



U.S. COAST GUARD INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Matter Under Investigation: ROGER BLOUGH Fire

Interview Of: Isaac John Johnson Ship keeper on board the ROGER BLOUGH

Date/Time: 1FEB21 0616

Location: Officers Mess room on board the JAMES R BARKER moored next to the ROGER BLOUGH

Interviewed By: CWO4 [REDACTED]

Others Present: None.

While onboard the JAMES R BARKER I was observing and taking photos of the firefighting response efforts taking place on board the ROGER BLOUGH. I arrived on board at approximately 345. At 0613 Isaac Johnson (the ship keeper) approached me and said he heard I was wanting to talk with him. Isaac Johnson was reportedly the only person on board the vessel when the fire broke out. We proceeded to the officer's mess on board the JAMES R BARKER to conduct an interview in private.

The officer's mess has three doors. Mr. Johnson was sitting directly across from me with a large table between us, with one door to his back, another immediately to his left and the third to his right. I informed him that he was free to leave at any time and I was not between him and any of these egress points. He consented to the interview which was also recorded. He gave verbal confirmation that he was also comfortable with me recording the interview. The below is a transcript summary of the interview. Upon starting the interview I made the following observations. Mr. Johnson's eyes were very bloodshot and he positioned his body so that it was facing away from me. He also often avoided eye contact. These behaviors may be normal for this individual but they gave me the impression that he was very uncomfortable with the questioning and it seemed as though he was guarding.

Below is the transcript summary of the recorded interview.

CWO [REDACTED]: Could you please state your name.

Mr. Johnson: My name is Isaac Johnson and I was on board the ROGER BLOUGH during the fire.

CWO [REDACTED]: I'd like to record this interview to get the facts straight is that ok with you?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED]: Could you walk me through how all this started today?

Mr. Johnson: Um, I worked up to about 3 in the afternoon yesterday (Sunday the 31st of January). Then I went up took a nap and then went to dinner around 7:30pm. I came back around 9:30/10:00 and

went to bed. I woke up to a room full of smoke. I ran outside and the ship keeper, I mean the gate keeper was up there and he said he came out because he saw smoke a little earlier.

CWO [REDACTED]: What time was this?

Mr. Johnson: I woke up around 1:38am.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you woke up saw smoke in your room, did you hear any alarms or anything?

Mr. Johnson: I can't remember I ran out of there so fast. I just saw a lot of black smoke.

CWO [REDACTED]: So did you notice where the smoke was the thickest?

Mr. Johnson: It was thickest in the hallways.

CWO [REDACTED]: What deck is this?

Mr. Johnson: Main deck.

CWO [REDACTED]: And what room are you staying in on board?

Mr. Johnson: The boson's room.

CWO [REDACTED]: The boson's room?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED]: And that's starboard side? So you're in the aft accommodations?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you ran outside. Then what did you do?

Mr. Johnson: I ran outside and that's when the ship keeper said what's' going on. I said I don't know call 911. He called 911.

CWO [REDACTED]: You just said ship keeper.

Mr. Johnson: The, na, na must have been the gatekeeper.

CWO [REDACTED]: So somebody with Bay Ship?

Mr. Johnson: Yup. They called. So I called Dave (refers to Dave Hunt the Key Lakes vessel representative) and then here we are.

At this point the recorders battery went dead so I switched to recording with my phone.

CWO [REDACTED]: So how long have you been on board?

Mr. Johnson: I got here on Friday (January 29th, 2021).

CWO [REDACTED]: So you were on board on Friday. I'm switching over to my phone this battery is dead. Between Friday and when you woke up to the smoke what work was going on onboard that you were aware of.

Mr. Johnson: No hot work to my knowledge. Just kinda just picking up odds and ends. Taking it easy. We really weren't, there was no torches no welding. Nothing like that. Which makes it really odd. I, I think that there's a heater in the uh steering gear flat. I think that that electric heater went out.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you're thinking the steering flat electric heater?

