

Ship Report Transcript

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By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. Daddy will continue listening to parts of an interview I did in the spring of 2024 with author John Kppp, former U.S. Coast Guard, surfacing about a book he wrote called CG 41332. That's the name of a U.S. Coast Guard utility boat that was involved in a terrible tragedy on the Columbia River Bar in 1977. U.S. Coast Guard trainees were working aboard Sig 41332 during a practice run out on the river on the BAA. Things went wildly wrong and the nightmarish incident that occurred cost three young crewmen their lives. It was a little known accident until Kopp wrote his book, but what investigators learned from it changed Coast Guard procedures forever. The book came out in 2023. Here's more from my interview with John Kopp.

JR: So let's talk a little bit more about the incident itself, because there were some really extraordinary things that happened. So the boat is upside down. One person got thrown off into the water. Everybody else is in the cabin and they're challenged with a pocket of air in there that is finite. And they and they have to get out. And but nobody knows they're there. I mean, it took quite a while for the Coast Guard to realize that they were there. And the story of what is his name? Jean Wisdom, the chief, the Fisheries National Fisheries agent, who was he was he was tasked with looking for people who are poaching, who are who are fishing illegally. And so they would go out in bad weather like there was during this incident. Right. And the the flyer, the helicopter pilots were like, we don't really want to do this. And he just for some reason said, no, no, we got to do it. And then he asked them to turn around and go on it. A bit of intuition. And that's how how they found the boat. Isn't that right?

JK: That's right. Yeah. The synchronicity to start with that this this nighttime fisheries patrol up over Grays Harbor was scheduled and it was going to be canceled. But Jean, who worked for a different agency, he worked for the National National Marine Fisheries Service under NOAA, He kind of pushed he just he had the sense that, like now we need to go out tonight. And there were a few different delays that led them to departing the air station in Warrenton just a little bit later than they expected. And literally, as they're departing and they're starting to curve northward and fly over the south jetty, he sees like this weird glow on the reflection of his the visor on his flight helmet. And so from that point, kind of building into this gut intuition, he convinces the pilots to turn around. And in there turning around, they they notice the legitimate flares from the crew. But the situation I mean, at that time in the Coast Guard, there wasn't a requirement for underway vessels to be maintaining a communication schedule with their parent command. Today, that happens every 30 minutes. You get a you get a radio call from the station. And if the vessel doesn't respond, then the station has a protocol they follow to basically go figure out where the boat is and why they're not responding. So that set up the vessel to be in a situation where it could be upside down within view, actually, of the lighthouse and the lookout tower at Cape Disappointment. Had it been daytime or had somebody been up there knowing to watch out for them but they were upside down, the crew was stuck inside with with no means easily to communicate on the air. Right. So they're they're being sucked out towards the ocean at about five knots through lots of spit where it's breaking 15 feet or greater.

JR: I mean, just for people who are not familiar with the area, Clatsop Spit is an area near the mouth of the river that's very shallow. And so when you're talking about that line of red buoys, that red line is a place, you know, to the south of that red line. You don't want to be there because it's just so hazardous. And and that's where they were. And the boat flipped. And and so they're I mean, the story is just

horrendous, you know, the people. A few of them swam out and a couple were afraid to. And those people died in there in the boat. And oh, my God.”

As you can tell, if you've been listening to this interview series, I was deeply affected by this book, and there are some significant takeaways for readers, especially for people who live in our area here on the lower Columbia or might visit here and think that boating here is a lark and you just get in your boat on a sunny day and go out there and have fun.

That may very well be the case, but this story shows how wildly things can go wrong when a boat is in the wrong place at the wrong time. And while this story happened in 1977, the actual conditions on the river were not a fluke. They were normal at certain times of the tidal cycle here.

The Coast Guard made big changes to their protocols as a result of this tragedy. And we'll hear about that later in this series. But the truth for recreational boaters here is that the chance of this happening to someone in a pleasure boat on the Columbia River bar remains real. Most motor boats are not self righting. I mean, they don't flip back upright if they roll over. Like most Coast Guard boats are.

And so if your boat flips over, it will tend to stay upside down. And if you don't get an S.O.S. signal off or don't even have a VHF radio or an EPIRB on board to set off to let the Coast Guard know you're in trouble, you could be left to your own devices to get yourself out of harm's way, which could be really challenging without help.

This boat was upside down, caught in a strong ebb, current in very turbulent sea conditions, all of which happened daily here on the Columbia at the mouth of the river. Just about any boat that was in the place that that utility boat was would have had pretty big problems. You'd be hard pressed to control your boat under those circumstances and might not even be able to get yourself into safe water before something terrible happened.

So it's important to take the river here seriously. If you're inexperienced, go out with someone who knows the river, look at the tides and avoid the ebbs. Watch the marine weather. Wear a lifejacket, have a VHF radio and know how to use it. All these things are just smart living for people who go out on the water. They up your chances tremendously that you will survive if something bad happens.

If you're intrigued by John Kopp's story, you can see him speak at the Columbia River Maritime Museum on August 29th. That's a Thursday, at 6 p.m.. He's going to be giving a lecture about this book, and I bet it's going to be really interesting. So I would encourage if you if you're interested, to go to that and you can find his book around the region in various local bookstores and in the Timberland Regional Library. If you'd like to get a copy of it for yourself, it's quite a read.

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