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"Lessons Learned From *Morning Dew*"

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Amenities:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's always a great honor to be here at Annapolis and to be part of any U.S. Naval Institute event. For you young people in the audience—especially those about to begin professional naval (with a small "n"!) careers, I encourage you without reservation to become participating members of the Institute. It's the finest forum we who go down to the sea in ships have to exchange views and learn from each other. It's an enormously important part of a sailor's professional growth. Don't pass it up.

Introduction:

I think it's important to tell you first what I'm not going to talk about. You've heard from Admiral Johnson and General Dake on the state of their services. The agenda offers that as my challenge as well. However, two reasons compel me to discuss something else. Number one is that I have my Annual State of the Coast Guard speech to deliver to my service on May 4th, and they deserve to hear me first on that subject. Number two, and more importantly, your panel that follows me is focused on an intriguing dimension of the Search and Rescue mission: the worth of life. The panel as presented seems to focus on the response dimension of the mission, and I'd like to discuss some lessons we've learned recently that will have us focus on the prevention dimension.

We're all full of heroic stories about response: *The Perfect Storm* . . . the fishing vessel *Le Conte* case in the Bering Sea last year told so well in a series run in the *Washington Post* . . . lots of Coast Guard and Air National Guard cases where magnificent professionals saved lives at sea.

Sadly, we often learn more dramatic lessons when lives are tragically lost. In the midst of such losses, we must take the time to learn lessons and keep the losses from recurring the next time similar circumstances occur.

We've heard that line of thought a lot these last two days since the tragedy in Colorado. It is applicable as well to tragedies at sea.

My remarks will focus on the loss of the *Morning Dew* near Charleston, South Carolina, the winter before last. My goal is to learn, take stock and encourage prevention skills for all of us who have parts to play in making going to sea a safer experience.

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The *Morning Dew* Case:

The week between Christmas of 1997 and New Year's Day of 1998 was supposed to be a pleasant time for the family of 49-year-old Michael Cornett. Mr. Cornett had just bought a used sailboat, a 34-foot Cal sloop, christened the *Morning Dew*. He had been a recreational sailor for more than twenty years and had previously owned other sailboats. He accepted delivery of *Morning Dew* in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, embarked his two teenaged sons and his teenaged nephew as either crew or passengers, and began a transit to Jacksonville, Florida.

As near as we can reconstruct the *Morning Dew's* voyage, Mr. Cornett's departure from Myrtle Beach on the 27th was delayed by an electrical problem on the boat, which he corrected by buying a new battery at an auto parts store. While he made sure that the battery could hold a charge, he purchased some charts and planned an inland route along the Intracoastal Waterway.

At 2200 on December 27th, the bridge tender at Little River, South Carolina, reported seeing *Morning Dew* in the Intracoastal Waterway. We don't know how far *Morning Dew* went on the 27th or where they spent the night.

At two-thirty the next afternoon, the operator of a salvage vessel saw the *Morning Dew* heading outbound in Winyah Bay, moving towards the open ocean, cruising on engine power with the sails reefed to the boom. The operator of the salvage vessel assumed the *Morning Dew* had missed the turn into the ICW and hailed the sailboat on VHF-FM, but was unable to establish communications. A sport fisherman also saw the *Morning Dew* heading toward the open ocean, also tried to send a warning, and also failed to make radio contact.

No one knows why Mr. Cornett headed for sea. Perhaps he wanted to find some sea room so he could spread some canvas on his new boat. Perhaps he missed the ICW and decided against retracing his route to regain his intended track. Whatever his thought process, at some point, he knew his boat was pointed away from land and continued out to sea.

There were small craft advisories posted from Little River Inlet, South Carolina, to Savannah, Georgia. Winds were from the east at 25 knots and gusting. Seas were running five to six feet. Areas of rain and embedded thunderstorms reduced visibility to less than one nautical mile. The water temperature was 55 degrees.

We do not know what happened aboard the boat over the next eleven or twelve hours.

What we surmise is that sometime around two in the morning, the *Morning Dew* struck the north jetty at the entrance to Charleston Harbor, right around low tide. Some time later, it sank on the south side of the jetty, probably after being driven over the rocks by the east wind and the incoming tide. Mr. Cornett, his two sons, and his nephew died.

