

CAPTAIN DOUGLAS RUSSELL

Below is a summary of interview CAPT Douglas Russell, USCG, Commanding Officer, USCGC HEALY (WAGB 20) conducted by the AIM informal board on August 25, 2006 concerning the diving incident which resulted in two deaths on August 17, 2006. AIM board members present at the interview were Captain [REDACTED] LCDR [REDACTED] and LCDR [REDACTED]

CAPT Douglas RUSSELL relieved CAPT [REDACTED] as Commanding Officer, USCGC HEALY (WAGB 20) on 5 June 2006. His previous seagoing assignments include: Executive Officer, CGC HEALY; and Engineer Officer, aboard both a WMEC & a WAGB. Shore assignments include headquarters, and program acquisition offices for several classes of Coast Guard vessels.

On 16 August 2006, LT HILL approached CAPT RUSSELL about a potential dive operation for the next day. He advised her to talk to LCDR [REDACTED] (OPS) and put a plan together. She mentioned that she'd like to do an ice familiarization dive for her new divers, BM2 DUQUE and ENS [REDACTED]. CAPT RUSSELL stated that he asked her "can you dive with all three divers in the water in accordance with dive policy and her training as a dive officer?" He indicated that she replied "yes," she could dive with three.

On 17 August, CAPT RUSSELL awoke very early to plan for flight ops. They had set an ambitious science schedule, and were getting great results. They had particularly good weather on the 17th. The plan was to retrieve 13, or so, coolers full of equipment from the ice over a large area.

They planned a significant amount of flight operations, and with good weather, made great progress throughout the day. In fact, they finished the entire operation by mid-afternoon. There was discussion of doing some core sampling along a ridge after flight operations were finished, but CAPT RUSSELL had interest in taking a break for ice liberty. The crew deserved some time off after over 40 straight days of operations. The senior scientist concurred.

They sought out a decent spot, and found a large floe with good ice. Later that afternoon, the crew made preps to lower the brow and deploy to the ice. During the preparation period for ice liberty, the OPS boss advised CAPT RUSSELL that the proposed dive plan from LT HILL was ready for his review. It essentially mirrored the discussion they had the night before. The plan was for two dives. The first was a surface checkout dive. The second dive was for subsurface familiarization with diving under the ice. No more than 20 feet deep and no longer than 20 minutes.

At 1620 the dive officer gave the CO a verbal brief consisting of the following information. The tenders would be: LTJG [REDACTED] (the ship's physician's assistant), DC3 [REDACTED], and MK1 [REDACTED]. The divers would be all three ship's divers: LT HILL (dive officer), ENS [REDACTED] (scuba diver) and BM2 DUQUE (scuba diver).

The dive would take place forward of the ship. It would be a training dive similar to what was planned in Dutch Harbor. The CO gave his approval.

Ice liberty began mid to late afternoon. CAPT RUSSELL went down on the ice to keep an eye on things. He noticed the divers were dressing out in dry suits, and deploying to the ice. He noticed the polar bear watch was keeping an alert watch, made sure people were staying close to the ship, and the morale committee kept an eye on the consumption of alcohol. He also watched the crew's overall behavior, which was good.

Later, he saw LT HILL reach the dive side. The CO distinctly remembers observing a portion of a dive brief and he felt comfortable with what was going on. Things looked good. Later, the CO saw the divers sit down on the ice and put on their equipment.

Prior to the divers going into the water, the CO noticed that BM2 DUQUE had a glove problem. Eventually he saw the BM2 go over and join the other two divers.

Shortly thereafter, all three divers entered the water. A few moments later ENS ██████ got out. She was having a leak problem in one are of her dry suit. CAPT RUSSELL said he lost track of her. She may have gone back aboard HEALY. The remaining divers looked good.

CAPT RUSSELL stated that he began to walk back through the ice liberty area. He saw that the pickup football game was becoming a big deal, and spent some time watching. Back at the dive side, he noticed that BM2 DUQUE was again having some kind of glove or hand problem. This time he had removed a glove and was getting help warming it back up. BM2 DUQUE had his hand in the under arm of one of the tenders. A few moments later he put his glove back on. BM2 DUQUE was re-checked by LT HILL. They did surface checks again. Later they submerged. CAPT RUSSELL said he could see bubbles and once again thought that things looked normal. The dive seemed to be proceeding according to plan.

At 1840 or so, the CO heard there was a problem. Specifically, BMCS ██████ was giving instructions to personnel to help the tenders with some sense of urgency. He saw people moving quickly to help the tender lines. CAPT RUSSELL said he walked over to the scene. A few minutes later he could begin to see the divers in the water column. There appeared to be bubbles, but no response from the divers. BMCS ██████ gave instruction to pull the divers out. He was getting a lot of help at the scene. The two divers were pulled onto the ice. BM2 DUQUE had red/pink foam inside and out of his mask, and LT HILL had white foam all throughout the inside of her mask. Both divers were unresponsive. Immediately, the tenders and medical personnel started resuscitation. Pipes were being made for HSC and stretcher bearers to lay to the dive side.

