



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of **LTJG MARK MOLAVI, USCG**

Conducted by **DR. DAVID ROSEN, PACAREA HISTORIAN**

Pacific Area Command Center

INTERVIEWER: Go ahead.

MOLAVI: Okay. Mark Molavi, Lieutenant Junior Grade, and it's M-o-l-a-v-i, and Mark with a "k."

And in the command center here, the Pacific Area Command Center, I am a command duty officer. Basically, I oversee the entire watch. There's many cases I go along, whether it be search and rescue, law enforcement, homeland security. I kind of oversee and kind of supervise the watch centers that are doing those missions. They're the ones doing the details, and I kind of stand back and make sure that we're following the policies and do all that kind of stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Are you doing the PAC Area or the 11 [District]?

MOLAVI: Both. We do both here. So we're kind of a joint command center.

INTERVIEWER: And tell us exactly what happened.

MOLAVI: Well, basically, on this case, the initial call went to our unit down in San Diego, Sector San Diego. So they took the initial call from a boater who had heard this vessel, the fishing vessel, Legend, call in distress, and they passed the information off to Sector San Diego.

And the controller down there, he's a BM1 Englert, E-n-g-l-e-r-t, and he's the one that really got everything in motion. I can't say enough about him. I mean, you almost should be talking to him, but he actually was the initial person that took the call, and he launched or sent out two Coast Guard helicopters and also two Navy helicopters as well. So he really got the ball rolling.

INTERVIEWER: This was yesterday morning?

MOLAVI: This was actually two nights ago, kind of. So it kind of wrapped up yesterday morning, but it happened on the night of the 23rd into the 24th.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Wednesday the 23rd. All right.

MOLAVI: Tuesday the 23rd.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, you're right. Okay. Tuesday night.

And what exactly happened? He takes the call.

MOLAVI: Yeah. He took the initial call, and what happened is his vessel, the fishing vessel, *Legend*, had apparently -- what was found out later, it had a broken chime, and the chime, I guess -- it's an old wooden fishing boat, 75-foot wooden fishing boat, and it takes people out from -- it's based in San Diego, and it takes people out on charter fishing trips basically down to the Baja, Mexico.

And so they had broken the chime on the wooden vessel, and that can cause water because the chime holds the wood together, prevents water from coming in.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

MOLAVI: It prevents the water to come in. Initially, it was coming in about 30 to 50 gallons per minute.

INTERVIEWER: Gee.

MOLAVI: So BM1 Englert, down in San Diego, his initial quick, you know, response, just getting all those resources down there. In a case like this, you know, get those things down as quick as possible, and that was critical in getting the water off the vessel, and they were able to drop some pumps and reduce the water flows coming on, so at least the vessel wouldn't sink, and, you know, all 38 people on board could -- you know, minimize any danger to them.

INTERVIEWER: So they dropped the pumps?

MOLAVI: The helicopter dropped the pump. They were able to get the flooding under control, and meanwhile, what we did up here is -- because we have various tools that we can use. One is called the AMVER program, and what that is, is merchant vessels, whether it be cargo ships or whoever, they voluntarily participate in this program. And what we can do is we can bring up -- we have a program we can bring up where they're at, and if they're nearby

search and rescue, case like this, we can divert them to the site and see if they can assist in any rescue or search efforts.

And it just happened that the *Sunbelt Spirent* [ph] was the AMVER vessel, the merchant vessel that we found, and it just happened to be probably 15 miles away when this case started. So we were actually able to get them, get them to go to the scene there. They stood there. They stayed there for five hours. So the AMVER program is a great program. We use them quite a bit, especially with us here because a lot of -- some of our cases are out in the middle --

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MOLAVI: -- honestly nowhere, but, you know, we get different alerts far away that none of our Coast Guard resources might be around.

INTERVIEWER: Guam or something.

MOLAVI: Yeah. So we use them quite a bit to go through areas and search for any signs of distress. So that was a great -- you know, great assist there.

They stayed there for five hours, just in case we needed them. We ended up not, you know, using them. Our initial plan was maybe to use them to get the -- you know, get people off the fishing vessel, but since they got the flooding under control, we didn't have to do that, but they still stayed on the scene.

You know, it costs money for these guys to stay on scene.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

MOLAVI: So we really appreciate the vessels in the AMVER program.