The Coast Guard's Role in the Case:

Here's how the case developed from the Coast Guard's perspective.

Coast Guard Group Charleston, South Carolina, carried out its normal watch routine on December 27th and 28th, unaware that such a boat as the *Morning Dew* even existed or was underway within its area of responsibility.

On the night of December 28th, there was one watchstander in the communications center, standing a twelve-hour watch from six in the evening until six in the morning. A more experienced petty officer had turned in for the night as authorized by the standing orders but was immediately available if anything unusual occurred.

At 0217, the watchstander heard a rapid and broken radio transmission on channel 16, VHF-FM. He could tell that the caller was yelling, and he interpreted the words he heard as, "U.S. Coast Guard. U.S. Coast Guard." He answered the call twice, but heard no return call. A few minutes later he heard the keying of a microphone, and tried to respond again. No communication was established.

The watchstander did not perceive this to be a distress situation. It wasn't unusual for boaters in open craft to yell into microphones to counter wind or engine noise. Furthermore, atmospheric conditions often cause radio calls from outside the operating area to be audible in the Charleston communications center. It could have been someone seeking a radio check. There was no cause for alarm.

However reassuring these explanations seemed to the watchstander at the time, later analysis and audio enhancements revealed that the call was actually the voice of thirteen year old Daniel Cornett yelling, "Mayday! U.S. Coast Guard. Come in!"

Even if the watchstander had correctly understood the call, there was very little information to go on. Without knowing the identity of the vessel, its location, or the nature of its distress, there wouldn't have been enough information to initiate a search. There would have been cause for a heightened state of alertness, and there would have been cause for some detective work to ascertain whether a distress situation did exist somewhere. But we probably wouldn't have launched a boat or helicopter because we wouldn't have known where to send them.

At 0628, the same watchstander, who had been relieved by the day watch, but had remained to perform some administrative work, received a phone call from the Charleston Harbor pilot dispatcher, advising him that the boatswain aboard an inbound automobile carrier had reported hearing someone screaming for help off the starboard side, that would be the vicinity of the north jetty. The pilot aboard the inbound ship had already taken it upon himself to direct his pilot boat to search the area.

The watchstander accepted the information and notified his supervisor. Nobody made a connection to the broken call four hours earlier. A little while later, we accepted the pilot boat's judgment in suspending the search.

At 1115 two bodies washed up in the surf. The third body was found in the early afternoon. Michael Cornett's body was found about four weeks later.

It was a horrible accident, and one made more horrible by the possibility that the Coast Guard missed the opportunity to rescue one or more of the *Morning Dew* sailors.

As I said when I began my remarks, when we encounter a case like this, it is important to focus our efforts on preventing recurrences. With that in mind, I'd like to draw lessons from this case for three distinct audiences: the American public, the Coast Guard, and the recreational boating public.

Lesson One: The Need for Investment in National Distress Communication System:

The first lesson to be drawn from *Morning Dew* is a lesson in public policy, specifically the need for investment in a national distress communication system. Most recreational boaters would be alarmed to learn how fragile this weak link in our search and rescue system is. As matters now stand, there is a vast disparity between the communications capability that the public thinks we have and the communications system that we do have.

The Coast Guard is working with a distress communications system that is equivalent to what local police and fire departments were using in the 1950's. If you dial 911 on your telephone, say the word "fire," and run outside, a fire engine will show up at your driveway in a matter of minutes, and you can wait at the neighbor's house if it's cold outside. If, on the other hand, you pick up the handset on your VHF-FM radio, say the word "Mayday," and jump overboard, you could very likely drown or die of hypothermia.

Our operations centers do not have the capability to enhance and replay audio signals. And they do not have useful direction finding equipment. Our search and rescue communications depend on the ability of people whose lives are in immediate peril to explain calmly their identity, their location, and the nature of their distress. The more urgent the distress, the less likely are boaters to be able to communicate the necessary information and the less likely is their equipment to be functioning properly.

