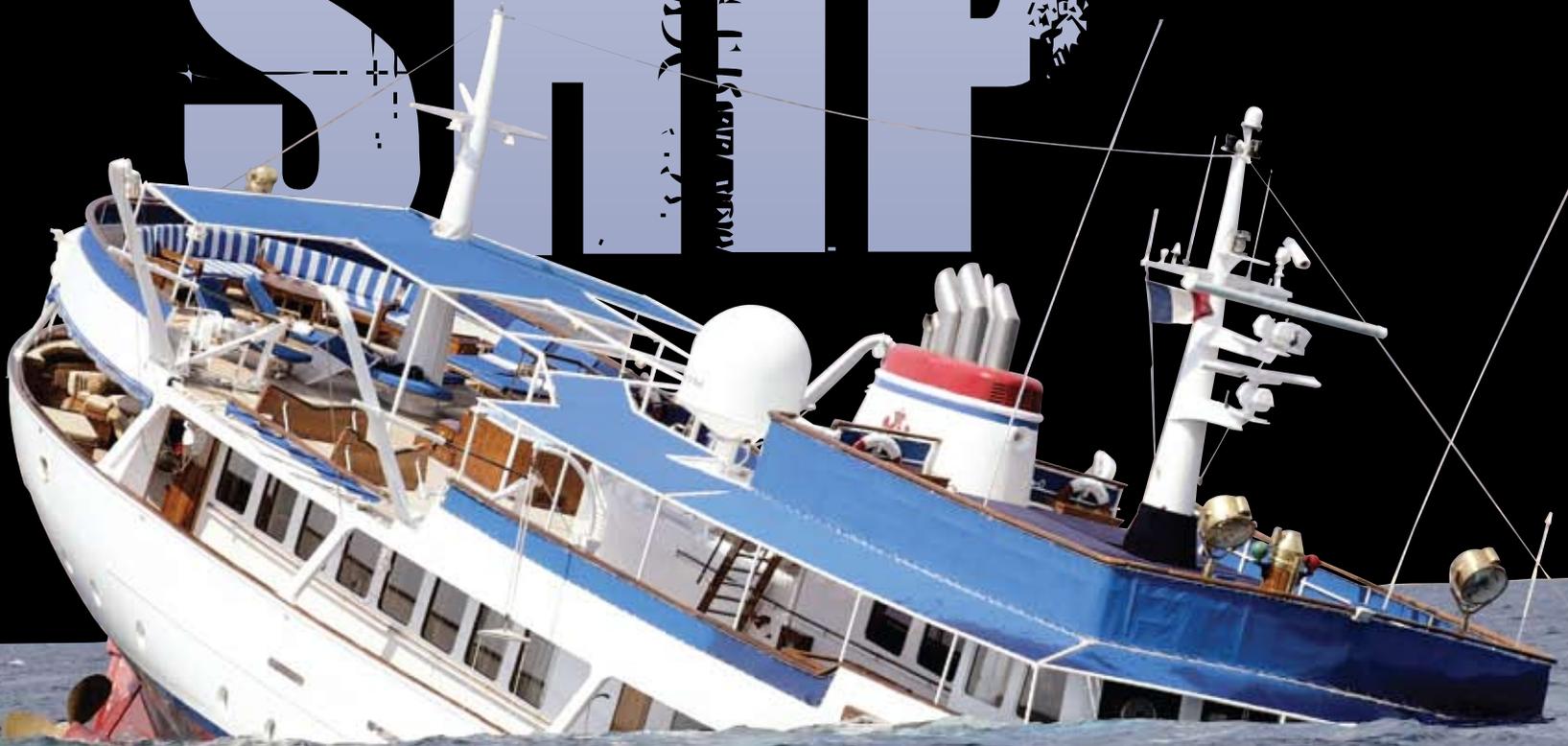


When bad things happen to good captains; how not to let your career go

DOWN WITH THE SHIP

BY LISA KNAPP



THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I've told somebody [about the accident]," says Gottfried Schultz. Schultz is former master of the ill-fated M/Y *Ontario*, the 46-meter Lürssen that sank seven years ago near Greece's Simi Islands. "ShowBoats and others called me, but I never talked about it, even though it bothered me for a long time. I had a very good name in yachting, and after that, I was afraid if I talked too much...well, that's never good."

No one died on Schultz's watch. Everyone abandoned ship in rescue rafts to safety as Schultz beached the yacht alone. She sank down to her main deck, destroying all cabins below the main deck, while the superstructure remained intact. But Schultz has no recollection of what led up to the accident.

"I fell unconscious and [the yacht] hit a rock," Schultz says. "A crewmember woke me up on the bridge and I came back to reality and realized I hit something. There was water coming in and the mate launched the boats and got everybody out within ten minutes, very quickly."

After a catastrophic disaster at sea, a captain may feel like going into hiding, but the fact is, he has to deal with the situation, pronto. He has no choice; hopefully adrenaline, instinct and training guide him through a life-and-death situation. Bewildered crew and hysterical guests, salvors and rescue personnel, owners who want details, insurance claims, refits and finger-pointers: all leave the captain feeling lonely at the top – and entirely responsible.