INTERVIEWER: How long did it take you to get the pumps there?

MOLAVI: It was about a -- it was about a 30-minute flight from San Diego. It was a hundred miles south of San Diego, 90 miles south of San Diego. So it took them about a half an hour. Probably from initial notification to when they actually got down there is maybe 45 minutes. So they get spun up real quickly.

INTERVIEWER: It's amazing.

MOLAVI: Yeah. And, you know, in addition, you know, we also -- what we also do up here is we coordinated with the Mexican Navy since it was off their coast.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sure.

MOLAVI: It wasn't in their territorial waters, but just in case -- and the initial plan that we had kind of changed from what actually happened, but any kind of overflight clearances or we need our helicopters to land there or if we need to fly over their airspace, we have to coordinate with Mexican Navy to get approval.

So we coordinated with them and got -- we got the quick verbal approval, and we also had to follow it up in writing, but we did get the quick verbal approval. That way, if we did need to take these people somewhere, we could.

And the initial plan was to take them to the Ensenada Airport and just offload them there, so just make multiple trips back and forth from the fishing vessel to the Ensenada Airport. Now, what actually ended up happening, the weather down there was pretty bad that night, and so what actually ended up happening is they hoisted -- the helicopters hoisted -- the Coast Guard helicopter hoisted two people. So they just basically dropped the basket, hoisted up two people from the fishing vessel.

One of the Navy helicopters that had gone down -- went down there, they hoisted three people, and they both went back to San Diego. And after those five people were hoisted, the weather got too bad, that they couldn't do any more hoisting.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

MOLAVI: So, you know, these fishing vessels, they have a lot of rigging and stuff like that. So it kind of makes hoisting dangerous because you are dropping a basket, and it's kind of hard to get it into all that stuff. So, if the seas get a little too rough, then, you know, they can't -- you know, they can usually handle it pretty well, but sometimes they may not be able to, you know, hoist in if the weather gets too rough, especially if there's a lot of rigging on the fishing vessels.

But what did happen is the -- and another thing that was great in this case, the Navy helped us out tremendously. They had one of their ships off the -- you know, doing some exercises off the coast, and they headed down there as well, and they were down there probably in --

INTERVIEWER: Super.

MOLAVI: I think they had a two-hour -- it took them two hours to get down there, and, you know, by that time, the flooding was under control. So it was more just a matter of getting the people off, and they actually took 28 people on board there, the Navy Ship.

I think it was the USS *Preble*. I think that was in here, P-r-e-b-l-e. I think the name was in there, but right there.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MOLAVI: And so what they do is they had the small boats that they'd just launch, and the small boats went back and forth between the *Preble* and the fishing vessel just taking people back, back and forth. So, again, the Navy -- in Sector San Diego, they have a great relationship with the Navy down there, obviously, with all the Navy units in San Diego. So they did a lot of coordination with them, and we coordinate up here a little bit with them, but --

INTERVIEWER: So the Navy was able to evacuate about 30 people?

MOLAVI: No, 28 people. Right. So --

INTERVIEWER: What happens to the *Legend*?

MOLAVI: What's that?

INTERVIEWER: What happens to the *Legend*?

MOLAVI: The *Legend*, actually what happened is they -- since they got the flooding control in, they plugged the leak, five people stayed on board.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

MOLAVI: San Diego also launched one of our patrol boats, an 87-foot patrol boat, the *Petrel* -- and that's P-e-t-r-e-l -- and they went down there, and they actually escorted the -- the *Legend* back into one of the ports in Mexico, Colonet, C-o-l-o-n-e-t.

And so they escorted them back there, make sure they're okay the whole time, and they were going to stay with them. At that time, it wasn't decided what they were going to do. They might have headed back. Part of the plan or one of the options was to head back to San Diego with the *Legend*, once the weather subsided a little bit, but what the master of the *Legend* decided to do was just get the vessel fixed down in Colonet, and so the *Petrel* came back home to San Diego.

So everyone, everyone on board the fishing vessel was a U.S. citizen. So we all brought them back to -- brought back to San Diego. So everyone ended up -- we wrapped up yesterday about 10:45. Everyone was --

INTERVIEWER: In the morning?

MOLAVI: 10:45 is when the *Preble* finally got back up to San Diego and offloaded the 28 people.