In many cases we are lucky to get a position report as specific as "off Cape Hatteras," which may or may not narrow our search area to a couple thousand square miles, depending on what other information we are able to learn. Other times we initiate searches knowing only that distressed mariners think they are "on the hundred fathom curve." I don't know for sure that it's true, but it didn't strain my credibility when I heard about the operator of a disabled vessel who reported his position in these terms: "I'm right about at the 'C'—that's the letter 'C' as in 'Charley'—in Campeche." "Roger, sir. Would that be the big 'C' at the beginning or the little 'C' near the end?"

We need a communications system that gives our watchstanders the ability to translate calls like Daniel Cornett's desperate "Mayday" into effective action; a system that allows watchstanders to replay calls, slowing them down and adjusting the quality until the message can be understood; a system that determines and preserves an electronic fix every time a signal is received.

We are pursuing Coast Guard-wide modernization of archiving, playback, and radio direction finding capabilities as part of the National Distress and Response System. But we don't expect to begin to field this system until 2001, and it is not slated to be fully operational before 2005. In the meantime, mariners must understand that voice distress communications to the Coast Guard may not produce an effective response unless they include the vessel name, position, and nature of distress. Without those three pieces of information, we're often dealing with needle in haystack probabilities of success.

We must carefully guard against the possibility that video footage of our dramatic rescues may lull some boaters into a false sense of security, may give rise to a misplaced confidence that the Coast Guard can bail them out of whatever peril comes their way. We can't guarantee that we'll be there. The sea remains a dangerous place, and it continues to cover a vast space.

The first lesson from *Morning Dew* is that upgrading the distress communications system should be an urgent priority for our national transportation system.

Lesson Two: The Consequences of Stretching a Coast Guard too thin.

The second lesson is for the Coast Guard.

I have no basis for speculating whether an earlier search could have made any difference in this case. The lesson for the Coast Guard is a reminder that operational vigilance must come before all other organizational considerations.

We've heard a lot of dialogue this year about shortfalls in the readiness of all military services. It's apparent to me that we have reached the absolute limit in streamlining our organization. Budget constraints have made us cut and trim everywhere we could. *Morning Dew* tells us that further cuts would degrade public safety if our previous cuts haven't already done so. Streamlining may have gone too far.

Our personnel are stretched too thin. Our people are working too hard. We have too little experience in too many crucial positions. A more experienced watchstander might have been able to pick up the word, "Mayday." I say "might" because I had to hear the tape several times before I could discern the distress proword, and I had the advantage of knowing precisely what I was listening for.

Even so, a more experienced watchstander who better understood how different the world looks when you're at sea on a stormy December night than it does from a cozy operations center might have been slower to accept non-distress explanations for the two radio calls at two in the morning; experience might have produced more persistence in seeking additional information; experience might have caused a more seasoned watchstander to

continue mulling over the incident and be more ready to associate it with the phone call from the pilots. More experience might have enabled an immediate recognition that our awareness of volunteer search activities should not normally be a factor in determining a Coast Guard response. I cannot rule out the possibility that our service-wide training and staffing shortages affected our response to this case.

Lesson Three: The Responsibilities of Recreational Boaters for Their Own Safety.

The *Morning Dew* case should also provoke serious self-examination on the part of the general boating public.

It is bad form to speak ill of the dead, and so news reports rarely recount the errors in judgment or seamanship that cause people to perish at sea. This tendency is understandable but regrettable.

We face a moral imperative to learn from the mistakes we observe. To my view, we show the greatest respect for those who have been lost—especially for those who die unnecessarily—when we use the occasion of their deaths to prevent others from sharing their fate. With that in mind, what lessons should recreational boaters learn from the *Morning Dew* case?

The principal lesson for the recreational boating public to draw from the *Morning Dew* case has to do with the gulf between legally mandated safety requirements and prudent seamanship. The *Morning Dew* case presents us with a stark illustration that boaters have a responsibility for their safety that extends far beyond legal compliance.

Consider these factors.

There is no federal requirement for recreational boaters to carry distress communications devices other than flares and efficient devices for producing noise. However, as a prudent mariner, I would never sail without a properly registered 406 EPIRB that would transmit my vessel name and position in the event that I could not. *Morning Dew* had a VHF-FM radio, flares, air horns, and a strobe light, but it did not carry an EPIRB. Note the gap between legal compliance and prudent seamanship.

