

Statement of CAPT Douglas G. Russell, USCG, Commanding Officer, USCGC HEALY (WAGB-20) regarding diving accident on 17 August 2006 resulting in the deaths of LT Jessica E. Hill, USCG and BM2 Steven Duque, USCG

USCGC HEALY hove to for the purpose of holding ice liberty at approximately 1600 on 17 August 2002 at position 77-13.104N and 177-42.02W. I had contemplated holding ice liberty for the crew and science party for several days after over a month of challenging scientific work and our success at completing our westernmost leg of the planned scientific objectives. I made the decision for holding ice liberty with the complete support of the Senior Scientist for the mission, Dr. [REDACTED].

In leading up to this day, LT Hill, the Dive Officer, had asked me the night previously whether it would be possible to conduct a SCUBA dive in conjunction with some planned scientific operations that were to take place as well on the 17th. She had been seeking an opportunity during the trip to conduct a familiarization dive with our two other divers, BM2 Duque and ENS [REDACTED], while in the ice. With her pending departure from the Coast Guard in February 2007 and the lack of any ice experience for the other divers, she wanted to provide them an opportunity to become familiar with diving in the ice. I expressed to her that I thought that it might work given our operational plans at the time, but that she needed to assemble a Dive Plan and to discuss it with the Operations Officer, LCDR [REDACTED], on 17 August. I do recall asking her who would be diving, she replied that it would be her, ENS [REDACTED], and BM2 Steven Duque. I asked her if it was ok for the three of them to dive together per the Dive Manual and her training as a Dive Officer. She replied in the affirmative.

After the ship was hove to in the ice, I received notification on the bridge that the Dive Plan was complete and in the Cabin for my review. I struck below, reviewed it and approved it returning it to LT Hill's inbox. I notified the Operations Officer that I had in fact seen and approved the plan. A short while later, at approximately 1630, LT Hill provided a verbal brief to me regarding her plans for the dive. My understanding was that it was a two part dive consisting of two 20-minute segments. One for entering the water and checking out their equipment and comfort with the water. The second would be another re-entry to the water and a short foray under the ice never going below 20-feet of depth. The dive would be conducted in a small lead at the bow of the ship just forward of where the brow was staged.

I then departed for the ice to enjoy liberty with the crew and science party. While on the ice, I observed the Dive Team and their Tenders, LTJG [REDACTED] (the ship's Physician's Assistant), QM1 [REDACTED], and DC3 [REDACTED] plus other crewmembers who were helping with transferring the dive gear to the ice via the ship's brow. By approximately 1730 all of the team was on the ice. This is an estimated time on my part. Although I didn't listen in, I did observe from the distance what appeared to be LT Hill conducting a dive brief with the divers and tenders. Afterwards, I noted during periodic observations the divers donning their equipment and preparing with help from the tenders and ENS [REDACTED]. LT Hill and ENS [REDACTED] were the first to be fully equipped and staged to the edge of the ice. BM2 Duque was taking longer and apparently had a glove problem. He returned to the ship and came back to the ice with a different set of gloves. He then was fully equipped with help from others and joined LT Hill and ENS [REDACTED] on the side of the lead. They appeared to go through final equipment checks and then entered the water together - LT Hill first, BM2 Duque second and ENS [REDACTED] third. All appeared to be fine except ENS [REDACTED] departed the water a few minutes later. She reported that her dry suit was leaking in one arm.

I wasn't watching the operation nor monitoring time closely as I was walking around frequently visiting with different members of the crew and science party. Although, I did glance over periodically observing both divers heads above water. After a short while, BM2 Duque exited the water complaining of a cold hand. He had his, I believe left hand, glove removed and then had it massaged by a shipmate. After about five minutes, it seemed to be okay as he put gloves back on, re-mounted his tank and regulator, and then re-entered the water. It appeared he was doing fine communicating continuously with LT Hill as to his status. I then noticed that they both descended into the water. I did not look closely to determine how far they descended. I recall seeing plenty of bubbles breaking the surface. I then turned my attention to other people and activities taking place on the ice.

