

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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FIRE AND SINKING OF THE *CONCEPTION*
WITH LOSS OF LIFE NEAR
SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, CALIFORNIA,
SEPTEMBER 2, 2019

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Accident No.: DCA19MM047

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Interview of: IAN HIGGINS
Captain, *Vision*

Via Telephone

Monday,
January 13, 2020

APPEARANCES:

BART BARNUM, Marine Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

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I N T E R V I E W

(1:33 p.m. EST)

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3 MR. BARNUM: Good morning. This is Bart Barnum with the
4 NTSB. I'm conducting a telephonic interview of Mr. Ian Higgins.
5 It is 1:33 Eastern Standard Time on January 13, 2020. And
6 Mr. Higgins is on the West Coast.

INTERVIEW OF IAN HIGGINS

BY MR. BARNUM:

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9 Q. Good morning, sir. If you could please state your name, and
10 spell your last name for the record.

11 A. Good morning. It's Ian Higgins, H-i-g-g-i-n-s.

12 Q. All right. Thanks again, Ian, for taking this call. If you
13 could, could you just kind of take me through your experience and
14 your background as a mariner, and how you came to be working for
15 Truth Aquatics?

16 A. Yes. I received my merchant mariner credential, I think, 8
17 years ago. I grew up sailing. I was teaching sailing for an
18 aquatic center. I accrued a significant amount of sea time with
19 that. I got into operating towboats. And then I got into small
20 boat charters. And after that, driving some ferries and stuff
21 like that, and some (indiscernible) whale watching. And then
22 small expedition ships in Alaska. And then I was looking for the
23 next step, and applied for Truth Aquatics as a second captain, and
24 was hired in, I think, in 2016. And then had worked for them for
25 the previous 4 years as a captain of the Motor Vessel *Vision*.

1 Q. Okay. Thank you. How did you hear of Truth Aquatics?

2 A. I hadn't heard of them. I actually was just looking for a
3 job, and I sent an email to an advertisement I saw in a dive
4 magazine, and that was it. I didn't really know about them. I
5 was living in San Diego at the time.

6 Q. And how long have you held your captain's credential?

7 A. I think 8 years now.

8 Q. Okay. All right. So take me back. You had been working --
9 you joined with Truth Aquatics. Who did you contact? Who
10 actually did the -- was there an interview process or how -- what
11 happened?

12 A. Yeah. I contacted the office, I suppose. I'm not quite sure
13 who initially responded to my email. And then they handed my
14 resume off to the captain of the *Vision*, which is Graham Ashlock,
15 and he's the one who had contacted me about working for the
16 company. Shortly after that, I had an interview with him, and
17 then he offered me the position second captain. Offered me to
18 come out and go deadhead on the boat, see if it's a good fit. And
19 so I did that, and I actually deadheaded on the vessel *Truth*. And
20 the captain of that boat seemed to like me or said I could be a
21 good fit. So then I started working on the *Vision*.

22 Q. Okay. Did you have any interaction at that initial hiring
23 stage with anyone from the office?

24 A. No, not at the initial hiring stage. It was just directly
25 with Graham, the Captain of the *Vision*. And then as deadhead

1 you're really not paid or anything. You're pretty much just a
2 passenger on the boat. And I was just told to show up for that
3 deadheading, which I did. And that, yeah, that was prior to any
4 employment contract or training or anything like that. You're not
5 a paid crewman. You're just kind of there watching.

6 Q. Okay. So this deadhead trip that you took on both the *Vision*
7 and the *Truth*, was it a 1-day trip or multiple-day?

8 A. I deadheaded on the *Truth*, and that was -- I think it was
9 just a 1-day trip.

10 Q. Okay. And after that trip, you were hired as second captain
11 on the *Vision*?

12 A. Yeah.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Well, you know, seeing I'd be a good fit, and then I met --
15 meet the crew and met the captain, and conditionally hired, I
16 suppose.

17 Q. Okay. So take me through how long were you second captain
18 before you moved up, and how did you move up and how did that
19 happen?

20 A. I was second captain on the summer of 2016. I think I
21 started May-ish of that time. And I worked full-time until, I
22 don't know, November aboard that boat. And then I got a phone
23 call in January or so of 2017. The owner of the company asked if
24 I wanted to be the captain of the *Vision*, and he told me to think
25 about it for a long time, you know, it's no rush. And said

1 something -- you want to make sure it's something you want to
2 pursue. And I think, a month or so after I called him and said
3 I'll go for it. And that was, yeah, the beginning of 2017.

4 Q. Okay. How much interaction had you had with Glen prior to
5 that conversation?

6 A. Prior to that not very much. I mean, I probably -- I've only
7 spoken to him a handful times.

8 Q. Yeah. What was the reasoning -- was it Graham, got done?
9 Why was the position available?

10 A. I think he just wanted to move on, which he did. And see, he
11 comes back, I think (indiscernible) now and then, but he just
12 basically from my -- he had already -- he had been doing it for a
13 long time previous to that year. I think it was his seventh year
14 or so doing it, and he just wanted to move on --

15 Q. Okay. What kind of training were you required to have before
16 you could take over as captain of the *Vision*?

17 A. I already had my 100-ton master's license. So my Coast Guard
18 requirement was fulfilled. I think I just had to take -- like get
19 my DHS or my STC certificate, which I did through the San Diego
20 Maritime Institute, Mariners Institute. And then I did do another
21 trip with Graham. It was more oriented as me being the captain.
22 This is sometime in the beginning of January 2017. And I also did
23 a trip with the previous captain of the *Truth*, and he kind of made
24 me more oriented as if I was running the boat. And those two
25 trips, well, plus the previous years as the second, acting as

1 second captain was the training pretty much.

