



National Transportation Safety Board

Marine Accident Brief

Towing by Coast Guard Response Boat *CG 29113* of Vanguard Sailboat, Resulting in Loss of Propulsion and Allision with Highway 11 Bridge, Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana, May 3, 2017

Accident no.	DCA17PM012
Vessel names	CG 29113; Vanguard-model sailboat
Accident type	Tow evolving into loss of propulsion and allision with bridge
Location	Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana, 30°11.5' N, 89°47.9' W
Date	May 3, 2017
Time	About 1832 central daylight time (coordinated universal time – 6 hours)
Injuries	One minor injury
Property damage	Total loss of the sailboat, valued at about \$20,000; damage to the CG 29113 estimated at \$337,000
Environmental damage	None reported
Weather	Scattered showers and a line of intense thunderstorms, southeast winds at 18 knots gusting to 39, waves 4–6 ft, water temperature 72°F, air temperature 68°F
Waterway information	Lake Pontchartrain, located in southeastern Louisiana, is 40 miles long and 25 miles wide at its widest point, with an area of 630 square miles and a mean depth of 10–16 feet. It connects eastward through Lake Borgne with the Gulf of Mexico by a narrow passage called The Rigolets.

On May 3, 2017, about 1832, the Coast Guard response boat *CG 29113* allided with the Highway 11 Bridge while responding to a non-distress search-and-rescue case involving an adrift sailboat in Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana. The accident caused a minor injury to one of the four Coast Guard crewmembers and damage estimated at \$337,000 to the *CG 29113*. The sailboat, valued at \$20,000, eventually sank.



A Coast Guard response boat similar to the *CG 29113*. (Photo by Coast Guard)

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Accident Events

At 1515 on the day of the accident, Coast Guard Sector New Orleans received a call from the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office reporting that a 32-foot-long dilapidated sailboat (a Vanguard model) with no one on board was adrift in the area near the Highway 11 Bridge in Lake Pontchartrain. The day before, the owner had inadvertently grounded the sailboat on a nearby sandbar and, late that evening, abandoned the vessel after reportedly securing it with two anchors. The sailboat had subsequently become dislodged and, on the day of the accident, authorities could not reach the owner to retrieve the sailboat. Sector New Orleans directed Coast Guard Station New Orleans to launch a vessel to assess the situation and, if safe to do so, tow the vessel to keep it from striking the bridge or in general presenting a hazard to navigation.

Accordingly, Station New Orleans trailered its 29-foot-long response boat-small (RB-S II) CG 29113 to a nearby boat ramp. At 1706, the vessel, with four crewmembers aboard—a coxswain, two third-class boatswain's mates, and a seaman; all who had conducted many previous vessel tows—was under way to the sailboat's last-known position. At 1729, the crew located the sailboat, which had drifted up against the Highway 11 Bridge. After a brief assessment of the situation, the crew, with the consent of the shoreside officer on duty at Station New Orleans and approval from the operational commander at Sector New Orleans, decided to tow the sailboat from the scene.



Satellite image of Lake Pontchartrain where the CG 29113 lost propulsion and allided with the Highway 11 Bridge. (Background by Google Earth)

Because of the sailboat's position against the bridge and because the jib sail covered the forward bitt, the Coast Guard crewmembers were unable to tow the sailboat in a standard configuration from its bow. Instead, they attached a bridle to two bitts on the sailboat stern to tow the vessel in a stern-to-stern configuration. About this time, the weather began to deteriorate due to strong thunderstorms in the area. A small craft advisory had been issued that morning, but the conditions were not expected to deteriorate significantly until later that evening. However, during the tow, the winds were gusting up to 39 mph, and the waves reached 4–6 feet. The crew observed

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waves washing over the sailboat's stern, which by design was already low to the waterline, and the vessel started taking on water.

The crew then tried to reconfigure the tow, but in the course of doing so, the sailboat began to sink in the high waves. In addition, its mast broke and struck the *CG 29113* taffrail (a handrail around the deck area at the stern of the Coast Guard boat). While dodging the falling mast, the crew tossed the detached bridle lines into the water and also tried to maneuver the *CG 29113* away from the sailboat to avoid collision. About that same time, the *CG 29113* lost engine power and propulsion. After the crewmembers tried unsuccessfully to restart the engines, they saw that the bridle lines were fouled in the propellers and they tried to clear them. Meanwhile, the waves and the strong current caused the *CG 29113* to drift into the Highway 11 Bridge, alliding with the bridge's fendering system and concrete pilings. The initial impact was on the *CG 29113*'s starboard side. The vessel then drifted under the bridge, and its port side struck the pilings. Eventually, the crewmembers were able to restart the port engine and maneuvered the *CG 29113* to a safe area northeast of the bridge. Once away from the bridge, the crew managed to also restart the starboard engine and proceeded to the nearest ramp. The sailboat ultimately sank.