Mr. Johnson: I think that's exactly what happened. And it moved up.

CWO [REDACTED]: Why do you think that happened? Why does that...

Mr. Johnson: It's the only thing back there running.

CWO [REDACTED]: What else is stored in the vicinity of that electric heater?

Mr. Johnson: Ah, there's oil back there, engine oil. Um, yeah there's a paint locker back there, steering gear.

CWO [REDACTED]: Ok. So that's aft portside?

Mr. Johnson: That's right, yeah that's strait back.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you think it was an electrical heater. I guess we'll find out when we get back there. And to your knowledge that's the most likely thing?

Mr. Johnson: I can't see anything else that it would be to start both belts on fire. That's odd.

CWO [REDACTED]: How clean are things back there? I mean is it [clean], as far as fire hazards are concerned and electric heaters and things. Have you noticed anything that would jump out as a fire hazard or anything that concerned you?

Mr. Johnson: Not necessarily no. I mean there were no really oily rags laying there that I know. I hadn't really had a chance to look around back there too much.

CWO [REDACTED]: Anything else that you can think of right now?

Mr. Johnson: Not really if I think of anything else...I mean there's electrical panels all over the place back there, behind the steering gear flat back there. I don't know what work has been done all summer.

CWO [REDACTED] So from when you came on board last Thursday or Friday, you weren't aware of any hot work going on. What have you been doing on board since then?

Mr. Johnson: Just basically picking up the engine room. Yesterday I was making gaskets all day. I closed up shop early at around 3.

CWO [REDACTED]: p.m.?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah yesterday at 3p.m.

CWO [REDACTED]: So Sunday at 3p.m. was the last time you were down there?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED] For the gaskets were you using any heat for that?

Mr. Johnson: Nope.

CWO [REDACTED] Notice anything out of the ordinary back there?

Mr. Johnson: Nothing. Everything was running smooth.

CWO [REDACTED] Any shipyard workers on board on Sunday?

Mr. Johnson: No not that I know of.

CWO [REDACTED] Is that something that you would have been aware of?

Mr. Johnson: Oh yeah if they were doing hot work they would let me know.

CWO [REDACTED] If they're not doing hot work would you know?

Mr. Johnson: No. I don't know.

CWO [REDACTED] Since Friday you've seen shipyard workers come and go I'm sure. Have they been smoking on board?

Mr. Johnson: No not shipyard workers.

CWO [REDACTED] Do you smoke?

Mr. Johnson: I do.

CWO [REDACTED] Do you have a designated smoking area on board?

Mr. Johnson: I smoke right out front of the cabins by the number 4 and 5 winch.

CWO [REDACTED] How often do you guys smoke inside?

Mr. Johnson: I don't smoke inside.

CWO [REDACTED]: Is there a company policy that says not to?

Mr. Johnson: No. I just don't smoke in the cabins.

CWO [REDACTED]: Were you smoking while you were working the gaskets.

Mr. Johnson: No. I was in the control room. You can't smoke in there.

CWO [REDACTED]: Ok. But it was cold out you know and I get it I'm a former smoker. Do people hunker down in the engine room and smoke? There's nothing wrong with having a cigarette I mean.

Mr. Johnson: No I mean I definitely wasn't smoking back there.

CWO [REDACTED]: Alright so you were last in there yesterday at three punching gaskets in the engine control room. To your knowledge you think the most likely thing may have been that electric heater back aft. There's a paint locker back there and you said oil. When you say oil what do you mean? In storage tanks or.....?

Mr. Johnson: 55 gallon drums.

CWO [REDACTED]: How many 55 gallon drums were back there?

Mr. Johnson: I'd say 6 or more.

CWO [REDACTED]: Full?

Mr. Johnson: Yup.

CWO [REDACTED]: Ok. Why are they stored back there?

Mr. Johnson: Ah, that's where they store them. That's where they always store them.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you weren't smoking on board.

Mr. Johnson: No not yesterday.

CWO [REDACTED]: Except for the main deck?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED]: Any other sources of ignition that you can think of, anything running hot back there?

