

Ship Report Transcript

Thursday, August 29, 2024

By Joanne Rideout

All rights reserved. No use without permission. © 2024. Joanne Rideout/The Ship Report.

It's time for the Ship report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Thursday, August 29th, 2024.

Well, today I wanted to honor and anniversary of a pretty life changing maritime incident that happened to a friend of mine. A true story about a boat on the Columbia River Bar. You may know this person to his name is Michael McCusker, and he's the host of a radio show. On Came U n here in Astoria called A Story Told. Michael has built up an abundant and varied resume during his now 83 years on the planet. He's been a firefighter, a soldier, a journalist, and in the mix, a commercial fisherman.

In this story, which you may have heard parts of on the show in the past, he lived to tell the tale even though the boat went down on the Columbia River bar and sank out of sight right under him. Surviving something like this is an accomplishment in itself. As we know, that isn't always the case. With mishaps on the bar and boats. It's a place whose history is riddled with tragedy.

On this day, 52 years ago, Michael was working on a fishing boat out in the ocean off Astoria. The boat was headed for port and was on the bar when they ran into problems on a day that was not even particularly bad weather. They lost some of their crab pots overboard and had to go into shallow water to retrieve them. And things went from challenging to worse in a matter of minutes. The boat, called the meteor, ended up sinking entirely. It's a cautionary tale about how our local waterways can be overwhelming, even for people who know what they're doing out there. I've played some of this audio before on the show, as I said, but never on the actual anniversary of the boat sinking. And I thought today I'd play a bit of it for you and offer a little explanation here and there for folks who are not commercial fishermen. Michael is a great storyteller, and this is a heck of a story.

JR: And so how long was this boat?

MM: She was about 50 feet. That's pretty big. Yeah, but about average for a albacore boat.

JR: So you were saying that it wasn't even a particularly stormy day?

MM: No, there was there was some wind on the water and there was turbulence in the bar itself. And it was stuff coming in and it looked like it was bouncing off the north jetty. And we were in running through the south jetty. But actually we were starting to go for the for the main buoy line because we had taken a taking a roll and knocked a bunch of pots that we had stacked on deck off and we had to circle around and almost splash into the rocks, trying to, you know, pick them up with the boat hook. And we got them aboard again and decided we better get in the buoy line. And that's when we went down.

JR: So what he's talking about here, the boogie line, if you look on a nautical chart of the mouth of the Columbia River, there's a line of red navigational buoys that mark the south side of the ship channel in the general area of the jetties and a corresponding green line on the opposite side of the channel, the north side. These boogie lines are the demarcation line between deep water and shallow water outside the ship channel in those shallows around Clatsop Spit to the south where they were and Peacock spit to the north. Things can get really turbulent and dangerous even when the weather is not particularly

bad. So boats should stay out of there. They didn't, and they got caught in there by some big waves. And that's when things got bad.

JR: I mean, how high were the waves and the ideas?

MM: Big and high. Yeah, that's. They didn't seem to, you know, cut off the horizon like some I've seen out on the pond. But they were enough and had enough force behind them to just hit us. They hit us on the port side. We were about 45 degree angle, and they just plowed us under and there didn't seem to be any slack between the two of them. It was just like a Muhammad Ali - one, two. And down we went in the skipper. I was in the house. I was up on the flying bridge.

So I kind of rode her down like an escalator and he I could hear him just trying to goose the motor, trying to, you know, break the and just goose her back up again. But it just didn't work. And we started going down from the stern. Another tuna boat pulled up outside of us and the skipper was mad at him for not coming in to get us. But he would have by then. We're we're on the side, you know, and all our our stick and all our gear is just point like spears, you know, it'd be only a small boat could get in and get in on us. And that's what happened to gillnet around. And what we finally call a "puker" came and came and got us off the deck.

JR: A puker?

MM: Yeah, it's a party boat, you know, It was these guys that go out on a charter or have the little boats, you know, they add a lot to the river by from their insides.

JR: So this is a pretty accurate description of what can happen to a boat swamped by waves and how quickly it can happen. Another important point here is that people on other boats immediately came to help them, both other commercial fishing boats and also charter boats that were out there. It was August and Buoy 10 fishing season was happening and commercial boats were out there doing their work as well.

And that is a rule of the sea. You help if you can. It's also the law to help one another. But that's really just kind of codifying something mariners have done for each other throughout history. Everybody knows how vulnerable we all are out there. So when someone is in trouble, you stop what you're doing and you help.

And about the puker part... People who are not used to boats often get seasick. Sometimes people get a little cocky about seasickness, especially if they aren't susceptible. I can tell you that I have gotten awfully seasick at times.

In some cases I just got sick and got over it pretty fast. But one time I was really seasick for kind of a long time. So sick that if you had offered to shoot me, I might have said yes. So seasickness is one of the most awful feelings in the world. And I've often thought that if we could design a defensive weapon, that would make your attacker seasick. It would essentially end it right there, because it's really hard to do anything when you want to puke your guts out. So I know that fishermen don't usually get seasick themselves or they get over it or they find other work. But it's the folks who are on vacation that are most at risk, especially if they're not used to being on the water. And if you are one of those folks, I feel for you.

MM: This guy was a mark trail fellow that he came in twice. He got off the one fellow, Dick Bjork. Then he and then then the gilnetter came in and got off the skipper and a passenger. We had a guest aboard who'd never been on a deck before and claimed he never would again.

And then Mark Trail came in and got me off at last. And by then the tuna boat that didn't come in and get us, he'd already radioed for help. So a 44 is coming out of Cape D for us, but we transferred to the 44 and it was the same 44. This, you know, from the museum. In the museum? Yeah. 44. 300.

JR: So if you go down to the Columbia River Maritime Museum. The white U.S. Coast Guard rescue boat that is on an angle in the big front window there, that's a real 44 foot U.S. Coast Guard motor lifeboat. And the conditions in that exhibit, which show the boat on a steep angle on a wave, are not at all unusual for Coast Guard personnel who perform rescues in our area waters. And that's the real boat that rescued Michael that day.

MM: You know, I was, it's like back in combat. Same thing, You know, you're scared, but at the same time, you're too damn busy to really be scared to take, you know, pay much attention to it and then when it's over, you start to get the shakes when you think, oh, Christ. And you know, the funny thing is, I got another deck. The only skipper I ever worked for that was left handed. So he wasn't yelling at me. Northern Hemisphere, you know, because I'm a lefty, too, You know, you're a left handed S.O.B., you know, skippers. And yeah, he never did.

JR: And that is a true story that took place on this day, 52 years ago on the infamous Columbia River bar, told by a lucky man who lived to tell the tale, Michael McCusker, a calm head in a crisis. He seemed to take it in stride overall. Glad he's still here with us.

You've been listening to the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. You'll find ship schedules and a podcast of this program on my website at shipreport.net. Ship Report podcasts also on Apple and Spotify. You'll find marine weather and links to ship schedules and more on my Ship Report Facebook page. Transcripts of the show are available with podcasts.

Thanks for listening and have a great day.