Injuries

One crewmember suffered a minor injury. He was evaluated at an urgent care center and released that same evening.

Damage

The *CG 29113* sustained damage to the port and starboard cabin windows, window frames, cabin-top handrail system, engine-well gunnels, and taffrail. The main cabin window frames and roof supports were forced inward by the impact against the bridge pilings, causing three of the mechanical windows and spotter fixed-glass panels to shatter. The handrails along the cabin-top were severely deformed between frames 3 and 7. The collar (fender system) sheath upper track was damaged, and the port bow and the starboard-side edge were inset.



Starboard-side damage to *CG 29113*.

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The sailboat's mast collapsed over the starboard quarter of the *CG 29113*, pushing the taffrail downward and splitting the material at the welds. All four taffrail anchor points became deformed with one of them separating from the gunnel and creating a breach above the waterline. Below the waterline, the hull was scraped on both sides by the boat coming in contact with the pilings and the wire-rope rigging from the sailboat's mast. No breach below the waterline was observed. The port engine's lower unit stabilizing fin was broken, and both propellers were damaged. A visual inspection of the outboard engines and lower units was conducted, revealing no mechanical damage.

Toxicological Testing

The Coast Guard initially classified the accident as a "Class C" mishap, which did not require toxicological testing, but later upgraded it to Class B. Toxicology testing was ultimately obtained about a day and a half later, at 1100 on May 5, 2017. Consequently, the requirement to alcohol-test within 2 hours and drug-test within 32 hours of an accident could not be met.

Lack of Navigational/GPS Data

The extracted data from the *CG 29113*'s Furuno NAV-NET 3D chart plotter showed the vessel's various positions and time-stamped geographic locations, but did not indicate speeds at which the vessel was traveling during the attempted tow. In addition, when the transponder from the *CG 29113*'s automatic identification system (AIS) was sent to the Coast Guard Navigation Center for analysis, personnel noted that the unit's last transmission was recorded on April 29, 2017, about 4 days before the accident. After further inspection, it was determined that the AIS's transmission antenna had malfunctioned, resulting in no data being transmitted after April 29, 2017.

Cell Phone Use

The coxswain used her personal cell phone aboard the vessel to communicate with Station New Orleans during the accident voyage. Review of her cellular data showed that she used the phone for operational purposes; no inappropriate, non-mission-related use was identified.

Vessel Information

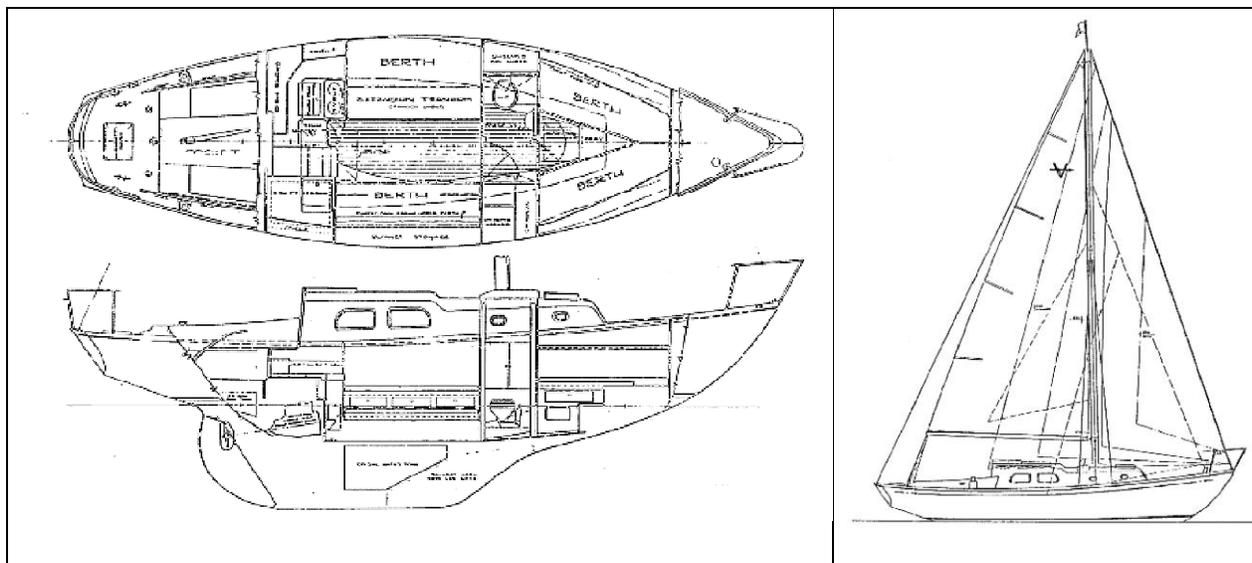
Coast Guard Response Boat-Small CG 29113