2 Q. Okay. Are you -- were you or are you dive certified? Or how
3 involved with the diving were you?

4 A. Yeah.

5 Q. Yeah, I'm a rescue diver. I had worked for the San Diego
6 City Fire Department from, I think, 2011 or so. I was a San Diego
7 City lifeguard, so -- but they're a branch of the Fire Department.
8 And I worked on a beach that had a lot of shore diving. So the
9 city got me rescue certified, and I had dealt with previous dive
10 emergencies. So I was fairly, you know, fairly practiced in
11 emergency dive medicine, basic response type stuff.

12 Q. Okay. So if you could kind of take me through when -- let's
13 say you're going on a 3-day overnight trip. So when do the
14 passengers arrive, when do you depart, at what time is the safety
15 briefing conducted? As a captain, kind of just take me through
16 the initial stages of that 3-day dive trip.

17 A. Okay. Everything that I have done as running the boat the
18 past 3 years I was shown to do. And I was just following and
19 continuing to do what I was shown to do by the previous captain,
20 Graham. But what we would do is -- so let's, for example, say
21 it's a 3 a.m. departure for the Northern Islands or something like
22 that. I would -- we'd prep the boat the day before, and then
23 leave the boat open for the passengers to board and make
24 themselves comfortable. And then we would arrive to the boat.
25 All of the deck crew would have to arrive a half an hour before

1 our scheduled departure to make sure we get everything together.
2 Upon departing, we double-check the passenger manifest and make
3 sure that there's an extra copy at the office. We would take a
4 tank count so we know how many tanks are on board so that later,
5 double-checking, make sure we don't leave any divers in the water.
6 Go through an engine room check in the morning, which includes all
7 the normal stuff in the engine room.

8 And then we would depart, and then head out in the morning.
9 And then be anchored up at the first dive spot. I like to get
10 anchored up -- it kind of depends on the length of the trip, but
11 give the safety briefing first thing in the morning when we would
12 wake up or when all the passengers would wake up and -- give the
13 briefing then and then start the trip.

14 Q. Okay. And would you conduct this briefing or would you
15 delegate that?

16 A. Personally, I would always do the briefing.

17 Q. Okay. And what would you cover in that briefing?

18 A. I would do the standard Coast Guard information about the
19 vessel, what to do in the case of abandoning the vessel, what to
20 do in the case of a fire, what to do in the case of -- I would
21 talk to them about how we -- basically how the trip runs. I would
22 talk to them about the location of all the emergency equipment. I
23 would introduce the crew. I would talk about what to do in the
24 case of dive emergencies, the signaling that we're looking to see
25 throughout the trip when they come up from their dive, how we keep

1 track of them, the importance of the manifest. Make sure that all
2 the paperwork is filled out appropriately. And then talk about
3 the schedule what we're expecting to be doing throughout the next
4 couple of days of diving, where we're expected to be going, why
5 kind of we're expecting to be going in those places. And then
6 also the galley would take a portion of the briefing and talk
7 about how that all works out, food assignments are given to the
8 passengers and if they want to request certain foods. And that is
9 best I can think off the top of my head right now.

10 We did have a little cheat sheet that we would follow to make
11 sure that we knocked off all the appropriate conversation points.
12 And the briefing would usually take about -- probably about half-
13 hour to at most 45 minutes. But usually, I'd say the briefing
14 would take about half-hour.

15 Q. Okay. During that briefing, would you or one of your crew
16 ever show where the emergency escape hatch was?

17 A. Yes. Every single time. I would make a little joke of it so
18 people would remember it, I think, in their head, and I'd say --
19 I'd tap it, because I usually give the briefing right next to it.
20 I put my foot under it. There's a little grip handle that you can
21 use to pull it up. And I would -- I'd slam it a couple of times,
22 and I'd say to anyone above bunks, I think 14 and 27, you guys
23 want to have first access at to coffee in the morning, just climb
24 through this hatch right here or something like that. So they
25 would know that that's where the emergency hatch is and, yeah, and

1 that it's there.

2 Q. Would any passengers take you up on that offer? Did anybody
3 ever use that escape hatch?

4 A. Yeah. People would actually. It's usually kids would have
5 fun; they'd just kind of climb through it. Whether adult
6 passengers, I can't think of a time that they had actually climbed
7 through it. But the kids would. On some trips the -- I'd find
8 the hatch open, and it's because kids are just flying around
9 throughout the bunk room, and going up and down the hatch and just
10 being kids.

11 Q. Was it ever customary for a member of the crew or yourself
12 to, during the briefing, to show the passengers from the bunk room
13 where the hatch was or was it always from there in the salon area?

14 A. No. It's from the salon area.

15 Q. Okay. All right.

16 A. I would say it's above these bunks.

17 Q. Okay. Understood. Thank you. On your time on board you
18 were on there for a few years as captain. Did you ever conduct a
19 inspection with the Coast Guard?

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. They were on board? Okay. What would they do when they came
22 on to do their inspection?

23 A. They'd go poking throughout the entire boat. If it's a man
24 overboard drill or a fire drill, they would usually -- I'd be up
25 in the wheelhouse driving along, and then they would just toss a

1 life raft overboard or a -- sorry -- like a fender or some type of
2 float like a life jacket. They'd toss it overboard, and say --
3 just see kind of what we did. And or for a fire drill they would
4 have us take out the fire hoses, fire up the fire pump, and
5 usually start spraying something off the side of the boat or at
6 the back of the boat, maybe on the swim step.

7 While we were at the dock, they would usually be just kind of
8 poking around the boat. They take out all the PFDs, examine the
9 EPIRBs, examine all the cutoff switches, and examine all the
10 expiration dates on all the different lifesaving equipment.
11 They'd be poking around the engine room for a long time, and then
12 ask me questions about -- some years, it would -- I mean, it would
13 always fluctuate. It would always kind of depend. I don't know
14 what it depends on actually, but they would ask me about when the
15 last time we did a fire drill or they would ask when last time we
16 did man overboard drills or how often we do these drills, and is
17 it documented in the logbook? And then I'd show them the
18 documentation.