CAPT RUSSELL went back aboard the ship and started making preparations to get underway. He told OPS to get D17 on line so communication could be started with a flight surgeon. He felt that he needed to close the distance to Barrow.

CAPT RUSSELL went back aboard the ship, and instructed the OOD to get the engines back on line and start making way toward Barrow at 10 knots. CAPT RUSSELL placed his focus on the ship until things were underway and progressing.

Checking with OPS, CAPT RUSSELL heard that communications problems were making it difficult to stay connected to D17. He also knew that OPS was talking to PACAREA, and making required notifications. He decided to head down to medical to check the scene.

CAPTAIN RUSSELL found that LTJG [REDACTED] was overseeing resuscitation efforts on BM2 DUQUE and HSC [REDACTED] was overseeing efforts on LT HILL. There were numerous stretcher bearers and others also assisting, including a Russian member of the science party, who was performing CPR. Even early on it did not look good for either diver, but the medical efforts continued in earnest.

Back on the bridge, CAPT RUSSELL ensured that the 10 knot speed was acceptable to the medical staff and was in keeping with general ship safety. He was told and observed that the speed and vibration was fine. He confirmed the track to Barrow, and started confirming helicopter range of onboard and land based assets. The helicopters aboard have a range of 100nm, and the land based Bell helicopters have a range of 200nm. HEALY was approximately 500nm from Barrow, Alaska. Still too far to fly.

At around 2000, OPS approached CAPT RUSSELL on the bridge and informed him that LTJG [REDACTED] and the D17 flight surgeon had made a death declaration. Resuscitation efforts were being stopped. CAPT RUSSELL instructed OPS to have the ship hove-to and muster the crew on the flight deck. A short while later he informed the crew that they had lost two shipmates, and were on the way to Barrow. He told them that critical incident stress de-briefers were being requested, and would be aboard as soon as possible. He also told them that the deployment plan was uncertain at the moment.

The CO got a group together with the XO in the cabin around 2100 to start working on the decedent affairs checklist which included next of kin notification. YNC had already been working on a mishap msg - CO and XO marked it up and sent it back for revision. The message wouldn't go out for a few more hours, but the CO was focused on other issues.

Back on the bridge at around 2300 CAPT RUSSELL was approached with personnel casualty reports. He then crafted the next of kin notification letters so they could be made available to the casualty assistance coordination officers. Then he walked around the ship and checked on the crew.

The next day he told the crewmembers he saw to start writing statements of what they saw, and not to discuss them with others.

The following responses were made to questions asked by investigators:

- LT HILL's brief to the CO included: who was diving, the duration and nature of the dive; the names of the tenders, LTJG ██████ experience, and the rescue plan which was to bring personnel aboard the ship.
- The brief was held in the passageway.
- No GAR model or ORM was conducted.
- CAPT RUSSELL stated that he had one beer on the ice, that there was a two beer limit, and that the beer distribution was monitored by the morale committee.
- CAPT RUSSELL said that he initially said "no" to the polar bear swim, but later allowed it. They were using a tending line that wasn't being used by the divers. It was in a separate place, and seemed like a low risk evolution, based on his experience. It had no impact on the dive.
- BM2 DUQUE was a new diver, but had a few dives. None in the ice.
- ENS ██████ attended navy dive school scuba dive training while at the Coast Guard Academy. He stated he is not familiar with her dive experience.
- LT HILL "grew up in the water", was a graduate of dive officer school and had dove 12 to 15 times in the ice.
- CAPT RUSSELL did not see a checklist for the dive.
- There was no evacuation plan to transport the divers to a medical facility other than the ship. He does not recall HEALY ever having one in place. He recalls divers diving at the North Pole.
- CAPT RUSSELL stated that he is unfamiliar with USN or CG dive manuals, and does not know what the requirements are for a three person dive, in terms of personnel numbers, standby divers, or supervision.
- When ENS ██████ got out of the water with a damaged suit it did not raise concerns.
- When asked if anyone was in charge of the dive operation on the ice, CAPT RUSSELL responded "no."
- CAPT RUSSELL stated he does not know dive policy and relied on LT HILL.
- CAPT RUSSELL stated that the following equipment was running during the dive: the screws with 10 shaft turns, the bottom mapping sonar, subsurface bottom profiler, and suction. The dive, however, was not on the ship.
- Normally equipment is tagged out for ship dives. He didn't think about it for this dive because it was forward of the ship.
- He doesn't know the training requirements for the dive hyperbaric chamber.
- He said he did not know that the divers had dove to 190 and 200+ respectively, until yesterday (24 August). He stated that he has specifically tried to avoid investigating any facts so that he does not cloud his original memory of the events.
- This dive operation seemed like those he had seen previously on HEALY.
- POLAR SEA divers seemed more organized and regimented, but were usually diving on the hull.
- LT HILL had experience in the ice and he trusted his trained/experienced dive officer to make it happen properly.

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- OPS endorsed the plan. We had a relatively short conversation.
- In response to the question "who was in charge of the emergency?" CAPT RUSSELL answered good question? It was mostly LTJG [REDACTED] I never said "XO take charge."

[REDACTED] LTJG
01/26/06

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