Mr. Johnson: I don't know. I mean whatever happened, happened fast because when I got back last night there was no smoke around 930p.m.-1000p.m.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you got back 930-1000 after dinner...

Mr. Johnson: Yeah I got a sandwich. Went to bed woke up and what the hell.

CWO [REDACTED]: Ok.

*At this point I noticed more of the behaviors stated above. Mr. Johnson broke eye contact and repositioned his body weight when asking about his timeline around getting back to the boat. *

CWO [REDACTED] Have you spoken to the company about the drug and alcohol testing?

Mr. Johnson: I just had a drug test so I guess I could do that again.

Mr. Johnson seemed very uncomfortable with the question about drug testing

CWO [REDACTED]: So this is what we're calling a Major Marine Casualty. Anytime we have substantial damage and this is likely going to be well over a million dollars, as a part of that it requires drug and alcohol testing of any company or vessel personnel that were on board that were involved. That's why I wanna speak with you. It's a required thing that we have to go through. That testing will be done at an approved facility that will be designated by the company. Alcohol testing has to be within like now. You have two hours to have an alcohol test from the incident. Granted you were sleeping but we have 8 hours. So we have up until 8 hours. Within 2 hours but no more than 8 hours. So we have to get you out to alcohol testing. Not saying there an issue. But you went to dinner, did you have any drinks with dinner?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED]: And that's totally fine. It's not saying that it's a causative factor or that it isn't a causative factor. A guy went to dinner and had a couple of drinks. That's good thank you for telling me so there aren't any surprises. As far as the drug use or anything like that if we send you for a drug test are we going to have any issues or problems?

Mr. Johnson: I'll be fine there.

CWO [REDACTED] You'll be fine there?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

Mr. Johnson showed more signals like looking away and shifting his weight that seemed to me that he was feeling uncomfortable with the drug and alcohol testing questions. I decided to briefly change the subject so that I could revisit that line of questioning later when he seemed calmer.

CWO [REDACTED]: Did you notice anything out of the ordinary before this happened or as it was happening that just didn't seem right to you?

Mr. Johnson: No. Nothing at all.

CWO [REDACTED] How many drinks did you have with dinner? Just so when we're doing the testing we kinda know what to expect.

Mr. Johnson: Probably 10 or 12. Yeah...yeah I got drunk.

CWO [REDACTED]: Ok. So you got drunk at dinner. That said anything else that you can think of that you saw, heard, or smelled?

Mr. Johnson: Not really.

CWO [REDACTED]: How long have you been working as a ship keeper?

Mr. Johnson: Every now and then I'll come down to help them. Two or three years now.

CWO [REDACTED]: Have you been on this boat before?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED]: How many times?

Mr. Johnson: I was on for a little bit last week. There's usually two of us.

CWO [REDACTED]: Why only one this year?

Mr. Johnson: Oh he had to go down for some classes. He'll be back this afternoon.

CWO [REDACTED]: Ok so you've been a ship keeper before.

Mr. Johnson: I'm not really a ship keeper I just help out like 8 to 3 or 8 to 4. Usually I just stay on board.

CWO [REDACTED]: I'm gonna try to wrap this up here. What is your job description? What is expected of you?

Mr. Johnson: Extra help just help the engineer out. That's pretty much it.

CWO [REDACTED]: So you're just another person working for the company to assist where needed?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah. No major responsibility or anything. I'm not in charge.

CWO [REDACTED]: Are you in charge of doing security rounds on the vessel or fire rounds or...?

Mr. Johnson: Well I do a round in the morning. I check the boiler I check the bilge. That's it. Security rounds that's um the company. They're supposed to be doing rounds at night.

CWO [REDACTED]: When you say company do you mean Bay Ship?

Mr. Johnson: Either Bay Ship or Keystone. They're supposed to have night guys to walk around.

CWO [REDACTED]: So as a ship keeper you do a round in the morning. You said you check the boilers. You mean the auxiliary heating boilers?