INTERVIEWER: You guys have somebody here, obviously, 24/7?

MOLAVI: Right. We're manned, all the watch positions, 24/7. Everyone is 12 hours. My position -- well, everyone stands 12 hours, so 12 hours on, 12 hours on, and then someone else relieves them.

The position I was at is a 24-hour shift. We go -- we have a room upstairs that basically around 9, 10 o'clock at night, depending on the caseload -- you know, this is a little different, but we go upstairs, and if something happens, we're a quick phone call away, and if it's bad enough, we come down. Otherwise, they just come and get briefed on the situation, just kind of provide a sanity check on -- you know, make sure that we're doing everything that we can.

So my job as a CDO, a lot of it's just kind of throwing out things, making sure we're doing all different things, that maybe someone else doesn't think of, and just make sure we're following policy.

Again, with San Diego, great, you know, quite a few experiences down there, BM1 Englert, I met him a few years, when I first go there, and I can't say enough of what he did because, you know, his quick response is -- it was tremendous in this case. So, you know --

INTERVIEWER: I'll talk to him.

MOLAVI: Based on all the numerous resources and the Navy get involved, we kind of assume what we call SAR mission core responsibilities, which means we're responsible for all the case, but, really, I mean, the people -- the watch centers down at Sector San Diego, they're very capable of handling themselves. We just took it more from the administrative side than anything else, but they definitely did a great job.

INTERVIEWER: So you coordinated all that?

MOLAVI: Well, we would coordinate everything, and, you know, they do a lot of coordination down there with the Navy themselves. We just kind of do the oversight, oversight up here and smooth, you know, the international relations with the Mexican Navy, and we do all that up here, since we have the contacts.

INTERVIEWER: And I understand you have a 24-hour shift?

MOLAVI: CDOs have a 24-hour shift. So we usually go upstairs for five, six hours, and then we give a brief every morning that we come down early to prepare for. So --

INTERVIEWER: So you have all the facilities up there? If something pretty --

MOLAVI: Yeah. You know, it's good enough. It's like a hotel room. You got two, two rooms, you know, with an adjoining bathroom. So, you know, usually -- a lot of our watch standers, they live far away, you know, a long ways away. So, usually, what we try to do is when we schedule them, we schedule them for two days in a row. So some of them stay up there, you know, between their shifts, just so they don't have to drive all the way back home.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, sure.

MOLAVI: So it's a lot easier that way.

INTERVIEWER: So they get one day on, one day off, two days on, two days off, whatever?

MOLAVI: Usually, most people get -- it's two on, two off, two on, kind of two off, but it depends on how many people we have here, how many people take a vacation or leave or whatever, and then, you know, sometimes they get two on, three off, or something like that. So it really just depends on how many people, bodies we have here.

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty amazing, though.

MOLAVI: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it sounds like it was a great job.

MOLAVI: It was a great job. You know, it's one of those, you know, things that you use a lot of different resources, the Navy, the Mexican Navy, the Coast Guard obviously, but it was one of those, you know, very good cases that you don't -- luckily we don't see that often, but when we do, we have a quick response, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Do you got to do a similar job in Galveston? I understand you're leaving next week.

MOLAVI: Yes. I'm headed down there to be the Enforcement Division chief. So I'm not going to be doing much search and -- or any search and rescue really, but I'll do more of the law enforcement, the fisheries management down there, probably some counter-drug. I don't know too much about the job but

some counter-drug and just other law enforcement issues that you get down in Galveston and stuff like that. So I'm looking forward to it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's great. Well, I'm looking for the pole that sends your guy down here, like the fire station.

[Laughter.]

MOLAVI: Yeah. That would be nice if we had one of those. You don't have to go down the ramp.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. It sounds great. Well, I appreciate your time.

MOLAVI: Oh, sure.

INTERVIEWER: It was good for me to know and stuff.

MOLAVI: Yeah. You know, I really -- you know, I would definitely contact and talk to BM1 Englert.

INTERVIEWER: I will.

MOLAVI: I can get you Sector San Diego's phone number if you want, if you want to call them.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. That would be great.

MOLAVI: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: I'll call to see if I can catch him now.

MOLAVI: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Thanks an awful lot.

MOLAVI: All right. You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

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