



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Office of Marine Safety

## Interview Summary

**Accident:** Fire aboard Dive Vessel *Conception* (NTSB No. DCA19MM047)

**Date:** September 2, 2019, at 0314 PDT

**Location:** Platts Harbor, Pacific Ocean near Santa Cruz Island, California, 34°02.99' N, 119°44.10' W

**Person Interviewed:** Captain J. Hrabak, former captain and occasional relief captain on dive boat *Vision*

**Interview Conducted By:** Mr. A. Ehlers, NTSB  
Mr. B. Barnum, NTSB  
Mr. M. Muise, NTSB

**Summary Provided By:** Mr. A. Ehlers, NTSB

### OVERVIEW

Captain Hrabak was interviewed via telephone on March 30, 2020, in conjunction with the investigation into the September 2, 2019, accident involving the dive boat *Conception*, which caught fire and eventually sank while it was anchored in Platts Harbor off Santa Cruz Island, California. Unless specifically delineated by quotes, the text that follows is not a verbatim record of the conversation. It has been developed from notes of the interview.

### INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Captain Hrabak provided an overview of his experience. He worked most of his adult life operating boats, earning his 100-ton master credential when he was 25–26 years old. His credential is still current. In the 1980s, he worked as a deckhand and second captain on the dive boat *Peace* as well as shore launches in the Port of Los Angeles/Long Beach. In the 1990s he worked for Tidewater on offshore supply vessels before he was hired by Truth Aquatics in 2001. He worked as a captain for Truth Aquatics from 2001-2003. He principally captained the *Vision*, but also captain the *Truth* “a number of times” and the *Conception* once. After a hiatus of a number of years in which he worked another maritime related job, he has worked the last 3 years doing 4-5 multi-day (2-5 day) trips per year as a relief captain on the *Vision*. Captain Hrabak is a certified diver, but he did not believe that dive certification was required for the captain position.

When Captain Hrabak was first hired and before taking over as captain of the *Vision*, he had a training period of about 6 months in which he served as second captain on the vessel. He did not receive any training from the company, other than the on-the-job training provided by the then-current *Vision* captain. (He noted that since he had worked on other dive boats prior to being hired by Truth Aquatics, there was an expectation that he had skills and did not require extensive training). The company did not provide an operations manual or any other procedural guidance for the captain; the captain was solely responsible for operating the vessel.

While working full time as the *Vision* captain, Captain Hrabak was responsible for hiring and dismissing crew. He found crew members either by word-of-mouth or by reviewing applications provided by the Truth Aquatics staff. Crewmembers that he hired had “some experience working on boats and diving” prior to being hired. A prospective new hire was invited to participate in a “deadhead” voyage, in which they were not paid, allowing them to interact with the crew. After the deadhead, the captain would make the decision on whether to hire the individual.

The captain and second captain were responsible for training new crewmembers when they came aboard. Training for new crewmembers was on-the-job training. Captain Hrabak stated that, before leaving the dock

for the first time, he gave newly reported crew a thorough walk-through of the boat, highlighting safety features, where emergency procedures were located, and describing procedures in an emergency. Once under way, he would provide training scenarios for the crew, and would occasionally “mock-up” an emergency for response by the crew. Training included fire drills, and all drills (man overboard, collision, fire, and abandon ship) were logged. Drills were generally conducted while passengers were in the water diving. Passengers were not mustered during the drills, nor were they required to by regulation. The vessel had a station bill that “everybody followed” for emergencies and drills. During his tenure, the vessel did not experience an actual fire on board.

For overnight trips, the *Vision* had a captain, second captain, two deckhands, and two galleyhands. Five crewmembers bunked behind the wheelhouse in 3 staterooms. One crewmember slept in the bunkroom. Captain Hrabak stated that the assignment of underway helm watches depended on how long the vessel was running between mooring/anchoring locations. If the run was less than 4 hours, then he kept the helm for the entire transit. If it was more than 4 hours, then the helm duties were split between the four deck crew. When anchored and divers were in the water, a watch was set; “most of the crew was up all the time.” When asked whether a watch was set when anchored overnight, he did not answer.

He stated that it was uncommon to have smokers onboard the vessel, but when they were onboard, the smoking area was generally the fantail area, downwind. Of all his crewmembers, only one was an occasionally (“Social”) smoker.

Captain Hrabak stated that there was a PA system installed on the *Vision* that had microphones associated with each speaker. The system allowed him to monitor sounds and voices in the galley and the bunkroom. “If need be, somebody could talk to me through that speaker.” There were no phones or fire-alarm pulls in the bunkroom.

Captain Hrabak did not recall whether there was smoke or fire detection in the engine room or lazarette, although he stated that there was a fixed fire extinguishing system in the engine room that would alarm in the wheelhouse. In the bunkroom, there were two home smoke detectors that were tested annually. He never heard them go off during a trip.

Captain Hrabak stated that he periodically took the bunkroom hatch off for cleaning, but the hatch was never used during a drill or actual emergency.

Captain Hrabak stated that Truth Aquatics was a well-run company. He described the company vessels as “the safest boats on the coast.” Between the time that Captain Hrabak left the company in 2003 and returned as a relief captain, he saw little change in the way the company was run. He stated that the office staff was “more supportive” than when he first worked for Truth Aquatics. For instance, when he started, there was no designated person on the staff responsible for finding replacement crew. He stated that the boats were not neglected.

He said that “*no expenses were spared*” in maintaining the Truth Aquatics boats (emphasis from Captain Hrabak). Captain Hrabak stated that he did 90% of the major maintenance on the boat, with the exception of general cleaning. Crewmembers could be tasked with simple maintenance, such as oil and filter changes, during off days under his supervision. Any structural work was done by him and Mr. Glen Fritzler, owner of Truth Aquatics. Fire hoses were tested no less than quarterly, no more than monthly, or whenever a new crewmember came aboard. Underway maintenance was completed by the crew and logged using standard company forms. He believed that the *Conception* crew under Captain Boylan would have kept accurate logs.

As captain of the *Vision*, Captain Hrabak did not have any issues during Coast Guard inspections. He stated that the vessel was never issued an 835-no-sail form, and, as far as he knew, all Truth Aquatics vessels always passed inspections. During his tenure, the relationship with the Coast Guard Detachment in Santa Barbara was positive.

Captain Hrabak stated that, during Coast Guard inspections, the inspectors reviewed the drill logs of the vessel. Coast Guard inspectors also reviewed the vessel's COI but did not go over it line by line with the captain or crew. When asked, Captain Hrabak stated that Coast Guard inspectors did not ask about whether roving watches were being set onboard the vessel. The vessel was never boarded at sea by Coast Guard officials (with the exception of during one emergency involving a passenger that had fallen).

Captain Hrabak could not recall ever doing a drill with the local fire department, Coast Guard, or first responders. He noted that the vessel was employed 220 days out of the year, so there was little time to do training with outside organizations.

Captain Hrabak knows Captain Jerry Boylan, captain of *Conception*, and stated that he has a strong reputation on the waterfront. Captain Hrabak worked as a second captain for Captain Boylan on 1-2 one-night voyages. He believed that Captain Boylan was fully competent to captain the *Conception*. He stated, "I trust Jerry Boylan with my kids' lives."

When asked if there were any areas of concern that he felt the NTSB should include in the investigation, he offered that regulations should be revised so that older small passenger boats are upgraded to meet modern standards.

#### **END SUMMARY**



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A. Ehlers  
Marine Accident Investigator