

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. Two New York City ferries and one fast ferry?

13 MR. TORREY: One New York Waterway.

14 MR. YOUNG: One New York Waterway.

15 BY MR. YOUNG:

16 Q. Were you -- was your vessel able to communicate with the
17 wheelhouses of the --

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. -- ferries, like VHF probably?

20 A. Yes. And then they were communicating down -- at some point,
21 I forget when exactly, but we switched to a working channel when
22 we were kind of more getting people off, you know what I mean? So
23 we had a different working channel. Honestly, the assistant
24 captain was really doing most of the VHF comms. He did a great
25 job with that. And then I'm sure down on deck they were

1 communicating with each other verbally --

2 Q. Right.

3 A. -- you know, they were within earshot of earshot of each
4 other, and then they were relaying back up to the pilothouse. But
5 overall, that part of the sequence was -- for never having done,
6 it worked, you know --

7 Q. Very well.

8 A. Very well, yeah.

9 Q. You talked a little bit about the weather and how the weather
10 kind of deteriorated towards the end.

11 A. Right.

12 Q. Could you just talk about maybe what the weather was, if you
13 can remember, when you departed the city and then maybe how it --
14 the winds increased, what wind speed and direction, if you
15 remember.

16 A. Yeah. So when we departed Whitehall, it was sunny out,
17 clear, maybe a little breezy, nothing really noticeable though,
18 you know what I mean?

19 Q. Um-hum.

20 A. And then I kind of knew in the forecast that it was supposed
21 to start picking up out of the north. So that was in the back of
22 my mind for most of it, how, you know, as far as the anchors and
23 all that stuff. And I want to say -- I don't remember what time,
24 I can't even give you a good estimate on time, but when I started
25 to say it's starting to get really windy --

- 1 Q. And that was during the --
- 2 A. -- we were probably like -- probably inside the KB towards
3 St. George. So I was -- I was taking notice to the wind the whole
4 time, but at that point it was kind of like extremis, like we need
5 to reevaluate what we're doing here.
- 6 Q. So that was during the evacuation that the wind kicked up?
- 7 A. Yes. Yes.
- 8 Q. Is current an issue in this area?
- 9 A. Yes.
- 10 Q. Was that -- can you estimate what the current was doing?
- 11 A. We were -- you know, the *Sandy Ground's* a faster boat than
12 some of the other, most of the other boats. I want to say the
13 assistant captain said we were doing, you know, about 19 knots
14 southbound, which is -- normally with a strong ebb, on the other
15 boats we're, you know, 17½, 18 knots, a little bit more than 18.
16 So we were moving really good, so I'm sure that the current was
17 good.
- 18 Q. About 2 knots or so?
- 19 A. Probably more than that, 3.
- 20 Q. Wow.
- 21 A. Yeah.
- 22 Q. And what is a normal transit speed? I'm sure it's --
- 23 A. Between 12½ and 18 knots.
- 24 Q. Based on the current?
- 25 A. Based on the current, yeah.

1 Q. You talked about counting passengers on and accounting for
2 them and that there might have been an inaccurate count --

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. -- as everybody boarded. How is that count done?

5 A. To my best knowledge, that count's done when they enter the
6 terminal, right? So they were counted when they entered the
7 terminal, and you might have passengers go to the bathroom, miss
8 the boat, stuff like that. So one of the first calls we made, you
9 know, when we found out we had a situation on our hands, we called
10 Whitehall to get a count. And it was off, but it -- you know.

11 Q. And I think there's turnstiles that people go through and
12 then they have overhead sensors, right?

13 A. Is there turnstiles?

14 Q. Or sensors and turnstiles --

15 MR. TORREY: Correct. There's a sensor overhead. They're
16 physical barriers they walk through but there's no turnstile
17 anymore.

18 MR. AJAR: Yeah.

19 MR. TORREY: It's evolved to an overhead camera.

20 MR. AJAR: Yeah.

21 MR. YOUNG: Okay. And is that actually counting people or is
22 it all done with video from above?

23 MR. TORREY: It's actually counting people. It's a camera
24 that counts and it goes to a cloud-based software counter. So
25 they -- it counts ins to the terminal and outs.

1 MR. YOUNG: Okay.

2 MR. TORREY: And to get an exact count, you would have to go
3 in at that time, the time the doors close, so that -- on the boat,
4 and then back out who's in the terminal.

5 MR. YOUNG: Okay.

6 MR. TORREY: So there's a little bit of a process to narrow
7 down the exact count, which can cause some error in terms of what
8 gets reported to the boats.

9 MR. AJAR: Yeah, people -- I guess people are coming in for
10 the last boat and miss it or don't take it.

11 MR. TORREY: Correct.

12 MR. AJAR: There are holdovers that aren't counted because
13 the doors --

14 MR. TORREY: So the count will show 300 --

15 MR. AJAR: Yeah. I think they told me --

16 MR. TORREY: -- and maybe only 280 got on the boat. There's
17 20 people either in a store or in the head or they, you know --

18 MR. YOUNG: Right.

19 MR. TORREY: So to narrow it down, we'd have to go back
20 through and get a snapshot in time to get an exact number.

21 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: It's a people counter, right?