19 It's just usually stuff like that. Usually be on the boat
20 for half a day.

21 Q. Okay. Kind of backing up. Got ahead of our self. While
22 you're on your trip, how do you as the captain, how would you
23 delegate the duties to your crew? You obviously have a cook and a
24 galley assistant there would be cooking, but what would the rest
25 of the crew be doing?

1 A. So the big thing about the crew is to have them well trained
2 so they kind of know what to do throughout the day because I can't
3 always be watching all of them. So it kind of depends on what
4 we've got going on. If we're in the mid-trip, they need to make
5 sure that the tanks are sealed throughout the trip and as we're
6 moving from destination to destination, checking, making sure the
7 sanitary conditions of the boat are good. Make sure the heads are
8 all clean, check the trash and all that type of stuff while we're
9 underway and just moving from spot to spot. Just make sure
10 they're doing all that type of stuff. And then, obviously,
11 attending to whatever the passengers' issues they have. The
12 galley would be kind of doing their -- they do their own thing
13 really, making sure that the food will be ready at a certain time.
14 Yeah.

15 We would all start the day off at 6 in the morning. The crew
16 would clean the heads and the shower room and top off all the
17 tanks. And at that point, I'm usually reviewing the weather, and
18 then deciding kind of what the day's -- or reviewing what the
19 day's options are going to be with where we are, the weather and
20 that type of stuff.

21 Q. Okay. You mentioned you all started the day at 0600. When
22 would you end the day? When you anchored up or how -- what time
23 was that?

24 A. It all depends. Sometimes as late as 10 o'clock, 2200
25 sometimes. The really long days would depend on, for one thing,

1 the night dives. If the passengers really want to do a night
2 dive, we would have to do night dives. Yeah, so it fluctuates
3 from mid-summer when the sun's setting around 8 o'clock. People
4 would want to go for a night at around 8:30, and we'd have to get
5 a head start on filling all the tanks so it's not trying to do
6 them all in the morning. So then some would, you know, be doing
7 that. And it would just -- yeah, it could be -- until 2200 at the
8 latest. Well, then, if we're moving the boat and then, you know,
9 we're past there --

10 Q. Okay. And you would sit on the anchor at night. Would you
11 set a anchor watch or how would you -- would everyone go to sleep
12 or how would you usually man the boat at night?

13 A. Yeah. There would be an anchor alarm. We would all go to
14 sleep, but there would be -- we'd set up an anchor alarm where if
15 the boat travels outside of a prescribed area, the alarm would
16 trigger.

17 Q. Okay. And that alarm was a alarm locally on the bridge or
18 would it ring in other locations?

19 A. It would alarm in the bridge, yes, where all the crew
20 quarters are located.

21 Q. Okay. All right. And that was the standard operating
22 procedure turned over to you from the previous captain or what
23 made you set up the watches like that?

24 A. Yeah, that was shown to me from the previous captain, who I'm
25 assuming was shown that from the previous captain. And every --

1 yeah, that's how I, that's how I did that.

2 Q. Okay. All right. Did you ever have any issues at night with
3 passengers getting up or any issues arise at night when everybody
4 was sleeping?

5 A. No. No, I never did. Occasionally on really windy nights,
6 obviously, if it's a really windy night, I anchored the vessel in
7 a location where -- it's just standard anchoring. We anchor in an
8 area where if you do drag, you drag away from land, right? So I
9 -- that would happen once in a blue moon where the anchor would
10 drag in the middle of the night and the alarm would go off.
11 Besides that, never had an issue with a passenger at night.

12 Q. Okay. Now back to the Coast Guard inspections you were
13 talking of earlier. You were on for an annual inspection or were
14 you ever on for a COI renewal?

15 A. Yeah. I was on for both.

16 Q. Okay. And were they similar or how did they differ?

17 A. I would say the 5-year was just more thorough. During that
18 time they would generally -- well, that would -- the boat would be
19 in dry dock. So they would poke and prod around the whole of the
20 vessel and any voids of the vessel, and obviously the bottom of
21 the boat a lot more thoroughly, obviously, than they could when
22 the boat was not above water -- I mean, not -- when the boat was
23 on the water. They would -- well, yeah, it was basically a more
24 thorough whole examination in my opinion. Because they would
25 still, in the annual -- in the annual inspections they would still

1 go through all the expiration dates on everything, and it was the
2 same crew drills. So on the 5-year they would poke and prod a lot
3 more at the whole area below the waterline pretty much.

4 Q. Okay. Thank you. What kind of interaction would you -- as
5 you as the captain, would you have with them? Reviewing paperwork
6 or what would you do with them?

7 A. Yeah. They review paperwork with me, ask me about crew
8 training. They would ask me about -- I'm expected to know the
9 vessel more closely than just a random crew member. So they would
10 review any type of deficiencies with me. And that, yeah, that was
11 the usual communication with them.

12 Q. You mentioned deficiencies, they'd review deficiencies with
13 you. Was there many deficiencies with these -- with this boat
14 or --

15 A. With my boat? No. Last year I didn't get a single one, or
16 last March or April, whenever that was. Year before that, I got
17 some very minor things. It was just some labeling. I remember
18 they wanted some different labeling on the main circuit panel.
19 They just -- you know, the labeling they didn't like. There was
20 some -- there was a couple PFDs that were the old type of personal
21 floatation devices that were -- they didn't like, unsatisfactory
22 for them. There's just some minor things. It was nothing major.
23 But, no, I didn't get a single one the last inspection in 2019 in
24 probably March or April.

25 Q. Okay. Great. They questioned you about crew training. How

1 was that documented on board?

