

**RECORD OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION
WITH
MR. DAVID COSGROVE
PASSENGER ON BOARD THE U.S. SMALL PASSENGER VESSEL
*PORT IMPERIAL MANHATTAN***

6 PAGES (INCLUDING COVER)



National Transportation Safety Board
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RECORD OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY: Donald J. Tyrrell
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National Transportation Safety Board

NAME OF PERSON INTERVIEWED: Mr. David Cosgrove
Hoboken, NJ

INTRODUCTION

I interviewed Mr. David Cosgrove in connection with the investigation of the fire on board the U.S. passenger vessel *Port Imperial Manhattan*, which occurred while the vessel was underway in the Hudson River near New York, NY on November 17, 2000. Mr. Cosgrove was a passenger on board the vessel at the time that the fire broke out. The text that follows is not a verbatim record of my conversation with Mr. Cosgrove. It has been constructed from my hand-written notes of the conversation and is correct and complete to the best of my recollection.

CONVERSATION

Mr. Cosgrove stated that he was a passenger on board the *Port Imperial Manhattan* on November 17, 2000, when a fire broke out on board the vessel. He stated that he had boarded the vessel in Manhattan and was standing on the top deck outside when he noticed "a puff of dark black smoke that came out of the port engine exhaust. He stated that a lot of black smoke came out and he started walking toward the pilothouse waving his arms to get the attention of the vessel's Captain who was in the pilothouse. He said that when he got his attention, he pointed back at the smoke. Mr. Cosgrove said that there were two people in the wheelhouse at this time and one of them went down below to the lower deck. Mr. Cosgrove said that he couldn't really tell which one was the Captain, but he thinks that the Captain stayed up in the wheelhouse.

Mr. Cosgrove said that very shortly after the man went below, the engines stopped and the boat stopped moving through the water. Mr. Cosgrove went down to the main deck "gangway area" and was looking through the glass windows into the main cabin. He saw a crewman with a fire extinguisher, and he saw smoke and flames. He said that he saw flames coming out of the "side of the boat." According to Mr. Cosgrove, the flames seemed to be directly under the "smoke stack" on the port side. Seeing the flames, Mr. Cosgrove went back to the upper deck, to let the Captain know there was a fire on board.

At this point, Mr. Cosgrove recalled, the crew was "sort of running around." He noticed that, in addition to black smoke, ashes began coming out of the port side exhaust vent. The next thing Mr. Cosgrove recalled was using his cellular telephone to call his finance, whom was waiting at a restaurant to meet him for dinner, to inform her that the ferry had broken down and that he would be late, just so that she would not worry.

Mr. Cosgrove stated that, at some point, the crew seemed to have lost the fight with the fire and they came out of the passenger cabin with life jackets and closed the door behind them. Mr. Cosgrove said that there were not a lot of life jackets available and he is unsure if everyone got one. Mr. Cosgrove ended up with a child size jacket, which did not fit him properly. When he told the crew about this, one of the crew gave Mr. Cosgrove a New York Waterway flotation jacket.

Mr. Cosgrove stated that at some point, after the engines stopped, the vessel lost electrical power and the lights went out. Mr. Cosgrove does not know if the Captain had been able to radio in a report of their situation before they lost power. He said that it was really dark, quiet and "kind of eerie." A steady wind seemed to be blowing from one direction and it seemed to Mr. Cosgrove that the vessel was drifting "really fast." He said that he had "kind of a helpless feeling." He said that the passengers were not getting any information from the crew about what was going on. The captain or one of the crewmen did ask people to dial 911 with their cell phones and people did this. He said that it was dark and very smoky.

Mr. Cosgrove notice "two guys" who were struggling to get life rafts down from on top of the pilothouse. Mr. Cosgrove climbed up to help them. About this time, another New York Waterways boat went by. Mr. Cosgrove said that this boat did not have any passengers on board. Mr. Cosgrove recalled that the Captain of the *Manhattan* went to the pilothouse and started sounding the horn but the other vessel kept going.

Mr. Cosgrove said that he and the others who were trying to release the life floats from their stowed position on top of the wheelhouse had a great deal of difficulty seeing the securing ropes because it was dark and smoky and the ropes themselves were black in color. He said that they couldn't see how the rafts were tied down, so they just started cutting everything until the floats came free. As a

result, they actually cut the painters that were needed to tie the float to the rail after it was launched to hold it next to the vessel until people could get to it.

Mr. Cosgrove said that they were able to get two or three life floats down to the main deck but that they only threw one life float over the side because there were no lines on the other ones to hold next to the *Manhattan*. Mr. Cosgrove said that, if they had thrown the other ones over the side, they would only have drifted away from the boat before anyone could have used them. Mr. Cosgrove said that they stopped lowering life floats at three because they figured that they had enough to accommodate everyone and did not need any more.

Mr. Cosgrove did not think that the crew was very well trained on how to handle a situation like this. However, he thinks that they all gave it their best effort.

