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Coast Guard makes final best guess on how Arctic Rose went down

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What caused the Seattle-based Arctic Rose fishing vessel to sink with the loss of all 15 hands in the Bering Sea likely will never be known.

But after two years and nine months of an investigation into the worst U.S. commercial fishing disaster in 50 years -- which included testimony from experts and previous crew members, scientific analysis and an undersea camera's inspection of the sunken boat -- the Coast Guard yesterday offered its best guess about how it sank.

In a final report that contained 25 corrective recommendations, the Marine Board of Investigation's most probable scenario echoed a preliminary opinion by a Coast Guard stability expert issued last fall as to the factors in the sinking:

A rough, quartering sea; carelessness in leaving key watertight doors open; a flawed design that allowed water to pour in, progressively flooding the boat. Human error in responding to the emergency probably conspired to capsized the 93-foot trawler in two to three minutes. It sank in four to eight minutes.

"Casualties are seldom caused by a single catastrophic event," said Capt. Ron Morris, head of the Anchorage, Alaska, marine safety office, who presided over the board.

No mayday was heard, just a lonely signal relayed by satellite triggered as the vessel slipped into the sea. Only the body of the skipper, Dave Rundall, 34, was recovered.

Yesterday, his parents, Lou Ann and David Rundall of West Seattle, were among nine survivors of the dead crew members who heard the findings before they were made public.

"From the first it seemed like it would remain a mystery, and it will," Lou Ann Rundall said.

"But we all feel better because we appreciate that the Coast Guard has taken so much time and effort to answer everything they could -- especially since 9/11 and all they have had to do since then. It was a different world," Rundall said.

The boat's owner, David Olney of Arctic Sole Seafoods Inc. of Seattle, whose brother, Mike, was among

the 15 who died, could not be reached for comment. In a news release, Arctic Sole Seafoods said it was reviewing the findings and declined comment.

Morris, Cmdr. John Bingaman, Lt. Cmdr. Jim Robertson and a National Transportation Safety Board investigator made up the panel. An NTSB spokeswoman in Washington, D.C., yesterday said the two agencies agreed last fall that the Coast Guard's report will be the only one.

With no survivors, the report is the Coast Guard's best guess, based upon scientific analysis and testimony from past crew members and boat builders. It goes like this:

At 3:30 a.m. on April 2, 2001, the Arctic Rose was traveling downwind in a rough "quartering" sea -- one coming at the boat from behind at a 45-degree angle -- and the roughest kind for the Arctic Rose. The mate likely was on watch in the wheelhouse.

With swells of 20 feet, a wave washed across the trawl deck through the rear watertight hatch carelessly tied open, usually for air or to take smoke breaks. It was seen that way by an underwater robot camera that checked out the wreck in 2001.

As the boat heeled to starboard, someone in the pilothouse, feeling the heel but unaware of the open door, committed a human error. He jogged left, or to port, to right it. This only heeled the boat farther to starboard, letting more water pour in, according to the report. The underwater camera revealed the rudder frozen to its port turning position and deck-gear dangling off the starboard side.

Lt. George Borlase of the Marine Safety Center in Washington, D.C., a stability expert who previewed the report in November in a marine technology magazine, said he's seen only one other catastrophe that resembles the Arctic Rose's. On Feb. 8, 1974, the 213-foot long British fishing trawler Gaul disappeared in an Arctic Sea gale off Norway with all 36 crew members.

Rundall said what helps her family is the effort the panel put into the investigation, coming up with recommendations to prevent tragedies.

They include installing watertight doors alarmed with a visual and audible system in the pilothouse; revising fishing vessel construction standards to avoid free-flow of water through a vessel, perhaps by "maze" designs; documenting mandatory drills; requiring high-water alarms in processing spaces; and making the vessel-stability booklet used by naval architects and engineers easier for mariners to understand.

The panel also recommended that the rest of the nation do what Coast Guard inspectors in Seattle and Alaska now do -- conduct dockside boardings of fishing vessels prior to high-risk fisheries.

The board sent its recommendations to Rear Adm. T.H. Gilmour. He agreed with most but weakened some, such as removing grandfather provisions exempting some vessels from meeting stability

requirements. Gilmour preferred voluntary compliance.

Asked whether he agreed, Morris was diplomatic. "I'm going to have to stick with the party line on this," he said. "We see movement forward ... so I'm pleased."

The full report and recommendations can be found online at www.uscg.mil/d13/default.htm. Click on "News" and follow links to the report.

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