2 A. Fairly -- I'd say fairly unofficially. I'd -- the vessel
3 carried a crew log, a boat log, and in that log, I would mention
4 the -- pretty much their daily activities, and then I would also
5 mention any training that we did or if I checked the EPIRB
6 batteries or flashing light batteries, strobe light batteries. Or
7 if I had any type of serious medical incidents, I would document
8 that in the log. But it was a fairly unofficial log.

9 Q. Okay. Kind of just take me through that log. Is it a
10 running notebook or is it -- what is it?

11 A. Yeah. It's just a running notebook. And then I would more
12 use it for the -- for (indiscernible) conditions throughout the
13 years, you know, because their similar -- same charters, basically
14 keep coming back and back every year. So I would look back to the
15 previous year and look at where we went, and whether they liked it
16 or (indiscernible) somewhere else.

17 But it was also there for documenting any type, like I was
18 saying, medical issues that we had during the trip. I would also
19 reference the quality of divers that the charter would typically
20 have so I could know what type of sites I could take them to. But
21 I also documented any crew training. And it was all just kind of
22 loose-leaf, just kind of freehand. Yeah, I'd keep in a journal
23 pretty much.

24 Q. Understood. Was that the only document of record or log, or
25 was there one in the engine room?

1 A. Yeah. There's another one in the engine room, and that was
2 for all of the obviously the mechanical upkeep. That may have
3 been -- I think that would be considered more official for all the
4 mechanical upkeep, because we'd have set schedules of when we are
5 supposed to be changing the, for example, the oil on the main
6 engines or when we're supposed to be changing the filter banks on
7 the air compressors. So that had more of a set schedule we were
8 following.

9 Q. And you were in charge of maintaining that log and adhering
10 to it as well?

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. At any point did you ever have any company oversight into the
13 training or the recordkeeping?

14 A. No. No, not really. It was all on the captain's
15 (indiscernible), pretty much.

16 Q. Okay. When the Coast Guard was conducting their inspections,
17 whether it be the annual or the COI, did any inspector or other
18 representative review the COI with you?

19 A. No, not really, not that I can remember. Not talk it over
20 with me individually and review it. They would definitely go
21 through the COI to make sure we had the number of -- appropriate
22 number of PFDs or life rafts or whatever, but they never really
23 talked to me about the COI directly, I'd say, but they would
24 reference it.

25 Q. Okay. Basically, obviously what I'm getting at here is under

1 the routes and conditions portion of the COI indicates that while
2 there's passengers on board sleeping below deck there needs to be
3 a roaming patrol. I was just curious if that section was reviewed
4 with you or another member of the crew while the Coast Guard was
5 on board?

6 A. No. They never mentioned that. I mean, I did read it
7 though. I knew that that portion was there, but they had never
8 talked to me about it.

9 Q. Okay. What did you take from it then? If you had read it
10 through and understood it, how did you interpret that?

11 A. I kind of wondered about that because we obviously weren't
12 completely fulfilling it. I thought we had maybe -- there were so
13 many things -- I thought that we somehow fulfilled it by having
14 the crew members sleeping down there. And I also thought, well,
15 it's been -- the boat's been operating this way for so long
16 successfully after so many inspections that it must be fine; it
17 must be satisfied. Yeah. So I -- that was my interpretation of
18 it, was that -- I mean, that's the way I was shown to do it, and
19 it must be satisfied by having the crew members sleeping down
20 there.

21 Q. Was there any conversation with your crew or the owners of --
22 that, you know, questioning if you were or not satisfying it?

23 A. No. No, I never really talked to the owner about that. None
24 of the crew members really ever talked to me about that. No. I
25 remember I did ask my first year, I asked the captain, I said,

1 well, how does this work? And I don't remember his exact answer,
2 but it was pretty much, well, this is how we've been doing it for
3 about, you know -- this is how we've been doing it. I don't
4 remember completely the answer, but I remember the first year
5 (indiscernible), you know, questioning that.

6 Q. Sure. Had you ever been on any other dive vessels as either
7 a passenger or a crew?

8 A. I drove a day dive boat out of Avalon, and I deadheaded on
9 another day boat out of San Diego.

10 Q. Okay. But none with overnight accommodations?

11 A. No. None was an overnight.

12 Q. Okay. Your trip -- you deadheaded on the *Truth*. Was that an
13 overnight or day?

14 A. I think it was a day. I'm fairly certain it was a day trip,
15 but for some reason whenever I think about it, I think we were in
16 San Clemente Island, which from Santa Barbara to San Clemente, it
17 would have to be an overnight trip, but I think it was just a day
18 trip.

19 Q. Okay. Did you ever test the smoke alarms on the *Vision*?

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. What was your frequency, your method behind that?

22 A. That's the thing; it was fairly unofficial. There was no
23 real log. I would -- I'd pretty much do it around inspection
24 times, I would check that. Or if it started to chirp, obviously
25 I'd check it and then switch out the battery or something.

1 Q. How often when you checked it did it not work?

2 A. I don't think it ever not worked.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. But they're not integrated with our central alarm system.

5 Q. Right. How many smoke detectors did you have on the *Vision*?

6 A. There were two in the bunk room. There were -- and then I
7 added another one into the lazarette. That was one of those
8 sealed-type ones. And actually, now I'm thinking about it, the
9 two in the bunk room, I may have checked them and they didn't
10 work, so I put a whole new alarm there.

11 Q. Okay. And that was the first time you checked them or --

12 A. No. I don't think it was the first time. I think it was --
13 another thing that makes it kind of difficult with these boats is
14 they run so seasonally. They run very busy for May through
15 November, and then the off season they're not really running very
16 often. So we would obviously check them more often while we were
17 -- while the boats are running. And then while the boats are just
18 sitting at the dock, they kind of just sit there.

