

## 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. We'll continue today to hear the story of CG41332, which is the title of a book by former U.S. Coast Guard man John Kopp about a tragedy that occurred on the Columbia River Bar during Coast Guard training in 1977. Today, we'll hear the run up to the capsized wing of the Coast Guard utility boat. The situation shows how easy it could be to get into an untenable situation on the infamous Columbia River bar.

Here's John Kopp:

JK: A section from the fifth chapter of the book. describing this this actual incident. And to set the stage a little bit, this is the final week of a three week training school for boat operators at the Lifeboat School at Cape Disappointment. And what they're about to do is a tugboat involving two boats. Night navigation exercise all the way from Cape Disappointment upriver to Astoria, using radar to kind of navigate doing to BUI and doing manual chart work in the boats to kind of test the scenes. The first boat left a little after 5 p.m. and the second boat which is the crew and the vessel we're about to talk about was about to leave shortly thereafter, but they encountered mechanical problems on the boat they intended to take. So they kind of went from boat to boat chasing different mechanical problems or encountering different mechanical problems until they arrived at the last boat they could take, which was a utility boat instead of a motor lifeboat. They're very similar, except that utility boats aren't completely watertight and self righting in the event that they're capsized. So it's kind of a big, big, important distinction. And this this passage right here is just a few minutes into their trip as they're crossing from the tip of the jetty at Cape Disappointment, kind of southeast towards one of the first barges on the north side of Clatsop spit on the inside of the Columbia River bar.

JR: I just wanted to say, for people who are not familiar with this area that it's extremely dynamic and tides affect it heavily. And so this is a really, really risky place to be. Right. I mean, in general, even on a good day.

JK: Yeah, there's not a lot of leeway. You know, it is a large area. It's a couple of miles by a couple of miles. But as you say, things happen fast, especially in proximity to shoals and waves and DUIs and all that stuff. The last thing before I start going here, there's some abbreviations that'll be in here, like BM one MK3. Those all pertain to the rank and occupation of the people we're talking about. And if you're unfamiliar with Coast Guard rates and ranks, it's totally described in the book, and it's not important for what you're reading, but that's what that is. And one is a title, etc., etc., being one. Albrecht later explained that the intent of the drill was to demonstrate the effect of counter forces, so the students were to plot a direct course for the first leg, observe the effects of the forces, and then use the computed values to correct the second course in order to arrive without error at 319. Steve Sailer remembers something similar. The navigators weren't familiar with the Columbia River, and they were just going to plot as if they were. There was no current and see how far off they were on the first leg, and then they would use that to make corrections for going on from there. As a result, the 41332 was surely being pushed off course in its first cross current leg around this time.

Kestenbaum said, Sir, I got to head out into the pilot house to check on the boat's progress and observed that it was about mid channel and that the breakers south of the channel by the South jetty were visible but distant. We really had a clear picture on the radar and still saw no electronic sign of breakers, but he

could see that the boat's track was taking them about halfway between the 12 and 14. It was already apparent that the three three team was not proceeding directly to the B 14 as desired.

At some point in the channel, the cardboard cover blew off the center windshield and beam three sailing noticed spray on his glasses from the blown off tops of the 4 to 6 foot waves slapping beam three Maurice's side of the boat. As both instructor and coxswain, Albrecht would have had to keep his head on a swivel. And from inside the pilot house, he noted that the swells had increased in size. He exited the cabin to get a better look out on the main deck. Albrecht took the visual bearings on to Buoy 14 and the channel in hopes of gauging the boat's progress. And he realized that the three, three, two had found its way onto the South Buoy line or the line of red buoys on the south side of the main channel.

The M3 said had a sense of this to intuiting the mental map he'd built during assistance cases within that subset. But he was on the wrong side of the boat to properly gauge their proximity to the edge of the channel stuck on the upriver side of the boat. Steve says that one of the things I feel most guilty about is I was look out on the port side and it was a real dark night, but I could still see between 12 and 14. It was ten, 12 and 14 were lined up there and clouds of spit. And I believe we were between 12 and 14. I knew we were getting really, really close to clouds of spit that night, and I was thinking I should say something, but I was thinking the instructor knows what he's doing. I trust the instructor. I should have open my mouth because I knew we were close, honey. We were dangerously close.

When Albrecht went back into the pilot house after his outside scan with the intention of providing a course correction to seem intensely on the helm and acquiring a visual on duty. 14 from the inside. Less than 5 minutes had elapsed since the 41332 set off from Buoy 11, and it was still traveling between 14 and 18 knots. Things began happening fast moments before three, Duncan had decided that he ought to conduct an engine room round and had proceeded to the forward compartment to peer through a small window in the bulkhead. Following protocol, he wanted to visually inspect the engine room before proceeding to actually enter the space, but he felt the forward compartment was crowded with people and nautical charts. So he turned around, exited the pilot house, and stepped to the small scuttle on the deck. He and dogged it, descended to the cramped engine room, gave everything the once over, and popped back up to the main deck. Just as he'd finished dogging the scuttle back down. He looked up and saw nothing but a line of white off the stern and to starboard. Then boom, 12 past on the starboard side at a distance that being three sail estimated was 200 to 300 yards. He called it the passing buoy to be a man. It should be noted here that the boat's course deflection was not the result of the helmsman Seaman Kemsley steering poorly helmsman or direction followers, and their only task is to steer the compass course provided by the coxswain or navigator.

There's every indication that Seaman Kemsley was doing just that, but he also noticed something wasn't right. I remember seeing Billy 12 going down to the left and I was going to the right. I was just trying to maintain that course that he was giving me, but there was something screwy and we were discussing it back and forth. The scary situation was that the 41332 was crabbing. Its heading was in one direction, about 105 degrees compass, but its actual path over ground, its course made good was in another probably closer to 1 to 5 degrees compass.

Given the significance of this offset, one district investigator later wrote, since no navigational corrections were made initially for setting drift and since the mission was scheduled at a time of maximum ebb tide, the vessel was literally piloted to one of the most dangerous locations on the Columbia River.

Upon receiving the report that the 41332 was so far off track and passing buoy 12 too, navigators Seaman Gessler and Seaman Eriksson would have had to review their chart, estimate the boat's position and calculate a new course, all of which would have taken time in the trainer role at such points. A coxswain has to decide how far they will let trainees take things before stepping in and overriding. There's a potential for meaningful learning to occur, and there was also risk.

Only seconds were elapsing as the navigation problem developed, but at its speed, the 332 was traveling 20 to 30 feet per at least half a boat length with every tick of the navigator's timepiece. For several more instance being on Albrecht, let the situation ride, and then one of the two navigators computed a new course and directed Seaman Kemsley to alter course 15 degrees to port her upriver, bringing the boat onto a heading of 090 degrees compass, probably within 30 seconds of the command being issued as a332 was steadying out towards its new heading. William three Lee was watching the radar for an indication of the new course's effect. He noticed that Billy, 14, was still off the port bow. MK three Duncan then spotted a huge wave approaching from the port quarter and three sailors all the same thing. I realized we had a breaker coming up right behind us, and as the breaker approached the back of the boat, I ran as quick as I could around the back of the cabin and into the pilot house because I didn't want to get washed off the boat, but I didn't think there was any chance at all that the boat was going to capsize. I just thought we were going to get washed down. It was just a small sliver. It wasn't a big breaker.

But the crew were far from safe. Within seconds the boat capsized. We'll hear more about this story next week on the Ship Report.

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