A captain, even one who had taken every precaution, will be held to a higher standard by the court of public opinion. The pundits will wonder if he was negligent, drunk, asleep at the wheel, or even worse, succumbed to the owner's tantrums to push the boat to keep a schedule. A thorough investigation vindicating the captain won't erase the



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further, full time. Even though insurance pays for the boat and most of the time the captain's efforts to keep people safe are one hundred percent successful, it's still a devastating thing to deal with."

Supported by the yacht's owner, Schultz brought *Ontario* to Germany, where she was repaired under his supervision. Then he quit. "I needed a break after all that," Schultz says, adding that he discovered a cardiovascular problem that explained his sudden loss of consciousness at the helm. He subsequently had three bypasses. "Disaster and a twenty-two million dollar repair are not a piece of cake."

Schultz ran commercial ships and was a master mariner with the U.S. Merchant Marine for years before entering yachting. "He was

"Disaster and a **twenty-two million dollar repair** are not a piece of cake."

blemish on his record, either – one reason most captains leave the industry after a serious total loss situation.

"They find something else to do for a living," says Capt. Doug Hoogs, co-author of *Megayacht: True Stories of Adventure, Drama and Tragedy at Sea*. "It may be that time of life, time to make a shift. But in eight of ten total loss situations, the skipper would not captain



one of the best navigating captains I've ever been on a boat with," says Bill Klimas, megayacht consultant. "But

even the best guy in the industry has a bad reputation somewhere."

Indeed, whether or not the captain was negligent, a disaster at sea is a black mark against him. The insurance companies are often ruthless over this point. According to Hoogs, it's easier for a captain with an expired license to be reinstated and approved by the insurance company than a captain with a current license and a shipwreck on his shoulders. "You have to answer all their questions: have you had a recent claim or loss?" Hoogs says. "If a captain doesn't answer honestly, his license is in jeopardy and the insurance company will reject the captain to the owner. Insurance companies call the shots almost exclusively these days."

Of course, there are some questions that a captain shouldn't answer. "The stupidest thing a captain can do after a mishap is (a) sign anything, and (b) talk to anyone or admit anything without being legally represented," says Attorney Kenneth Gale Hawkes. While a captain may feel the need to vent about his ordeal, he doesn't need to confide in anybody unless he is a party to the litigation or faces liability exposure, in which cases he should only talk to his lawyer. "Obviously, all other players in the industry have legal counsel," Hoogs says. "The captain should be just as represented."

Captains are the most autonomous figures in the yachting industry. "These guys think they're Superman and invincible and able to handle everything," Klimas says. "It is the nature of being a boat captain. However, in legal positions, they are in deeper water if they try handling it alone."

"I don't know a single captain, personally, who goes out of his



LISA KNAPP

way to have an attorney before an accident,” Hoogs says, adding that it is prudent for captains to have ready legal resources in today’s litigious era. “Post accident,” Hoogs says, “Absolutely. Have someone [a maritime lawyer] in mind and call right away.”

Getting over a disaster is a day-by-day personal process. Some captains want to talk about it, some bury it deep inside.

“We had classes on that subject in the Merchant Marine Academy,” Hoogs says. “The level of psychological stress in this job has fostered a whole profession of maritime psychology today. Prior to maybe thirty years ago, if you worked in the shipping industry and had a problem

is to take that path of full disclosure. Don’t keep it hidden in your psyche. Share with others and learn from their errors. That was the main reason we wrote that book. Young captains learn from the bragging stories, but they can learn from this too.”

The fact that Elliott remained with the same owner didn’t hurt either. He went on to command the very popular charter yacht *Starship*. Capt. Anonymous, who also suffered a total loss, said, “If you separate from the owner after the accident it would be very difficult [to rebound]. Luckily my boss stuck by me and gave me glowing references after. If this did not happen I doubt I would be working today.” This captain – not surprisingly – wished to hide his identity so as not to dredge up old gossip.

The gossip can be vicious, as shown by the sinking of M/Y *Land’s End* two years ago in Corsica. Emails among industry professionals were quick to judge and crucify the captain, even before details as basic as the incident’s location were ascertained. Capt. Anonymous was burned by the media following his incident. He was instructed not to talk to the press, who, he points out, are pushed to print something to beat the opposition – and in his case, printed just what they heard, which was not the truth.

Even Capt. Anonymous, who was exonerated of blame, and Elliott, who was heralded for courage under fire, are still a target for Monday-morning quarterbacks. Hindsight is always 20-20.

“Hopefully, in every case, the truth will set you free,” says Capt. Rich Jones, a former salvage captain who has rescued recreational boaters and yacht captains. “But weather is a gray area – why was [Elliott] out in the first place? Was he pushing the boat for schedule? Did he do his homework?”