22 MR. TORREY: That's correct.

23 BY MR. YOUNG:

24 Q. So were there any additional efforts that had to be taken to
25 account for everybody disembarking or how did you verify that

1 everybody --

2 A. Well, just continuous sweeping of the boat, and then once we
3 got in, we did a really good passenger sweep of the vessel to make
4 sure everyone was off.

5 Q. Okay. And were there any checks for possibilities of people
6 overboard? No reports of it?

7 A. No reports of it. With all the traffic around us assisting
8 us, I would like to say that everyone was keen on making sure that
9 nothing like that was happening.

10 Q. You had mentioned that two crew members had reported possible
11 smoke inhalation. Were they both from the engine room?

12 A. One was the deckhand that was assigned to main deck and the
13 other was from the engine room, an oiler, yes.

14 Q. And did they both recover or --

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. -- got checked out and sent home?

17 We understand the emergency generator started as it was
18 designed to, but after a while it stopped functioning. And
19 obviously you're not really sure exactly when that happened, but
20 do you have any idea why that may have stopped working?

21 A. No.

22 Q. Okay. This is a newer vessel class -- a new class of vessel
23 here. Did you have any specific training on how the operations
24 occur on the wheelhouse compared to some of the previous --

25 A. Yeah. I was actually one of the training officers for this

1 class boat. So --

2 Q. And how were you chosen for that?

3 A. Application process and management, you know, interview, and
4 they decided two people.

5 Q. And were you brought down during construction of the new
6 vessel --

7 A. Yes.

8 Q. -- to learn about the vessel?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. Can you talk about that a little bit?

11 A. I went down in the summer. I guess it -- Covid throws all
12 your years off. I guess that was 2021, I went down for a few days
13 with one of the chief engineers that was involved with the
14 training as well. And we went out for some underway trials, just
15 observed, that type of stuff; did some walkarounds, took some
16 notes on the equipment, some differences, and got ready for when
17 the vessel came up to figure out how to teach everyone else about
18 it basically.

19 Q. And then once you got back up to New York, did you train
20 other captains and other mates on --

21 A. Yes.

22 Q. -- the operation for the newer class vessels?

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. Is the Ollis Class more of your regularly assigned vessel or
25 do you float all throughout the fleet?

1 A. No, a lot of floating. I haven't been on, I haven't been on
2 that boat for -- I can't tell you an amount of time, but I work on
3 the weekends mostly and I'm usually on one of the Molinari Class
4 boats.

5 Q. With this accident happening close to Christmas, was there
6 any issues with crewing, where people were calling out or on
7 vacation or unable to get a full crew or --

8 A. So on Thursdays and Fridays, my crew were to be assigned, so
9 we don't have a normal crew. We just operate Saturday and Sunday
10 together. So I was filling in for a different captain, as well as
11 my assistant captain and the mate that was in the pilothouse as
12 well. We were all from my crew, actually, on Saturday and Sunday.
13 So that -- I would like to think that that helped things. We have
14 a better working relationship and -- you know, everyone knows
15 everyone here, obviously, but as far as being with the same
16 people, I would say that that helped.

17 Q. That's good. And how about between the bridge -- or the deck
18 department and the engine department, were there any issues?

19 A. I wouldn't say issues, but -- I can't speak for them down
20 there as far as that is, but the chief engineer was from a
21 different crew that -- the one run was tied up, so they were also
22 TBA. So he was a part of the crew that he's not normally a part
23 of. But like I said, everyone works together and everyone knows
24 each other, so -- there might be little differences, but --

25 Q. Is it somewhat normal that you do work with different --

1 A. Yeah. It's normal.

2 Q. -- members of different teams?

3 A. Yeah. That's normal, yeah.

4 Q. I think that's all my questions for now. We talked
5 previously, but maybe -- I don't expect you to remember this, but
6 if we could ask you for the exact position, we'll look at a chart
7 and maybe we'll just send an email out just so we can put that --

8 A. Sure.

9 Q. -- in my report. But last question, do you remember what the
10 draft of the vessel was or what it normally is kept at?

11 A. About 13 feet, I would say.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. But I'm not sure definitely, specifically.

14 MR. YOUNG: Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

15 MR. AJAR: No problem.

16 CWO [REDACTED] All right. I don't have any more further
17 questions, so at this time I would like to open it up to the room.

18 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: No questions.

19 CWO [REDACTED] All right. And, Captain, before we conclude
20 today, I just wanted to ask you are there any final remarks or any
21 other items you would like to add?

22 MR. AJAR: No. Just proud of the way the crew handled the
23 situation we were put in. But everyone, all the passengers and
24 crew members, got off the boat safely and enjoyed their holiday.
25 And that's basically it.

1 CWO [REDACTED] All right. Well, thank you again, Captain.
2 And would you agree for us to follow up with you at a later time
3 if needed --

4 MR. AJAR: Of course.

5 CWO [REDACTED] -- for follow-up questions? All right.

6 Well, thanks again for you time today. That concludes our
7 interview. Time on deck is 11:45.

8 (Whereupon, at 11:45 p.m., 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: ENGINE ROOM FIRE ABOARD THE
 STATEN ISLAND FERRY *SANDY GROUND* NEAR
 STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK
 ON DECEMBER 22, 2022
 Interview of Joseph Ajar

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA23FM010

PLACE: Staten Island, New York

DATE: March 8, 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.

Kay M
Transcriber