There is no federal requirement for recreational boaters to have any protection from hypothermia. However, as a prudent mariner, I would not venture out in 5-6 foot seas in a 34-foot sailboat with a water temperature of 55 degrees unless I had an anti-exposure suit for every person aboard. If I did proceed to sea under those conditions, I would require everybody to wear their anti-exposure suits at all times when topside, and I would require them to keep them immediately accessible when below decks. *Morning Dew* may have had the required personal flotation devices aboard, but it sailed without a liferaft for keeping people out of the water or anti-exposure gear to keeping them warm in the water if the boat went down. Note the gap between legal compliance and prudent seamanship.

There is no federal requirement for recreational boaters to carry particular navigation equipment. However, as a prudent mariner, I would never undertake a coastal passage at night without a compass whose reliability I had personally verified, without some means

of electronic navigation, or without the means for terrestrial or celestial navigation in the event that the electronic navigation failed. As near as we can tell, the only known navigation equipment aboard the *Morning Dew* was a magnetic compass of undetermined reliability. Note the gap between legal compliance and prudent seamanship.

There is no federal requirement for recreational skippers to get any particular amount of rest before or during their voyages. However, I would not think of going to sea for an overnight voyage unless there was someone else aboard who was capable of taking over the helm in the event that I became fatigued or incapacitated. When the *Morning Dew* went to sea, its skipper was committed to staying on watch all night in heavy weather after having stood watch all through the previous day. Once again, note the gap between legal compliance and prudent seamanship.

In describing this gap, my purpose is not to campaign for more stringent requirements for recreational boaters. I'm aiming higher. My goal cannot be legislated and cannot be regulated. My goal is prudent seamanship on the part of recreational boaters.

Eight hundred lives are lost annually from boating accidents, second only to the highway fatality totals that approach 40,000 annually.

Recreational boaters have the ultimate responsibility for their own safety, and this responsibility chiefly falls into two areas. Boaters must plan to minimize the likelihood of finding themselves in distress situations. And then, because the power of the sea can overwhelm even the most careful efforts to avoid danger and dangerous waters, boaters must plan to maximize the likelihood of being rescued if they do encounter distress.

I am absolutely not picking on Mr. Cornett this morning. I am trying desperately to generalize a single case's experience to lessons that we can all take away to ensure that there are not any more tragic *Morning Dews*.

Conclusion: Contrast with *Acapella* Case:

The *Morning Dew* case didn't have to turn out the way it did. We worked a case about two weeks ago that shows what can happen when boaters give the Coast Guard a chance to save their lives.

There's a lot that could be said about this case, which provided a terrific example of every part of the North Atlantic Search and Rescue system working together. But my purpose in mentioning the case is to show what mariners can do to take responsibility for their own lives.

The *Acapella* was a sailboat about the same size as the *Morning Dew*, in fact it was a foot shorter. *Acapella* was underway off the coast of Nova Scotia, hundreds of miles further from search and rescue assets than *Morning Dew* was, sailing in weather far worse than that faced by the *Morning Dew*—waves variously reported to be between 15 and 35 feet high, waves so high that they capsized this oceangoing catamaran and suddenly left it completely turtled . . . upside down with no power. Similar sized boat, worse weather,

greater distance, more sudden disaster. Yet the *Acapella's* crew survived. What was the difference?

Principally, the difference was the crew's preparation. The *Acapella* was equipped with a properly registered 406 EPIRB. The boat was outfitted with a watertight compartment and an emergency escape hatch on the underside of the hull. The crew had anti-immersion suits.

Once disaster struck, the *Acapella* sailors retreated to their watertight compartment and used the escape hatch to deploy and tether their 406 EPIRB. Then they showed due prudence by staying with their stricken craft in their anti-exposure suits until help arrived, which it did. Within minutes of deploying the EPIRB, the search and rescue system was fully alerted, focused on saving their lives, knowing exactly who was in distress and where.

If we know people are in trouble, if we know where to look, and if distressed mariners can float and stay warm for a few hours, we have an excellent chance of rescuing them.

I opened my remarks suggesting the imperative of learning from tragic events. The Morning Dew case offers many such lessons for those who create public policy, for the Coast Guard, and for the boating public. Every life in danger at sea is an opportunity. Let's all learn . . . and commit to the investments necessary to preclude the unnecessary loss of any of them.

Thank you.