Mr. Johnson: Yup.

CWO [REDACTED] How were those working this morning?

Mr. Johnson: 35lbs. Perfect. Everything was running awesome.

CWO [REDACTED] Any suspicion that anything could have started over there?

Mr. Johnson: Nope.

CWO [REDACTED] Can you explain that, why don't you think that might have been an area where...

Mr. Johnson: There's so many safeties on it. You break a line is just shuts off.

CWO [REDACTED] So as far as the automation on the boilers is that something that you oversee with the fueling and feed water and things like that? Or are you just checking pressure?

Mr. Johnson: I'm just check pressure. Everything is good.

CWO [REDACTED] If the boiler were to go off line would it be your job to fire it back up?

Mr. Johnson: I could if I wanted to. I usually call an engineer to do it.

CWO [REDACTED] Did the boilers go down at any point in the last three days since Friday?

Mr. Johnson: Never.

CWO [REDACTED]: Those are Johnson boilers?

Mr. Johnson: Um.

CWO [REDACTED] How many are there?

Mr. Johnson: Just one.

CWO [REDACTED] Ok just one. As far as being a ship keeper and being on board what's your job description or what are the expectations if there's an emergency? Do you have a role in that?

Mr. Johnson: No not really. I work my 8 hours and leave.

CWO [REDACTED] So you work 8 hours during that day. Is there a set 8 hour schedule they like you to work or ask you to work?

Mr. Johnson: 8-4 something like that.

CWO [REDACTED] So between 4pm to 8am the next day is it expected that you stay on board?

Mr. Johnson: No I can stay at a hotel.

CWO [REDACTED] So do you stay on board to save the company a dime or is it easier for you?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah. It's easier for me.

CWO [REDACTED] Ok but you're not required to be on here? Are you required to do any rounds at all?

Mr. Johnson: No I don't think so. That's the engineer's job.

CWO [REDACTED] So you mentioned in the morning you checked the bilges and the boilers. Is that an expectation?

Mr. Johnson: Um I would think so yeah, a curtesy. I do it just because it's a good thing to do. I don't know.

CWO [REDACTED] Do they give you anything formal in writing or in any list and say hey man here's the gig. Here's what you're getting paid, here's the hours, here's your expectations?

Mr. Johnson: No.

CWO [REDACTED] So who gives you your tasking every day?

Mr. Johnson: The engineer. I pretty much usually just follow him on the ship.

CWO [REDACTED] So when was the last time the engineer was on board?

Mr. Johnson: This morning at 9am (Sunday the 31st of Jan at 9a.m)

CWO [REDACTED] And who is the engineer?

Mr. Johnson: Christian Benville? Benvn? I forget his last name. (The engineer is Christian Benvin)

CWO [REDACTED] Benville? I can get that from Dave Hunt (Dave Hunt is the local Key Lakes vessel rep). Is he the only company engineer that you've been working with or have there been other folks?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah Yeah he's the only one this year.

CWO [REDACTED] He doing any work that you think could have had any impact?

Mr. Johnson: No. No I don't think so.

CWO [REDACTED] Um, that said what I'm going to do now is, I think we're going to conclude the interview now. You were the only person on board when it started so we're gonna be having more conversations moving forward, partly because you're exhausted you just went through an emergency situation, I know you're shookin up and this gives us time process things. So as we start to learn more about what may have happened or may not have happened I'll need to get back in touch with you. What I'd like to do is grab your contact information, your address, date of birth, first/middle/last names and stuff like

that. And I would just ask that you make yourself available. I'll also give you my cell phone and you can call me with any questions or concerns. Are there any questions that we haven't talked about you feel I should have asked? Or something we should discuss?

Mr. Johnson: What happens if I fail the drug and alcohol test?

CWO [REDACTED] Well are you a licensed mariner?

Mr. Johnson: No.

CWO [REDACTED] You're not a licensed mariner?

Mr. Johnson: No.

CWO [REDACTED] Ok. So what do you do full time?