“If Mark had stayed in port that day instead of going toward Sardinia, near Rome, obviously, he would have avoided that loss,”

Hoogs says. “In almost every instance of vessel loss, there’s some element of that that we can look

“In eight of ten total loss situations, the skipper would not captain further, full time.”

you usually turned to alcohol and that was the end of the story. You became another statistic. How do you measure that level of trauma?”

Hoogs remembers every grounding in his life, but they were minor incidents. A vessel that is severely damaged or an incident that results in injuries or fatalities is a scar you’ll carry closely. Mark Elliott, who skippered M/Y *Nadine*, isn’t haunted by his disaster at sea, but he does think about it every time he sees a big wave.

Hoogs and co-author Buddy Haack chronicled the incident in their book. Hurricane-force winds and severe flooding devastated the Italian coast in what was called the storm of the century. Although *Nadine* was devoured by the sea, all crew and guests made it off the boat safely. “Everyone took one month off to reorganize their lives... we lost everything,” Elliott says.

Nadine’s sinking and the miraculous fact that all aboard survived actually catapulted Elliott’s career. Instead of going into hiding, Elliott countered the gossip by speaking openly about the terrifying incident and sharing the experience with Hoogs and Haack for their book. Speaking about it gave Elliott the chance to do positive PR. He tells *Dockwalk*, “My crew acted flawlessly. There was no panic. We had top-notch training. Everyone was off safely. It is well documented with the Italian Navy.” Today, he is a successful broker with International Yacht Collection.

“Mark Elliott’s manner of dealing with it [disaster at sea] is probably the healthiest,” Hoogs says. “When we approached him [for the book], he was very forthright, for the good or bad. My only advice

back on. Did he have enough weather info to say, ‘maybe I better wait till a better day?’ Those are easy questions for an insurance company to ask, but, by and large, captains act without any negligent behavior. They’re using their best judgment and best advisory available and going forward with it.”

Few impulsive acts cause loss, according to Hoogs. The yacht owner



Captain's Log: DOWN WITH THE SHIP

is usually guiltier of impulsiveness than the captain, and captains usually resist their pressure. "They will stand their ground on this point," Hoogs says. "I can't think of one calamity where captain said, 'Okay, yacht owner, I'll do whatever you want.'"

Nevertheless, it does happen. The grounding of M/Y *TV*, the 116-foot Azimut on the rocks in Port Everglades, Florida, on March 16, 2005, appears to be a case in point. The newly commissioned yacht left Fort Lauderdale at night with a new crew in a rush to get to the Caribbean – for a party. Capt. Rich Jones was the first salvor to respond to *TV*'s distress call.

"If you knowingly go into bad weather and something happens, you have no one to blame but yourself," says Jones, who says he can't remember *TV*'s captain's name.

Fortunately for a captain, when the worst does happen, the mishap tends to stick to the boat's rather than the captain's name.

"Yes, boats have histories," says Scott Salomon, manager of Hall of Fame Marina in Fort Lauderdale, citing *Mirabella V* as an example. "People associate the problem with the boat. Accidents do happen and when they occur, you have to take responsibility. I've never seen a captain who didn't want to make it right."

Not a witness to disasters at sea, Salomon occasionally sees captains experience "docking problems." But he encourages captains to ask their dockmaster for help. "Mum's the word if you need someone to talk to," Salomon says. "You learn from mistakes."

"If a captain did something wrong, have enough courage to mention it," Schultz advises. "Then it is over. You are a person living in this world. You don't get any respect if you lie. If you are guilty, probably no one will hire you."

"The captain is responsible for virtually everything that occurs on board, whether or not it is his 'fault,'" Hawkes says, referencing the case of the captain of *Summit Venture* in Tampa Bay in 1980. The captain had a mandatory, licensed pilot on board who was giving directions to the helmsman, but the captain was at fault when the pilot ran the ship into the Skyway Bridge and killed 32 people.

That's nothing new. The buck always stops at the captain's desk. But it's tougher for the captain of an aircraft versus a seagoing vessel. Airplane pilots have more regulations to contend with and aviation agencies around the world investigate and report on every incident. "A captain has a lot of leeway in operating a vessel, which will change someday [as maritime regulations] become more like the FAA," theorizes Capt. Bob Falk, a licensed yacht captain and fixed-wing flight instructor. "Until then, a boat/yacht captain can get away with quite a bit [compared to a pilot]."

It takes time to get over a disaster at sea. If the captain's self-confidence is eroded in the process, he may never get over it. But Schultz and Elliott have some advice for anyone who walks a fathom in their soggy deck shoes. "Know your safety procedures," Elliott says. "Practice your fire drills." In a situation where everything went wrong, Elliott's preparedness meant the difference between life and death.

Schultz didn't talk about the incident after it happened and regrets it, to some degree. Had he spoken up as Elliott did, more people would have known his spin on the situation. He is adamant about not influencing crew on their statements.

"Be very honest," Schultz says. "If you try to influence them, it will harm you and that is much worse than anything they could say. Being captain is a lonely position, anyway." ★

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