19 Q. Right.

20 A. And I think that I checked them before an inspection in March
21 and they weren't working. And then went back, and that was a
22 couple years ago, and took care of it.

23 Q. Okay. And the type you installed in the lazarette, was that
24 one of those 10-year First Alert sealed ones?

25 A. Yes.

1 Q. Was there any in the engine room?

2 A. No. There were two -- they weren't audible alarms. There
3 were two -- well, actually, yeah, I think there were actually two
4 that were tied in with the bridge alarm, but those were never
5 tested. I didn't really know much about those alarms because no
6 one ever asked me about them and I was never told anything about
7 them. There were two heat-sensitive fixed-system alarms in the
8 engine room that would deploy CO2. And then actually there is --
9 there was also a fixed-system alarm that was tied into the bridge
10 in the dark room, which was in the shower room of the boat. The
11 dark room was kind of a dry food storage area.

12 Q. Right.

13 A. And there was one of those sensors for that located there,
14 and there was an option on the centralized bridge alarm for that.
15 We never tested it though. And the Coast Guard never asked about
16 any of those things, and that's something I always wondered about
17 is why they never asked about those or why we never did anything
18 about those. And that's -- in hindsight, I should have looked
19 more into that.

20 Q. The centralized bridge alarm, was that just the engine room
21 and the dark room alarms or was it encompassing other ones as
22 well?

23 A. Yeah. That was actually more for high water alarm. And
24 that's something that the Coast Guard would always -- was very
25 concerned on -- about, was the high water alarm systems. We have

1 high water alarms in every bilge of the vessel, and they would be
2 tied to the centralized alarm, which sounded in the bridge.

3 Q. When testing the smoke alarms in the bunk room in particular
4 and the lazarette, the one that you said you installed, could you
5 hear those alarms from the bridge, do you know?

6 A. Not while underway. Not with the motors and the generators
7 running.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. You could faintly hear the lazarette one. You could faintly
10 hear the lazarette one, but not -- I don't think you could hear
11 the engine room ones while underway -- I mean, the bunk room ones
12 while underway. Maybe hear a little bit of a ring. You kind of
13 wonder what it is, but it wasn't very prominent. But with the
14 motor, with the main motors off, yeah, you could.

15 Q. What about with just the generator on?

16 A. Yeah, the -- it wouldn't be as discernible, but you could
17 hear it. The generators aren't nearly as loud as the mains.

18 Q. Okay. How would you typically run the AC on the vessel?
19 Does it run all the time?

20 A. No. Actually, I would turn it off usually manually. There
21 was a thermostat. I would turn it off usually after first thing
22 in the morning, and then I would try to remember to turn it back
23 on before the passengers get in bed.

24 Q. Okay. How would you -- was there any guidance for you that
25 dealt with the charging of batteries on board the vessel?

1 A. No. There's never any mention of that.

2 Q. And the passengers would traditionally charge anything they
3 had whereabouts?

4 A. Usually it was throughout the salon. There's a bunch of
5 outlets that run forward and aft on the outboard bulkheads of the
6 boat, and that's usually where people would charge all their
7 stuff.

8 Q. Did you ever have any issues with battery charging or
9 batteries catching fire?

10 A. I did not personally know while I was running the boat.

11 Q. Did you hear of any on the boat?

12 A. I did hear about an incident that occurred while I wasn't
13 running the boat that another captain had filled in for me had.
14 And I heard about that actually after the *Conception* incident.

15 Q. What was that captain's name?

16 A. Tommy Cappinnelli.

17 Q. Do you know how to spell his last name, Ian?

18 A. I think it's C-a-p-p-i-n-n-e -- I think it's two l's -- l-l-
19 i.

20 Q. Okay. And what was the situation around that fire?

21 A. I guess, I've kind of heard conflicting stories. The way I
22 first heard of it was I heard about the *Conception* incident, and I
23 went down and started telling my crew what's going on, and then
24 one of my crew members said, oh, man, that's like what happened on
25 -- when Tommy was running the boat. I said, what happened when

1 Tommy was running the boat? And my crew member went over and
2 grabbed her phone and showed me a picture of the battery -- or,
3 no, of a power strip that was burnt.

4 And then she said that, she said that there was a device
5 being charged or a battery being charged on the book shelf, and it
6 was smoldering in the middle of the night. A passenger came up
7 and saw it. And then she said woke up Tommy, and Tommy came, and
8 put it in -- or threw it overboard or put it in (indiscernible) or
9 something like that. That's what she said. And then Tommy said
10 too, I think, that he grabbed it and threw it overboard or
11 something like that. So I can't -- I don't really remember 100
12 percent what he said. But then I had also heard that the
13 passenger is now saying that he discharged the fire extinguisher
14 on that, but I don't -- I doubt that because I don't think there
15 were any discharged fire extinguishers.

16 Q. Right. You don't know the passenger's name, do you?

17 A. I think he was a guy named Jeff Faye.

18 Q. What was his last name?

19 A. J --

20 Q. Could you spell that, please?

21 A. I think it's F-a-y-e.

22 Q. And when was that trip? When was that trip taken?

23 A. It was the beginning of October 2018.

24 Q. And why weren't you on that trip?

25 A. I just took it off. I went on a vacation.

1 Q. So you didn't -- the only -- you mentioned you were talking
2 to Captain Tommy about it. That wasn't -- that was after the
3 *Conception*. That wasn't when he turned the vessel back over to
4 you, correct?

5 A. Yeah, that was after the *Conception*.

6 Q. Were you aware -- did the -- was the Coast Guard made aware
7 of that incident?

8 A. I am not sure. I don't believe so, but I don't know.

9 Q. How about the owner of Truth Aquatics?

10 A. I don't know that either. The owner told me that he wasn't
11 aware of it, but then Tommy told me that he did tell him.