According to Mr. Cosgrove, the passengers were very concerned at this time that the boat would explode. They could see inside the main cabin through the glass that the cabin was filled with black smoke and flames. They feared that, if there were some sort of explosion in the cabin, "they were right in the line of fire."

Mr. Cosgrove next recalled that a helicopter flew over and flashed its light at the *Manhattan*. A little while after that, he said, a Coast Guard boat came up alongside of the *Manhattan*. Then, he recalled, a fireboat arrived on scene. But none of them were making any attempt to rescue the passengers and crew from the *Manhattan*. Mr. Cosgrove said that this had all of the passengers pretty concerned. He stated, "We didn't want to go into the water. And we felt that the fire was spreading so fast that we were going to have to enter the water."

Mr. Cosgrove said that the fireboat, which was a "bigger" vessel than the *Manhattan*, came closer and it appeared to Mr. Cosgrove that it was "too difficult" for it to maneuver "close enough to us to get us off." Then, Mr. Cosgrove said, another ferryboat arrived and started to approach the *Manhattan*. However, Mr. Cosgrove explained, it had to back away again to get clear of the fireboat. While it was backing, the fire got real bad and there was an explosion on the *Manhattan*. When the passengers heard the explosion, Mr. Cosgrove said, "That's when we all started really freaking out." The passengers started yelling, "Come on. Get this boat up here so we can get off!"

Mr. Cosgrove stated that the other ferryboat swung around, clear of the fireboat, and came into the *Manhattan*, bow to bow. When the other ferry got close enough, the passengers and crew stepped off the *Manhattan* directly onto the other ferryboat. While the other ferryboat was moving away from the *Manhattan*, Mr. Cosgrove looked back at the *Manhattan* and saw that the doors to the passenger cabin near where he had been standing seemed to "melt away" and the fire seemed to get a lot worse. He said that he thought there was a second explosion and observed the entire area where the passengers had been standing become engulfed in flames. He offered the opinion that five minutes after they left the *Manhattan*

they would not have been able to stand where they had been standing on the foredeck because of the flames. He thinks that the passengers would have had to jump over the side because the flames and black smoke were "starting to kind of roar out of there" [the main cabin]. He said, "Really, we got off just in time."

Mr. Cosgrove recalled that two ferryboats had left the dock in Manhattan at the same time. One boat, the *Manhattan*, had 8 people on board. He said that the other boat looked like it had 50 or 100 people on board. Mr. Cosgrove stated that if the fire had broken out on the other boat, there wouldn't have been enough room for everybody to stand on the foredeck and there would have been more panic. He thinks that there would have been people injured or in the water. He expressed his opinion that, if there had been 100 people on the *Manhattan* when the fire broke out, it would have been a "disaster." He said it was "so lucky" that there were only a few people on the *Manhattan* when the fire broke out. He stated his opinion that, if there had been more people on board, "there is no way" that everyone would have had life jackets on. Mr. Cosgrove understands that there were more life jackets on board the *Manhattan*, but says that they were stowed either close to the fire or were "inundated" by the fire. Mr. Cosgrove did not think that there were life jackets on the upper level where he was when the fire started. If there were, he said, he didn't notice them.

Mr. Cosgrove stated that the life floats were extremely heavy. He said that they had to "kind of flop them over" and drop them down "three flights" to the main deck. He said this procedure was dangerous because someone standing below could have been struck and injured by one of the floats. Mr. Cosgrove said that in setting up the stowage arrangement for the life floats, the conditions that may exist, such as darkness, smoke, black ropes, etc., should be taken into consideration.

Mr. Cosgrove stated that he did not receive any kind of safety briefing when he came on board. Mr. Cosgrove said that he is not a regular passenger on these ferries. He says he takes the ferry "everyone now and then." He estimated that he had ridden on a New York Waterways ferry about 10 times previous to the fire. He said that normally he commutes via the Path Trains from New Jersey to Manhattan.

Mr. Cosgrove stated that during the fire, the passengers were scared, but that "nobody was completely panicked." Mr. Cosgrove did not hear the Captain or crew trying to keep people calm, but he recognizes that he [Cosgrove] was occupied with trying to help lower life floats and was not present on the main deck to hear if they did. Mr. Cosgrove said that he never really knew who the Captain was.

Mr. Cosgrove said that he was not injured in the accident. He did say that his throat was irritated by the smoke. He said that they offered to examine him at the ambulance but that he declined. He did not go to the hospital.

Mr. Cosgrove believes that fire suppression systems should be installed on all the ferryboats and that if they were, the fire safety of their operations would be greatly enhanced..

In Mr. Cosgrove's opinion, the captain of the other ferryboat that rescued the passengers and crew from the *Manhattan* was the "hero of the day." Mr. Cosgrove said, "He did some pretty fancy maneuvering to get his boat up alongside out boat and get us off of there in time."

END OF INTERVIEW

**Donald J. Tyrrell
Investigator-in-Charge**