

Tragic 1983 Sinking Led To Major Safety Changes In The Shipping Industry

by Elizabeth Van Wye

“Tragedies drive marine safety reform, but they are written in blood.”

Award-winning investigative journalist and author Bob Frump, along with Gene Kelly, one of three survivors of the February 1983 sinking of the SS Marine Electric in a vicious nor'easter, were on hand Thursday night for an emotional and riveting program describing in detail how that tragic event, in which 34 lives were lost, resulted in a host of reforms that would save lives in the decades that followed.

It was the courage of the three surviving crew members of the Marine Electric, including Third Officer Kelly, both on that night and in pursuing the truth through a grueling inquiry, Frump said, that was key in leading to major improvements in the shipping industry, crew safety and sea rescues.

Kelly and Frump spoke at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy in Buzzards Bay as part of the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center's Ed Fouhy Distinguished Speaker Series. The program, titled “A Survivor's Story: The Sinking of the Marine Electric,” was also livestreamed to the Orpheum in Chatham and to the Maine Maritime Academy and to homes via Zoom. It was seen by more than 300 viewers.

In a gripping recounting of the events of that fateful trip, Kelly, a 1975 graduate of Mass Maritime, noted that the 40-year-old ship, a World War II-era tanker converted to a bulk cargo carrier, was on its last legs and due to go back to the shipyard for repairs in 1982. The return had been delayed by six months, postponing the repairs to the forward collision bulkhead, which had corroded on the bottom, jeopardizing its ability to prevent flooding in case of an accident.

The Marine Electric had completed the first leg of its round trip from Somerset, Mass. to Norfolk, Va. in “perfect weather,” Kelly recalled, however by the time the ship steamed north with a full load of coal, there was a “howling gale in Norfolk harbor.” By 16 hours into the trip there were gale force winds and 30 to 40 foot seas. “Things were breaking loose and we covered maybe two miles in four hours,” he recalled.

Into this storm came the fishing vessel Theodora. It was in trouble and the Coast Guard requested Marine Electric stand by until a Coast Guard vessel could arrive. The call required the Marine Electric to execute a difficult turn in 40-foot seas and stand by for several hours until help arrived.

By the time the Marine Electric was back on their northbound course, conditions had worsened to 40-foot seas, 60-knots of wind and snow. At 2 a.m. on Feb. 12, the captain summoned Kelly, who had completed his watch without incident at midnight, and all deck officers to the bridge.

“As soon as my feet hit the deck I could feel the motion was different and I knew she was down by the head,” Kelly recalled. The entire forepeak was under water, with tons of sea water coming in the number two hatch. The water, mixed with the coal cargo, created a coal slurry which disabled the already damaged collision bulkhead.

When the captain called the Coast Guard to notify them that he was issuing an abandon ship order, the crew headed to the lifeboats, which would turn out to be largely useless. The crew never thought they would

really need them, Kelly recalled. “They thought the Coast Guard would come.”

Realizing the lifeboats could not be launched, Kelly had earlier retrieved 20 life rings, equipped with the emergency EPIRB beacon, to ensure they would float free of the ship, accessible to the crew in the water. As the ship began to go down, Kelly recalled falling into the water, which was “so cold, it was squeezing the breath out of me.” The air was 28 degrees and the water measured 38 degrees, he would later learn. The wind chill was minus 14 degrees.

After being tossed about by the 40-foot waves, he landed on “five guys who were holding onto a life ring,” he recalled and he quickly joined them. When he was finally rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter deploying a Navy rescue swimmer, he was the last crew member alive on the life ring. “It took every bit of courage to jump into the dangling rescue basket,” he said, remembering being “hailed up like a bucket of fish.” In those temperatures, hypothermia should have killed him in 15 minutes, he said. He was in the water for three hours.

As is mandated following a marine disaster, a marine board was convened to review what happened and to determine how to prevent future loss of equipment and life. Marine Electric wasn't the first T2 tanker to experience problems. Both the Pendleton and the Fort Mercer, sunk off the coast of Chatham in 1952, were T2 tankers which had each split in two in a storm. Although the Pendleton would result in one of the greatest rescues in Coast Guard history, the Coast Guard resisted removing the T2s and instead tried to repair them.

At the time an investigative reporter at the Philadelphia Inquirer, Bob Frump covered the Marine Electric marine board. It was headed by former merchant mariner Captain Dom Calicchio, whom Frump praised and Kelly called one of his “personal heroes.” The company, as was often the case, attempted to place blame on the crew.

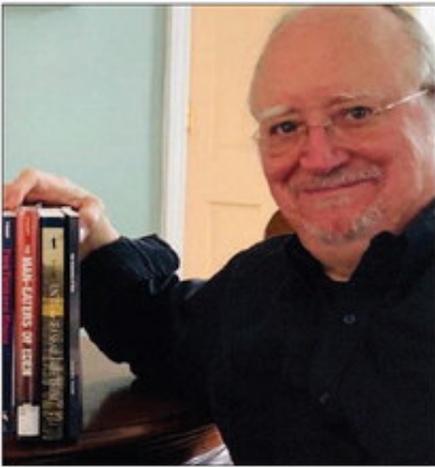
However, in this case the three survivors, with their accurate and precise testimony, thwarted that effort and ensured the company did not succeed. As a result, the board ordered that 70 of the old T2 tankers be scrapped, that survival suits be required in the North Atlantic and that new and tougher safety inspection standards be issued. The Coast Guard rescue swimmer program, modeled on the Navy program, was also established.

Frump's reporting forms the basis of his book, “Until the Sea Shall Free Them.” He noted “the Marine Electric set a new culture for safety inspections. From 1983 to 2015 there was no catastrophic American ship loss.”

The loss of the SS El Faro in 2015 would end that streak. To learn more about that marine tragedy and the results of that investigation, Chatham Marconi Maritime Center will host Rachel Slade, author of “Into the Raging Sea: The Story of a Modern Shipwreck,” on Oct. 7 at 7:30. For more information or to sign up, go to www.chathammarconi.org.



Gene Kelly, one of three survivors of the SS Marine Electric sinking. COURTESY PHOTOS



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