The RB-S II is a deep-V, rigid-monohull vessel with a foam collar enclosed in a polyurethane sheath. The Coast Guard uses RB-Ss to conduct missions related to port, waterways, and coastal security, search and rescue, and recreational boating safety. The RB-S II is 29 feet long with a beam of 8 feet 5 inches and a draft of 2 feet 9 inches. The *CG 29113* was commissioned in 2016 and homeported at Station New Orleans.

Vanguard Sailboat

Records indicate that the sailboat was built in 1966 as a Pearson Vanguard 32-design, auxiliary sailing vessel of early-production fiberglass construction. Its length overall was 33 feet with a single-mast assembly. At the time of the accident, and according to those interviewed and familiar with the sailboat's condition before the accident, the vessel was used more as a power vessel than a sailboat. Investigators were told that the means of propulsion included an outboard engine fastened to the cockpit's stern. A rudder was attached to the aft edge of the keel with affixed cables that ran externally to the hull and were fastened to the tiller. The vessel had ground tackle and two anchors. Its beam was 9 feet 6 inches and its draft was 4 feet 2 inches.

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Drawings of a 1966 Pearson Vanguard 32 sailboat. (Image by Pearson)

For the last 7 years before the sinking, the sailboat was in dry storage at several locations in Florida. The current owner purchased the vessel in February 2017. At some point during the 2.5 months before the accident, the owner, with the help of friends, motored the vessel from Panama City, Florida, to Lake Pontchartrain. Because the sailboat sank, investigators could not conduct a postaccident vessel survey or inspection; however, all witness accounts indicated that the sailboat was in a degraded state.

The Coast Guard's decision to attempt a tow was reasonable, as the Vanguard sailboat had drifted up against a highway bridge, presented a general hazard to navigation, and may potentially have been leaking fuel. The sailboat's position against the bridge did not allow for a standard towing configuration, and the onset of thunderstorms produced increasing winds and waves that further complicated the tow.

Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the towing accident involving Coast Guard response boat *CG 29113* and an adrift Vanguard sailboat was the challenging circumstances during a stern-to-stern tow in deteriorating weather conditions, which fouled the *CG 29113*'s propellers and caused a loss of propulsion. Contributing to the accident was the dilapidated state of the sailboat, which complicated the attempt to tow the vessel, which subsequently sank.

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BY THE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Adopted: May 22, 2018

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Vessel Information

Vessels	CG 29113	Vanguard Sailboat
Owner/operator	US Coast Guard	Private citizen
Port of registry	New Orleans	Panama City
Flag	United States	United States
Type	Response boat-small	Pearson Vanguard 32
Year built	2013	1966
Official number (US)	29113	(State of Florida number)
Construction	5086 marine-grade aluminum	Wood and fiberglass
Length	29.4 ft (33 m)	32.8 ft (9.1 m)
Draft	2.75 ft (1.8 m)	4.5 ft (1.3 m)
Beam/width	8.41 ft (6.3 m)	9.25 ft (3.29 m)
Tonnage	5.9 tons	6.3 tons
Engine power; manufacturer	225 hp (168 kW); 4-stroke; V6 (2)	N/A
Persons on board	4	0

NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from Coast Guard Sector New Orleans throughout this investigation.

For more details about this accident, visit www.nts.gov and search for NTSB accident ID DCA17PM012.

The NTSB has authority to investigate and establish the probable cause of any major marine casualty or any marine casualty involving both public and nonpublic vessels under Title 49 *United States Code*, Section 1131. This report is based on factual information either gathered by NTSB investigators or provided by the Coast Guard from its informal investigation of the accident.

The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for a marine casualty; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, “[NTSB] investigations are fact-finding proceedings with no formal issues and no adverse parties . . . and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights or liabilities of any person.” Title 49 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Section 831.4.

Assignment of fault or legal liability is not relevant to the NTSB’s statutory mission to improve transportation safety by conducting investigations and issuing safety recommendations. In addition, statutory language prohibits the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report. Title 49 *United States Code*, Section 1154(b).