12 Q. Okay. Other than that one incident with the issue with the
13 battery charging and the possible fire there, did you have any
14 other issues with the vessel's electrical system? Breakers
15 tripping periodically -- anything?

16 A. Yeah. We would have issues with generator bog-down, and
17 that's kind of why I would turn the -- make sure the AC was off
18 throughout the day so as just not to create extra load. As far
19 as stuff actually popping, yeah, we would have compressor motors
20 (indiscernible) would occasionally trip. But there was one near
21 the AC breaker. If the AC was running while a compressor would
22 kick on, it would sometimes pop the AC breaker. That's why I
23 would keep it -- turn it off during the day or try to remember to
24 always turn it off. Yeah. And then there would be issues with
25 the compressor sometimes popping -- the breaker would pop.

1 Q. Which compressor was that in?

2 A. I think it may have actually been the nitrox compressor
3 because that's got a 20 horsepower electric motor, I think. Or is
4 it 15 and the others are 10? And the air compressors are both 15
5 and 10 horsepower compressors. So the nitrox one would draw more
6 amperage, and I think that would be the issue. If that ran while
7 the AC was running and, say, the burners were running, because
8 everything is electrical on the boat, then it would cause some --
9 I think, just a little bit of an overload and some of the breakers
10 would pop.

11 Q. How would you normally manage that to prevent that?

12 A. Like I say, keep the AC off during the day. We wouldn't run
13 the nitrox machine with the barbecue on. We wouldn't -- we would
14 also be -- this was actually more in concern to prevent the ovens
15 from short-circuiting the breakers, their digital panels. We
16 would try and tell the galley to turn off the ovens before we
17 turned on the compressors. That wasn't from anything popping
18 though. That was because modern equipment is so sensitive now
19 with any type of voltage drops. I think when we hit the starboard
20 -- no, the -- it was actually -- because we put a soft starter on
21 the starboard compressor. On the port compressor, it was a pretty
22 impactful start. There was no capacity or anything like that.
23 It's a three-phase motor, so it would just hit and there would be
24 a voltage drop, and that would -- previously had fried the
25 motherboard of an oven. So that's -- we would, we'd mitigate that

1 by trying to turn off ovens, not have barbecue running while the
2 nitrox was running, and stuff like that. That wasn't necessarily
3 as much from things popping as I would say like -- it's just
4 modern equipment is sensitive. It would just fry the boards.

5 Q. Sure. Yeah. Would your generator ever overheat?

6 A. The generator did overheat. The starboard generator would
7 -- I don't think the port one. The only time the port one would
8 overheat was if someone would forget to open up the, you know, the
9 through hole, the water intake. That would have -- I mean, that's
10 obviously it's going to overheat if you forget to provide cooling
11 for it. But the starboard would overheat if the -- if it was
12 overloaded, and that would occur if we were running too many
13 things at the same time.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. But it would also, I think, kind of depend on how -- because
16 if there's any type of crap or stuff that builds up in the heat
17 exchanger it prevents flow. So I'd have to be quite diligent
18 about making sure that there's no seaweed that gets pulled up in
19 the heat exchanger and stuff like that.

20 Q. Yeah.

21 A. It didn't happen -- for a little while, it was -- it would
22 happen a little more often than was comfortable because it was
23 just a pain in the butt, but kind of got a control on it.

24 Q. Okay. Other than those issues, was there any other -- what
25 kind of other issues were -- did you have with the boat or

1 concerns you had?

2 A. Electrical, that when the generators would bog, that was an
3 issue. We couldn't -- I mean, Glen tried to get -- the owner of
4 the company tried to get the generator rewound, and he tried to do
5 all sorts of things to figure out why the generators were bogging.
6 Because it was also kind of intermittent. It's kind of weird. I
7 still don't think it's been fully understood why it was bogging
8 and then sometimes not bogging. Mechanics would say it's a fuel
9 restriction. Generator guys would say -- they'd both hand it off
10 to each other. The generator guy would say it's the motor issue;
11 motor guy would say it's the generator issue.

12 Q. Sure.

13 A. But he definitely would try to tried consistently to get it
14 fixed. It wasn't always -- especially this last year we didn't
15 have too many problems with it. And besides that, a few years ago
16 I had a gear box went out, but that's just -- that type of stuff
17 just happens. No, mechanically everything -- I mean, the motors
18 were very good motors.

19 Q. How would you -- if you did have a problem with the boat or
20 something needed to be fixed outside your crew's ability, how
21 would you get it fixed or how would you notify the office?

22 A. By sat phone if it was something that I didn't know what to
23 do, I'd call -- I'd usually either call another captain, Jerry,
24 because he's been around dealing with stuff for a long time and
25 -- or I would call directly the boat's mechanic, diesel mechanic,

1 (indiscernible) if it was a motor issue. Compressor issue I would
2 call Compressor Specialties, and their techs are very good at
3 helping me diagnose things. It was usually me, or if there was
4 something that I thought maybe the owner could contribute, I would
5 call him and ask him what he recommends, and he would usually just
6 say call one of the three people I just mentioned, and ask them
7 about it.

8 Q. Okay. I think it cut out there. Who did you say the diesel
9 mechanic was?

10 A. Vaughn. South African guy. I don't know his last name. The
11 company is out of Ventura. It's Triple A, Triple A Power
12 Generation or something like that or diesel repair.

13 Q. Okay. Was there any time that you felt that you needed
14 support either from a third party or from the owner, and you
15 didn't get it?

16 A. Yeah. I mean, it would be frustrating. There would be a lot
17 on my plate. And it would be helpful if there was some type of
18 port captain or a ship's engineer would be wonderful. But, yeah,
19 that wasn't really there because it's sort of a lot of the stuff
20 was just on the captain's shoulders to figure out.

