

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. Today, we'll continue listening to parts of a lengthy interview I did with author John Kopp, former U.S. Coast Guard surgeon, about a book he wrote called CG 41332, which has 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 CG 41332 during a practice run out on the river on the Columbia River Bar. Things went terribly wrong, and the nightmarish accident that ensued cost three young crewmen their lives. It was a little known incident until Karp wrote this book, but what investigators learned from it changed coastguard procedures forever. Today, we'll learn more about what those changes were. The book came out in 2023. Today's Part six of that interview. Here's more from my interview with Jon Kopp.

JR: One question is it's a big question is what changed as a result of this? You know, because it seems like we have a lot of safeguards in place now. So could you talk a little bit about that, about what has changed that would protect prevent this from happening again?

JK: Yeah. And if not, prevent maybe make it more survivable, I think is probably a way to see it. So let's focus on the boat for a second. The 41 foot utility boat, the Coast Guard had about 200 of them in its fleet of boats from like the 1970s all the way up till 2014, when the last one was taken out of service because it was replaced. And after this accident, there was another capsizing in Florida a couple of years later. And it's hard to distinguish, you know, which accident or was it both that led to some of these changes. But cumulatively, the Coast Guard installed kind of like an escape hatch over the forward compartment. So that the crew, if they if this happened again and they were stuck there, they could just go out the hatch without having to swim upside down and backwards through the boat without any references in the dark. So that's one thing. They added some handrails that provided a continuous reference so that people can kind of blindly grope their way from where they were stuck all the way to the door at the back of the cabin where they could get out. They reconfigured the intake vents for the engine room, which basically are just a hole in the boat. And when it inverts, it allows air to gurgle out and water to rush in, which ultimately in this case led the boat to sink after a couple of hours of being inverted. So cumulatively, those and a few other changes made this boat specifically safer for the rest of its service life. And to my knowledge, there wasn't another capsizing after the one in 1981. But it was safer. It's safer as long as that hadn't happened.

Survival wise, survival comfort wise. There's some really big things today. If you see the crew and they walk out, you know, going and pulling into the marina with a disabled boat or something, you'll see that they're all wearing like a mesh survival vest with some pouches on it. And at the time of this accident, crews were supposed to be wearing that equipment like some flares, a strobe light whistles, various signaling items, so that if they fall in the water, they can be spotted. But the setup was literally like a uniform belt with a pouch on it. And because it looked dorky and it was cumbersome and bulky, the crews basically never wore them. They just stayed clipped inside the boat where they wouldn't have done any good. And so when this accident happened, the crew didn't have easy access to them. They couldn't find them or they just didn't think about it and they didn't have it literally on their person. And so crews were having the crew members were having to put flares and things into their pockets and swim out. Immediately after this happened, the survivors suggested to the investigators, you know,

aviators like Coast Guard pilots and air crews, they wear these, you know, Army green survival vests that they co-opted from the Air Force. They have all the things they need in these little pouches, like why don't we just wear those? And so for a few years, that's what some of the stations did. They either put the stuff in the pockets of their life jackets or they actually put them in the pockets of these survival vests and wore them over their life jackets. And then by about 1990, the Coast Guard had actually contracted the company to build like a purpose built Coast Guard orange survival vest item. And since then, it's like required to be worn. And there's you will not go on a Coast Guard boat if you're not wearing one of those, You wouldn't see that happen. So today, crews are wearing all this gear because of this accident.

That's one thing. The other thing is, you know, can you talk about it a lot on your show? Hypothermia. And the water never gets that warm off the bar here in Astoria. And even in the summer, you know, maybe 60 degrees. And so at the time of this accident, the crews were wearing their work uniforms and float coats, which are kind of like a foam filled bomber jacket that provides flotation and protection, but not a whole body suit. And during the investigation, the investigators actually talked to the Columbia River Bar pilots because they were part of the response to this accident and searching for survivors. And one of the things that they gleaned from those interviews is that the bar pilots and local fishermen and other work boat people were wearing these at the time, these new survival suits that were like a foam filled coverall. And so that kind of brought some more awareness to the Coast Guard. And within a few years, stations around the country were being issued with these anti exposure coveralls, like a foam, kind of like a wetsuit. But more bulky and better thermal and flotation protection and whatnot. And that sort of evolved into the late eighties and early nineties into dry suits, which is what the crews wear when it's really cold now and they're really comfortable. Your survival time is excellent. It's a really good kit. So that's another way that this accident kind of nudged the ball forward in survival equipment land.”

And that was author John Kopp talking about changes to US Coast Guard safety protocols in the aftermath of a tragedy on the Columbia River Bar in 1977, in which a Coast Guard utility boat with student trainees on board had gone out for a routine night navigation run on the river and ended up straying off course in a strong current and ended up in turbulent water on the bar. The area near the entrance to the river near Clatsop Spit.

The boat ended up south of an area called the Red Line, which refers to a line of red navigational buoys that mark the southern edge of the ship channel in that area. In that shallow water, the turbulence caused by the rushing of current meaning the Pacific Ocean, causes heavy breaking waves and other difficult sea conditions on a regular basis.

Before they knew it, their boat was swamped by a wave and flipped because protocols were different. Then the boat was not required to check in periodically with the Cape Disappointment Station. And so for quite a while, no one knew they were in trouble. They were accidentally spotted by a fisheries agent in a helicopter who saw the reflection of a flare set off by a crewman who had managed to crawl through the upturned boat underwater in the dark, get on top of the upturned hull and set off flares.

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