The next thing I noted was at approximately 1840 BMCS [REDACTED] gave direction to a number of people in the vicinity of the bow to join and help with heaving in the tending lines. Many people joined in assisting and meanwhile I was peering over the ice edge trying to understand what was happening. After several minutes the divers finally came in sight at approximately 20-feet down and bubbles were seen streaming from them. Their ascent was stopped at 10-feet to see whether they were responsive. They showed no response so they were pulled from the water. Upon being lifted on to the ice by a number of crewmembers, LT Hill's mask appeared to be full of white foam. BM2 Duque had pinkish foam in his mask. Both divers appeared to be unresponsive.

At this point, various crewmembers removed their masks turned their heads to let their mouths drain and then started chest compressions in an attempt to clear their lungs of water. At the same time, word was passed quickly and HSC [REDACTED] was piped to ice for a dive emergency on the ice. Calls were made for quick deployment of the AED and litters to the ice.

With first aid being applied immediately by LTJG [REDACTED] and others, I changed my concentration to what else needed to be done. I boarded the ship and went to the Bridge. I directed the Operations Officer to establish communications with District 17 Command Center for the purposes of establishing contact with a Flight Surgeon. I also focused on what we needed to do with the ship immediately to best position ourselves for any external medical support should it be needed. I also saw that the Executive Officer, CDR Jackson, was on the ice at the scene overseeing the revival efforts. Within 10 minutes or so, both divers were evacuated to the Sick Bay on the ship via litters up the brow.

Second and third engines were ordered up as we were hove to on one engine. The Deck Force cleared the ice and retrieved the brow and we commenced steaming directly towards Barrow – our closest point of land approximately 480 miles away. I ordered a speed of 10 knots for transit through the ice ensuring that it did not impact revival efforts in sick bay and ensured that it did not result in ship motions that were dangerous for the crew or risk damage to the ship.

I learned that for a short while, we were having problems establishing communications with District Seventeen. Our Iridium calls kept losing their signal after a short period. Our ETs, IT's and the OSC were working to establish any comms possible. Meanwhile the Executive Officer also ordered that we shut down our outgoing comms links so that no one would communicate our situation complicating the necessary immediate medical assistance comms and without our first following proper notification procedures per the Personnel and Decedent Affairs Manuals.

I transited down to Sick Bay twice while revival efforts were ongoing. LTJG [REDACTED] appeared to be overseeing efforts on BM2 Duque while HSC [REDACTED] appeared to be managing the efforts for LT Hill. Our EMTs and Stretcher Bearers, plus [REDACTED] from the science party, were providing CPR on the two divers. The Engineer Officer, LCDR [REDACTED], EMC [REDACTED] and MK2 [REDACTED] were assembling the portable hypobaric chamber. ENS [REDACTED] was keeping a log of revival efforts and ENS [REDACTED] appeared to be investigating guidance for using the chamber, if needed, in a medical manual. Somewhere during this time frame, OPS notified me that PACAREA Command Center was notified of our diving accident.

I returned to the bridge, and at approximately 2100 the Operations Officer notified me that the District Seventeen Flight Surgeon had "called it", with the divers being declared dead at 2001 local – logged as 2001 local for LT Hill and 2002 local for BM2 Duque. I was notified by the XO shortly thereafter with a report of how the revival team in Sick Bay was properly standing down from the revival efforts per Flight Surgeon guidance.

I then directed the Operations Officer to make a pipe for an all hands assembly on the Flight Deck so that I could notify everyone of their shipmates' deaths. Shortly thereafter I addressed the crew and science party on the Flight Deck telling them about the loss of our shipmates and my intention to steam directly to Barrow at best possible speed with an unknown future but recognizing that our fallen shipmates would have to be transferred ashore and an investigation would take place. I also indicated that we would take steps to have a Critical Incident Stress Management team deployed to help the crew.

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