Mr. Johnson: I'm a commercial fisherman. I'm a captain on a commercial boat on Lake Superior.

CWO [REDACTED] On Lake Superior. Good deal! Do you have a license for that?

Mr. Johnson: No it's only a 35 footer.

CWO [REDACTED] So you run on Lake Superior. So you take folks out, like charter fishing trips?

Mr. Johnson: No. I fish with nets.

CWO [REDACTED] So you run a fish boat up there. What do you guys catch?

Mr. Johnson: Chubs, trout, whitefish, herring. That's pretty much I mean.

CWO [REDACTED] Oh nice. So do you work for a company or who's the boat owner?

Mr. Johnson: My dad owns the company.

CWO [REDACTED] Ok your dad. What's the name of the company?

Mr. Johnson: Ah squirrel fisheries.

CWO [REDACTED] What is it?

Mr. Johnson: Squirrel fisheries out of Portland, WI.

CWO [REDACTED] Oh. What's the name of the boat?

Mr. Johnson: The Judy.

CWO [REDACTED]: J.U.D.Y?

Mr. Johnson: Yup.

CWO [REDACTED] Do you remember the official number by chance?

Mr. Johnson: I don't.

CWO [REDACTED] I know some of these boats but it's been awhile since I've been on a lot of them. Squirrel Fisheries? Like Squirrel climbing a tree?

Mr. Johnson: Yup.

CWO [REDACTED] Who do you provide product to?

Mr. Johnson: Everett's Fisheries they smoke the fish. I also sell to Dan's Fish down here.

CWO [REDACTED] Nice. So you had asked a question. What if I failed a drug and alcohol test? I guess we'll cross that bridge if we get there. If that comes up. For the sake of being honest between each other, and again as an investigator my primary goal is prevention. If you're a mariner acting in a safety capacity drug and alcohol tests if they were to come back it could impact your ability to hold a license if you currently hold one. It could be suspended or revoked depending on what the circumstances were. And it could also prevent you from getting a license in the interim should you have a positive test for something. Um that being said for the sake of fully understanding the situation is there a specific substance in mind that you might be concerned with?

Mr. Johnson: Probably weed.

CWO [REDACTED] Probably weed, so a little Marijuana use?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED] So do you live in Wisconsin then?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah.

CWO [REDACTED] Alright..... So how much are we talking, casual or.....

Mr. Johnson: Maybe one hit two weeks ago. I don't know if I'm gonna pass or not.

CWO [REDACTED] Ok. Ok. Like I said we'll cross that when we get there. I really appreciate the honesty moving forward when we get the test results and knowing that we're having this dialog beforehand is very helpful for myself as well as you. That said anything else that we should talk about?

Mr. Johnson: No that's pretty much all I know. I can't think of anything else. When Christian gets here he may have a better idea of what's going on.

CWO [REDACTED] And Christian was the Engineer?

Mr. Johnson: Yup. He'll be here around noon.

CWO [REDACTED] Ok great. For now I'm going to conclude the interview unless you have any questions or concerns.

At this point in the recording I gathered his personal information.

CWO [REDACTED] You said you worked on a commercial fishing vessel. Do you have a credential or anything with the Coast Guard?

Mr. Johnson: No. Not for that.

CWO [REDACTED] I'll pull info up in our system. Have you ever had a license?

Mr. Johnson: I've got my oiler's ticket. But I haven't seen that in years. I quit sailing a while ago. Three years ago.

CWO [REDACTED] So former oiler. What boats did you work on?

Mr. Johnson: Well I was a conveyor man on the Blough for many years. Three or four years I think I was over there. I know the ship pretty well.

I then confirmed his contact and personal information. Mr. Johnson was very cooperative and seemed alert. Though the interview did indicate drug and alcohol use may have occurred it is not apparent at this time what role if any it played in the lead up to or during the casualty.

2/16/2021

X

[REDACTED]
CWO4 [REDACTED]
Investigating Officer

Signed by: [REDACTED]