



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 D. Rowell, former captain and occasional relief captain on dive boat *Truth*

Interview Conducted By: Mr. A. Ehlers, NTSB

Summary Provided By: Mr. A. Ehlers, NTSB

OVERVIEW

Captain Rowell was interviewed via telephone on March 27, 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 Rowell provided an overview of his experience. He has worked in the sportfishing and dive boat industry since 1982. He earned his 100-ton master credential in 1990. He worked for Truth Aquatics from 2001-2008 and has occasionally worked as a relief captain for Truth Aquatics since then. He currently owns and operates a sportfishing boat based in Channel Islands Harbor in Ventura County.

Captain Rowell was hired by Mr. Glen Fritzler, Truth Aquatics owner, to be the captain of the dive boat *Truth*. He had been called by a manager at the company to interview for the captain position after his own boat business failed. He stated that he spent a couple of months as second captain before he took over as the captain.

Captain Rowell captained the *Truth* only; he did not captain any of the other Truth Aquatics vessels. He stated that a typical week included two 3-day overnight trips booked Sunday to Tuesday and Thursday to Saturday and a one 1-day trip on Wednesday. The 3-day trips were generally charters by dive clubs and shops, and the 1-day trips were "open booking," that is, directly booked between the customer and Truth Aquatics.

Captain Rowell described Mr. Fritzler and Truth Aquatics as "an extremely proactive owner." He stated that the company's boats were well maintained, painted, dry, and vented. He described his experience operating the vessel and working for Truth Aquatics as "the funnest 8 years of my life."

Captain Rowell handled all hiring of crew for his vessel. Truth Aquatics staff provided him with resumes or applications to review, and he would interview applicants. He stated that, after his initial experiences, he did not hire deckhands who did not have previous experience operating boats. He would often find crew through his own contacts. All second captains and deckhands had to be dive certified, since they acted as safety divers during diving operations.

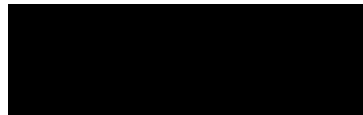
Captain Rowell stated that training for new employees was a combination of company led/required training and on-the-job training on the vessel. Company training included CPR, first aid, and defibrillator training. On-the-job training included a review of all the boat's operations.

Drills, such as fire drills, were conducted. Crewmembers did not have assigned positions for fire emergencies and drills. "The first to get there" was/were responsible for fighting a fire. Captain Rowell stated that no actual fires occurred during his tenure as captain of the *Truth*. He stated that the only similar incident was a hot bearing that caused smoke in the engine room before the cause was discovered, but no fire actually broke out.

When under way, Captain Rowell normally had the helm, with occasional relief by the second captain. There was no set watch rotation. When asked about whether roving watches were set when the vessel was anchored or moored, he replied "sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't."

Captain Rowell was asked if there was any area that he believed the NTSB should look into that he had not already been asked about. He noted that divers often have large cameras that they would bungy cord to a table after a dive or put into camera bags. He stated that the divers would also stuff towels around the cameras. He also noted dive lights. These cameras and lights used to have disposable batteries, but they have transitioned to rechargeables. Captain Rowell said that when the batteries are recharging, they become warm or hot. He would often unplug the rechargers if he found that they were warm and were not attended. He mentioned a fire on the *Condor Express*, a vessel moored nearby the Truth Aquatics boats, which was likely caused by a cell phone or handheld radio battery. The fire severely damaged the vessel's wheelhouse. Finally, he noted the Mr. Fritzler was now installing safe charging stations in his vessels.

END SUMMARY



A. Ehlers
Marine Accident Investigator