



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

MARINE ACCIDENT BRIEF

Sinking of U.S. fishing vessel *Miss Penelope*
South of Montauk, New York, January 28, 1998

Accident Number: DCA98MM015
Vessel: U.S. uninspected fishing vessel *Miss Penelope*, O.N. 615 480
Built of welded steel in 1979 at St. Augustine, Florida
Owner/ Operator: David R. Greenly, Lincoln, Delaware
Accident Type: Sinking
Location: Atlantic Ocean, 74 nm south of Montauk, New York
Latitude 39.52° North - Longitude 72.06° West
Date: January 28, 1998
Time: 1355 (local)
Property Damage: \$500,000
Complement: 4
Injuries: 3
Fatalities: 1

Description of Accident

About 1530, January 26, 1998, the *Miss Penelope* departed Newport, Rhode Island, for commercial fishing in the Atlantic Ocean, south of Montauk, New York. The crew comprised the master, a mate, and two deckhands. At the time of departure, the master had received a National Weather Service forecast predicting 30- to 40-knot winds and 10- to 15-foot seas in the intended fishing area.¹

The vessel arrived at the fishing grounds about 2330, and the crew began fishing. The work involved towing a fishing net astern and then hauling the netted catch on board, a routine that the crew continuously repeated while the vessel was at the fishing grounds.

The master said that, about 0300 on January 27, the weather deteriorated and he decided to suspend fishing, shut down the engine, and let the *Miss Penelope* ride out the heavy weather by drifting with the wind and seas. The crewmembers prepared the vessel for heavy weather, which involved securing the deck equipment and clearing the freeing

¹ The master later told Safety Board investigators that it was not unusual for him to take his vessel out to sea in such weather conditions.

ports on the after deck so that boarding seas could run freely overboard. The crewmembers dogged the clamps on the hatch covers to the storage areas and the lazarette and placed gravity-secured aluminum hatch covers on the fish-hold hatch.

While the *Miss Penelope* drifted, the crewmembers took turns standing watch in the wheelhouse; one man served as watch stander while the other crewmembers rested. The wheelhouse had a flooding alarm panel that monitored high-level bilge alarms in the engine room, fish hold, and lazarette. The watch stander's duties included going to and checking the engine room for flooding or casualties every half hour. According to the master, before the accident, no crewmember reported any problems during his watch.

On January 28, the master relieved the mate on watch in the wheelhouse about 1300. The two men then checked the engine room and did not note any problems. The master stated that the winds were now blowing at 60 knots and the seas were 20 to 25 feet. He said that, shortly after he assumed the watch, the vessel took heavy seas on the starboard side and heeled over very hard to port. When the after deck did not immediately recover from the roll to port, he said, he knew something was seriously wrong with the vessel. He said that the *Miss Penelope* then began to sink by the stern.

The master warned the mate and the deckhands that the vessel was sinking and then started the vessel's main engine. The master maneuvered the vessel into the wind in an attempt to clear water from the after deck. The mate and the two deckhands mustered on the port fore deck, donned their survival suits, and launched the *Miss Penelope*'s inflatable life raft. The master donned his survival suit and remained in the wheelhouse. The *Miss Penelope* carried three Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs): one 406-Mhz model that automatically activated and two 121.5-Mhz models that manually activated. The mate dropped the automatically activated EPIRB into the sea, put one manually activated EPIRB into the life raft, and gave the other manually activated EPIRB to one of the deckhands.

At 1325, the master radioed a report of the vessel's situation and position to the U.S. Coast Guard (Coast Guard) station at Moriches, New York. Twenty minutes later, he notified the Coast Guard that the vessel would sink within 10 minutes. The mate and the two deckhands then abandoned ship by leaping over the starboard bow into the ocean. At 1355, the master sent the last radio message from the *Miss Penelope*, advising the Coast Guard of the vessel's position at that time. He then abandoned ship. Shortly thereafter, the *Miss Penelope* capsized.

The master, the mate, and the two deckhands swam toward the life raft, which was tethered to the sinking vessel by the life raft's sea painter. The master, mate, and one of the deckhands managed to board the life raft. The second deckhand, however, did not make it to the life raft and, within a short time, drifted out of sight of the other crewmembers. The master stated that the second deckhand did not appear to be making an effort to swim toward the life raft. The master stated that the deckhand waved to him and that he appeared to be clutching one of the vessel's EPIRBs.

As the *Miss Penelope* sank, the vessel's rigging became entangled in the life raft's sea painter and started to pull the raft under water. The mate said that he did not know where the life raft's knife was located. He unzipped his survival suit enough to free his hands and then used his teeth and hands to untie the sea painter, releasing the life raft from the vessel.

Heavy seas buffeted the life raft. The crewmembers stated that during the first 5 minutes that they were in the raft, the sea toppled it over 8 or 9 times. Each time that the sea turned the raft over, the crewmembers righted it and boarded it again. The crewmembers said that each time the raft was toppled, they were thrown about and collided with each other.

In response to the VHF radio communications from the *Miss Penelope*'s master, the Coast Guard Air Station at Brooklyn, New York, and the Coast Guard Air Station at Cape Cod, Massachusetts, dispatched three rescue helicopters, which arrived onscene about 1435. A rescue swimmer from one of the helicopters entered the water to assist in rescuing the fishing vessel's crew. The master and the deckhand in the life raft were hoisted to and put on one helicopter; the mate was hoisted to and put on another. Rescuers located the second deckhand, floating face down and unconscious in the water, about 1 mile downwind from the life raft. He was hoisted to and put on the third helicopter.

About 1505, the Coast Guard rescue helicopters departed the accident scene. The helicopter carrying the master and the first deckhand landed about 1550 at the Coast Guard Air Station in Brooklyn. The master and first deckhand were immediately taken to Coney Island Hospital, New York, where the master was treated for hypothermia and released. The first deckhand was treated for hypothermia and a minor injury to his shoulder, which he suffered while he was thrown about in the raft. The deckhand was then released. The helicopters carrying the unconscious second deckhand and the mate landed at Gabreski Airport in Suffolk County, New York, about 1555. The mate and the second deckhand were immediately taken to Central Suffolk County Hospital in Riverhead, New York. The mate was treated for hypothermia and released. The second deckhand was pronounced dead at the hospital; the cause of death was drowning.

Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the sinking of the commercial fishing vessel *Miss Penelope* was flooding resulting from an unknown origin while the vessel drifted in heavy seas.

Adopted August 3, 2001