

Excerpt from ST5

### The Grant Tragedy

To improve sure-footedness along smooth metallic walking surfaces that are frequently wet, nearly all ships (including submarines) incorporate an abrasive material bonded to the dorsal hull itself. This “Non-Skid” is either painted on the designated surfaces or applied in rolls with an adhesive backing.

During new submarine construction, the abrasive material is usually initially applied by a sprayer at the shipyard. However, the coating is not especially durable under normal operating conditions at sea, requiring the reapplication of Non-Skid at regular intervals. In this setting, the material is nearly always rolled on as a two-part epoxy mixed with granulated sand; certain small areas not accessible by a roller require the use of brushes or even cotton swabs. The work is laborious and messy.

The coverage areas for Non-Skid are restricted to those walking zones on the deck required for access. Hence, the coverage does not span the entire length athwartships, nor does it extend fully to either the bow or stern. On boomers such as the Grant, a fairly large area of the pressure hull near the rudder remained bare. The absence of Non-Skid in these areas served as a reminder to avoid standing on certain parts of the deck unless absolutely necessary.

One final piece of safety equipment was required to be worn during operations topside when the boat was not moored—Top-Siders, the blue lace-up boat shoes (originally made by Sperry) featuring rubber soles to provide better traction while walking on slick surfaces. Taken together, the life vest, safety harness/lanyard/deck traveler combination, the Non-Skid, and the Top-Siders mitigated the risks of working in such proximity to the unpredictable sea.

Despite compliance with these measures and remaining constantly vigilant of the surrounding dangers, sometimes things could still go terribly wrong. Among those on the deck crew of the Grant that morning were TMC(SS) Larry Thompson, 37, and LTJG David Jimenez, 24. Thompson was the chief torpedoman for the Gold crew with more than 15 years of submarine experience. His proficiency in the torpedo room had earned him a prestigious shore duty gig as an instructor at Sub School in Groton. Thompson was from Orland, a small city along the I-5 corridor in Northern California. Assigned to the Grant in 1984, he was well-regarded by his fellow crew members as a reliable and easygoing person.

Jimenez, born in Hillside, NJ, spent much of his youth in Puerto Rico. He earned his commission in 1983 after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with an electrical engineering degree. Jimenez served for a short stint aboard the USS Kamehameha (SSBN-642) after completing his initial Navy training. He was described by a shipmate as “quiet and respectful.” He left the Kamehameha in 1986 to join the Gold crew of the Grant.

As the boat continued her transit in heavy seas, preparations were underway to submerge (“rig for dive”). From the bridge, an aft line locker was noted to not have been properly secured. (A line locker is a free-flood storage area for stowing mooring lines. Such lines are heavy and difficult to move and store below, so they are housed topside.) Thompson and Jimenez walked down the turtleback to the locker to button it up before the topside was vacated and the Conn moved down

to the control room for the dive. With their life vests donned and their safety lanyards locked into the safety rail, the two crouched to determine the issue. They discovered some globs of dried paint (presumably from the recent shipyard work) accumulated on the threads of the dogging bolts, making them impossible to screw in properly to secure the locker. There was no Non-Skid on that part of the pressure hull where they were standing.

Retrieving a tap and die to reestablish the threading, Thompson and Jimenez attempted to remove the paint debris. It was then that a large wave washed over them on the pressure hull. Lieutenant Jimenez lost his footing first and was slammed down violently on his back with the lanyard holding taut to the safety rail. He appeared to be knocked unconscious by the impact. Chief Thompson immediately went to his shipmate's aid but then lost his footing in the process as well. He remained conscious while struggling on his back to right himself. The bulky life vest he was wearing, combined with the fact that the safety tether was attached to his mid-back, prevented him from being able to reach around with either arm to grab the lanyard and pull himself back up. It was shortly after 0800.

A horrible scene unfolded, one that haunts those who witnessed the incident to this day. Without any ability to control their bodily movements, the two fallen men were battered mercilessly against the side of the hull by intermittent but ferocious waves breaking over the boat. Neither man was washed overboard because the tethers remained fast.

Meanwhile, the OOD on the bridge maintained a steady speed of five knots to maintain navigability. Because of the tremendous inertia possessed by a 425-foot long, 7,400-ton submarine, an order for "All Stop" would have taken several minutes and miles to execute while losing the ability to steer the boat. (A boat requires propulsion for steerage at all times.) At the time of the incident, the rest of the topside party had already come down below in anticipation of an imminent dive.

Upon learning of the emergency unfolding topside, a rescue party was quickly dispatched to return to the missile deck. Although members of that party were eager to intervene to save their shipmates' lives, they were ordered to stand down for fear of exacerbating an already dire situation by placing even more lives at risk. For several minutes, Chief Thompson tried valiantly but futilely to regain his equilibrium.