21 I did have resources where I could call. And the owner would
22 always answer his phone. It's not like he would just disappear,
23 but he -- and he was always willing to pay for whatever. But it
24 would be tough because, like I was saying, the schedules are
25 usually pretty demanding, and then stuff -- there's always stuff

1 that breaks. You know, it's a boat. Whether it's something
2 that's just mundane that needs to be repaired like the -- say the
3 dryer just stops getting hot for whatever reason, and but then it
4 would be up to the captain to make sure it's fixed before the next
5 passenger turnaround. And that was frustrating.

6 It would be nice to have somebody to -- I mean, I would
7 always have the ability to call and try and schedule an
8 appointment with a technician of some sort, but you usually pull
9 into the dock at 5 p.m., leaving at 3 a.m. the next morning, so it
10 usually was really hard to get a technician to come out, and it's
11 always on a Sunday or something, come out on Sunday at 8 p.m. to
12 fix the boat. So, yeah, that aspect is -- was frustrating.

13 Q. If you had had an item of concern that you felt the vessel
14 shouldn't leave the dock, do you feel that you would have been
15 supportive -- or by the company or they would have pressured you
16 to get underway?

17 A. Honestly, I think they would just figure out a way to get
18 underway. They would provide any type of resource possible to
19 make it happen. There were sometimes with weather when I didn't
20 really want to go out because the weather was too bad, but then I
21 would be kind of talked into just going. And, I mean, nothing
22 ever happened. Everything always worked out. It wasn't always
23 the best trips. But I didn't like that aspect either.

24 Q. And who are you having those conversations with?

25 A. I'd usually tell the manager how I felt about the upcoming

1 trip. And it wasn't very -- you know, it happened like once every
2 -- in the last 3 years. No, it happened maybe two or three times
3 actually. But I would say this weather looks horrible; I don't
4 know where I'm going to go. And then she would say, okay, fine.
5 And then she would tell that to the owner, and then the owner
6 would call me and say, hey, we got to run this trip.

7 Q. Okay. Ian, you still there? Can you hear me?

8 A. Yeah.

9 Q. And the office manager was Hilga, and the owner was Glen,
10 correct?

11 A. Yeah. Inga. I don't know if her name's Hilga, but I call
12 her Inga.

13 Q. Oh, Inga. Okay. All right. Other than those few instances,
14 was there any other issues you had with the company?

15 A. No, not as I can think off the top of my head. There were
16 definitely the typical employee/employer issues, you know, about
17 whatever compensation or about working or about -- there's that
18 type of stuff. But real drastic issues, I can't think off the top
19 of my head anything.

20 Q. What kind of interaction? You had mentioned earlier you
21 would call the captain of the *Conception*, Jerry, on the phone, if
22 you had a technical question. How much interaction did you have
23 with the crew of the *conception*?

24 A. With the crew, none at all. I don't think I knew any of
25 them. I knew -- Jerry, I talked to all the time. He's just a --

1 he's been out here on the water doing that for a very long time.
2 So if I had questions about the weather or he could help me
3 troubleshoot some mechanical issue, then, yeah, we would -- I
4 would probably call him maybe almost every trip, once at least.
5 On some trips a lot more than that, and other trips not at all.
6 Kind of depended if we were operating near each other or the
7 conditions.

8 Q. How would you evaluate him? Would you consider him -- how
9 would you rate his performance as a captain?

10 A. I would say in a couple different ways. In safety factors,
11 he was a very safety-oriented captain. But as being captain
12 you're also kind of a manager. You've got to make -- you're
13 trying your best to -- well, also you've got to be personable with
14 the passengers. So as far as maintaining and keeping a safe
15 environment, that's what he was definitely best at. But as far as
16 making the passengers happy and keeping his crew happy, he wasn't
17 very good at that anymore. He just, I think, got over it. So he
18 was a very good safe captain, very good boat handler, and could
19 make great -- well, a very, I would say cautious, conservative
20 decisions about where to dive, and where he anchored the boat,
21 that type of stuff. But as far as keeping a happy crew, it's just
22 like keeping a happy workforce, he wasn't very good at that.

23 Q. Did the crew turn over much on his boat?

24 A. Yes.

25 Q. Did any of them come work for you or did they leave the

1 company?

2 A. One actually did at the beginning of the year. It was one of
3 my deckhands. He worked on the *Conception*. A couple of my crew I
4 think would fill in with him now and then, but he could be very
5 particular and kind of stubborn and hard to work with. So unless
6 he liked the crew members, he -- they didn't do very well on his
7 boat and they would -- yeah. So I think I did get a couple of my
8 crew members came from him originally, maybe my second captain.
9 And he -- right off the bat he was working on the *Conception*, but
10 then for the past years he was on the *Vision*, and then my -- one
11 of my deckhands came from the *Conception*.

12 Q. And is that where you're getting most of your knowledge of
13 Jerry? I mean, you never worked for him, correct? Or just on a
14 professional captain-to-captain level?

15 A. Yeah. I never worked for him. It was just on a captain-to-
16 captain level.

17 Q. Okay. The night of the accident, *Conception* fire, were you
18 on board the *Vision*?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. On a trip or at the dock?

21 A. On a trip.

22 Q. Whereabouts?

23 A. I was on my out to Cortez Bank, between San Clemente Island
24 and Cortez Bank.

25 Q. And how did you hear of the casualty?

1 A. I heard the Coast Guard making PAN-PANs on the VHF. I could
2 only hear the Coast Guard. And then a friend of mine who works on
3 a offshore supply vessel in Gaviota called me on the sat phone and
4 told me what was going on probably about 4 in the morning or so,
5 4:30.

