



National Transportation Safety Board
Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Date: January 1 and January 12, 2003

Place: In person at Triad Seafood, Everglades City, Fl.

Person Interviewed: Kelvin Townsend

Interview Conducted By: Jim Walsh
Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

INTRODUCTION

Captain Kelvin Townsend was interviewed in conjunction with the sinking of the *Panther*. The text that follows is not a verbatim record of the conversation. It has been developed from my handwritten notes of the conversation and is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge and recollection.

INTERVIEW

Captain Townsend's boat, the *Red Rock*, a thirty foot Morgan outfitted and licensed for crab and lobster fishing was underway by 0430 on the morning of December 30,2002. The *Red Rock's* crew consisted of Townsend's son and a friend.

The *Red Rock* was tending her traps when at approximately 1000 the boat developed an unusual vibration. The Captain examined the damage, determined that a strut had broken and attempted to apply a temporary repair. After ten minutes in the cold water the captain started to lose motor control in his fingers and decided to lash the strut and return to port under a slow bell.

The *Red Rock* turned for the Barron River around 10:30 making little more than five knots. At approx 14:30 the Red Rock entered Indian Key Pass channel and spotted the Panther on their port bow. Both the Captain and his son recognized that the Panther was sitting low in the water. In order to get a better look the captain changed course to come down the Panther's port hand side. As the Red Rock approached the Panther captain Townsend could see that the Panther had little to no freeboard. As the Red Rock drew abeam of the Panther the Panther's captain waved for the Red Rock to approach.

The Red Rock motored forward of the Panther, turned to starboard, slowed down and slowly drew up to the Panther's port side. When the Red Rock was abeam of the Panther, the

Panther's captain informed captain Townsend that the Panther was sinking and the Red Rock would have to take his passengers. Right after the Panther's captain alerted the boats to the Panther's condition the passengers all scrambled to the port side of the Panther and jumped for the Red Rock.

Several people made it to the Red Rock's deck, others clung to the Red Rock's side with several panicked passengers clutching at their fellow passengers legs and back using them as a human ladder. With the rapidity of the sinking most of the passengers ended up in the water without life jackets. The captain, his crew and several male passengers on the Red Rock's deck helped the swimmers aboard.

The Red Rock's Captain made a call on Channel 80 to a shoreside coordinator alerting him to the Panther's sinking. The coordinator made a land line call to Everglades National Park Boat Tours relaying the Panther information. The captain commented on the panic and the mad scramble of the passengers to board his boat. People were thinking only of themselves grabbing and pulling and climbing one another's backs.

The Red Rock was drifting in the current until all of the Panther's passengers who were around the boat were on board. Once the boat was clear the Red Rock motored over to the last three passengers clinging to a ring life buoy. A Park Service boat and another recreational fishing boat was on scene. The Ranger was picking up the two people from the Panther's rail and the fishing boat had picked up the captain and a few other passengers. The last three passengers were brought aboard the Red Rock and they started for port.

The Red Rock's crew heard the Panther's captain call out to the Red Rock deck is everybody here. The Red Rock's crew did not see or hear anyone take a head count.

Approx five to ten minutes after turning for port two boats from the Tour Boat Company approached. The Skimmer came to starboard and the Panther II came to port. The Passengers were offloaded onto the Tour Boats. The Panther's captain boarded the Panther II from the fishing boat and took the helm. No one was taking a head count during the transfers.

The fishing boat coordinator "Howie" also arrived on scene in his 18-foot boat and marked the Panther to ensure that no incoming boat would hit it. The Red Rock continued into port and docked.

The Red Rock is a thirty-foot Morgan built in 1981 with a ten-foot beam, three-foot freeboard and a 370 Volvo diesel engine.

END OF INTERVIEW

Jim Walsh