At times, his tether became intertwined with that of Jimenez. Eventually, Thompson stopped moving altogether. At 0840, the Coast Guard station at New Castle, NH, was notified of the incident. Two rescue ships were dispatched to the scene, approximately 2.5 miles east of Rye Harbor. Before the ships arrived, however, Lieutenant Jimenez's body pulled free of its lanyard and slipped overboard, the kapok life vest still in place.

At 1020, a 41-foot Coast Guard rescue boat pulled his body aboard about two miles from shore. He had been in the water for more than 80 minutes. Survival times in ocean temperatures between 40 and 50 degrees F vary by body composition, general fitness, and age, but generally one would not anticipate survival for more than 30-60 minutes at sea before succumbing to exhaustion, muscle fatigue, and loss of consciousness.

The best case scenario, for a person equipped with a flotation device that removes the imperative to constantly swim and allows energy conservation, is between one and three hours. The official

inquiry into this incident reported a sea temperature of only 40 degrees F. In addition to the effects of hypothermia, Lieutenant Jimenez was already unconscious and had suffered blunt trauma from his repeated impacts against the side of the hull. Nevertheless, resuscitation efforts were initiated on the rescue boat. These continued during the difficult trip back to Portsmouth Naval Hospital, a transit that took longer than usual because of the inclement weather. At 1201, Lieutenant Jimenez was officially pronounced dead by doctors at the hospital, although he had almost certainly perished earlier.

Meanwhile, Chief Thompson's ordeal also came to a tragic end. With two Coast Guard rescue boats nearby, the order was given for the Grant swimmer (in a dry suit) to cut Thompson's tether. He had stopped moving minutes earlier, and it was still unclear whether he had expired or was unconscious.

This decision was made in the hopes that once his body was freed from the tether, his flotation vest would enable one of the boats to grab him from the water in short order and save his life. Unfortunately, the kapok had become thoroughly waterlogged by then, and when the line was cut and he slipped into the sea, his head was only briefly spotted bobbing above the waves before it disappeared. The time was 0947.

For the next 9½ hours, a desperate search for Thompson was conducted across a five-mile radius between the Maine/New Hampshire coastline and the Isle of Shoals. The Grant was joined by no fewer than six other rescue boats and a helicopter. The all-out search by the Navy ended shortly after sunset around 1920. The Coast Guard continued the hunt for a short time after nightfall but to no avail. While the tempest of the early day had subsided (Sea State 3 that night), conditions remained inhospitable to thorough searching. The CO of the Coast Guard station, Richard Cunningham, reported, "It's still foggy and raining out there. We can't see." Thompson's body was never recovered.

The Grant attempted to return to port at PNSY, but a fierce wind that evening necessitated a change of plans. Instead of making landfall and giving the shocked and saddened crew some time to contemplate the loss of two shipmates, the submarine was forced to head back to sea and submerge overnight.

Only the following day, Tuesday morning, had weather conditions improved sufficiently to return to port. A particularly wrenching aspect of this story concerns one of the mess cooks aboard the Grant that day. That person was Chief Thompson's younger brother, who was an MSC (mess management specialist, chief) on the same crew. His grief, and the anguish that befell the entire crew, had to be postponed until the Bravo trials were completed.

On Monday, 21 August 1987, a memorial service for the two fallen sailors was held at the PNSY chapel. Now more than 35 years later, the events of that day still weigh heavily on the minds of those who witnessed how the sea can snatch life at a moment's notice. Several of the men who assisted with the writing of this chapter offered their thoughts, presented here without attribution:

*"It was...surreal. We were both shocked and very frustrated that they couldn't be saved. It's a sobering part of the job. Working on a submarine for so long, after a while, it's easy to forget the danger because the work becomes so routine."*

Chief Thompson was a very smart man and a really nice guy. This is something that should have never happened. Chief Thompson was a great man...I was lucky to have him as my chief. He was like family to me, and he prompted me to become a torpedoman. He taught me so much. Even though it's been so many years since the accident, it's like it happened just yesterday. Even today. Several outcomes ensued from this terrible incident. In November 1987, the CO was issued a written letter of reprimand that documented his failure "to adequately react to rapidly changing sea states" among other citations. Regarding the overriding question of why the rescue party was not allowed to attempt a potentially life-saving intervention, the official Navy spokesman explained that "the wave conditions were such that rescue attempts to get back to (where the men had fallen) were severely hampered." The summary report of the official Navy investigation cited that "efforts to retrieve (the two men) were unsuccessful due to fouling safety lines holding both beyond reach."

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