6 Q. Okay. And were you finishing your trip? Did you return to
7 the dock, or what did you do after you were informed?

8 A. I turned the boat around because I was going out to Cortez,
9 and Cortez is out in the middle of nowhere, and I couldn't
10 actually deal with that. So I turned the boat around, and I took
11 us back to San Clemente Island, and I anchored up at the back side
12 of San Clemente Island and told the passengers what had happened
13 after telling my crew. And then -- and we did one dive off the
14 boat and we drove back to Santa Barbara.

15 Q. Was that your last trip or did you stay working for Truth
16 Aquatics for a while?

17 A. That was my last trip. I had done some maintenance for them
18 throughout October, but I haven't worked for them since middle of
19 October or so.

20 Q. Okay. At what point did you speak to Glen that day?

21 A. He -- I remember him, obviously, being very busy that day. I
22 talked to him when I was, I think, only 2½ hours or so outside of
23 the harbor. I think that was the first time I talked to him.

24 Q. Okay. Had you ever taken the same charter, the same scuba
25 dive group as the *Conception* had on that -- in that journey on

1 your vessel before?

2 A. Yeah, I had. I knew a lot of them.

3 Q. When was that?

4 A. Well, they were Finstad Worldwide Diving, that the -- I've
5 had that same charter only, I'd say, a month before.

6 Q. Okay. And how would you -- was it a normal trip? How would
7 you define their abilities and their -- how they acted on board?

8 A. They were normal. They were -- I was friends with the
9 charter masters, and the deceased were very diligent. The
10 passengers were usually a moderate level, a mixed bag,
11 photographers, maybe a couple hunters. Usually, in particular,
12 not wanting to necessarily push it really. They, I think, were a
13 little more likely to want just kind of calm mellow conditions
14 rather than some groups that would like to, you know, push it and
15 go look for lobster or whatever we're doing. They did have the
16 photographers.

17 Q. Yeah. Ian, just kind of, I guess, a couple last questions
18 here. How would you say the *Vision*, how would you say the shape
19 of the vessel was overall? Did you feel like it was a good vessel
20 or not so much?

21 A. I would say it's a very good vessel. I would say that boat
22 is the nicest sport boat, the nicest liveaboard dive boat on the
23 West Coast. Well, or not -- maybe -- on the coast of California.
24 For its size, I would say that that boat is very nice.

25 Q. Compared to the *Conception*, you would -- you just obviously

1 put it in front of the *Conception*. Was there any particular
2 reason for that?

3 A. I would personally because it's bigger. I like the *Vision*
4 more than the *Conception* because the *Vision* was my boat. The
5 *Conception* actually had some prettier design things to it, but
6 they're more cosmetic. The *Vision*, we had two generators. We had
7 bigger motors. I liked the layout of the wheelhouse more on the
8 *Vision*. So I honestly, really, I wasn't -- I'm not that familiar
9 with the *Conception*. I never worked on it. But just from my
10 experiences on the boat, I definitely preferred the *Vision*.

11 Q. Okay. Had you heard of any issues that the *Conception* was
12 having mechanically or personnel or --

13 A. I had heard that the *Conception* generator had some issues,
14 but they bought a brand new \$65,000 generator and put it in there.
15 I know they were having issues with looking for a second captain.
16 Yeah, that was -- that's about it.

17 Q. Okay. Well, thank you again. Just one last question, and
18 that's kind of for you -- for me, I mean. Is there anything that
19 we haven't -- I haven't asked you or that you feel that might be
20 helpful to this investigation going forward?

21 A. No. I don't know. It's -- I wish we had more information
22 about the dangers with those batteries, whether it was some type
23 of more in-depth scrutiny. Because basically we are just -- we're
24 a hospitality-oriented group on these boats, on these charter
25 boats, and we're doing whatever -- we're trying to just satisfy

1 the passengers. So until a government agency or -- with obviously
2 not everything, but when it comes to the newer technologies, until
3 some type of official tells us that it's bad or needs to have some
4 type of oversight, I just -- I don't think that the owners would
5 do it because it would piss off passengers. So I think having
6 some type of -- having some type of that type of information could
7 have prevented that. But I don't know what could have prevented
8 it, to be honest, if someone wants to --

9 Q. I assume you're still sailing. You said you're on your way
10 now. Are you in the same type of industry?

11 A. I'm actually unemployed right now. I've been trying to find
12 actually a job aboard a larger ship. I've been taking some
13 courses to increase the tonnage of my license. And I don't know
14 what type of industry I'm going to go into. I might stay in the
15 passenger boat industry. I enjoy working with the passengers, but
16 then it's just so -- like I have friends --like Tommy, a friend of
17 mine, he's got into upper tonnage stuff, and he works with
18 freight. And he just says, Ian, you know, if a piece of freight
19 falls off the boat, no one cares, nothing happens. There's not
20 any type of problem, and no freight's just going to, you know,
21 cause that type of a problem that a passenger could. If a
22 passenger falls off the boat or especially in a dive boat you've
23 got all these different varying types of people going in the
24 water, you know, the captain is ultimately responsible for. So
25 it's just -- it's kind of hard being in that or justifying staying

1 in that industry.

2 MR. BARNUM: Sure. Understood. Well, that's all the
3 questions I have. Unless you have anything for me, I'm going to
4 end the recording. It is 1443 Eastern Standard Time, and stopping
5 the recording now.

6 (Whereupon, at 12:43 p.m., the interview was concluded.)
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

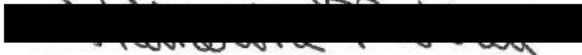
IN THE MATTER OF: FIRE AND SINKING OF THE CONCEPTION
WITH LOSS OF LIFE NEAR
SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, CALIFORNIA
SEPTEMBER 2, 2019
Interview of Ian Higgins

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA19MM047

PLACE: Via Telephone

DATE: January 13, 2020

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.


Katherine Motley
Transcriber