

MARINE OCCURRENCE REPORT

SWAMPING, CAPSIZING

**OF THREE SMALL CRAFT
ABOUT 200 MI N OF THUNDER BAY
GRAYSON LAKE, ONTARIO
13/14 OCTOBER 1995**

REPORT NUMBER M95C0074

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) investigated this occurrence for the purpose of advancing transportation safety. It is not the function of the Board to assign fault or determine civil or criminal liability.

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Summary

At about midnight on the night of 13 October 1995, 12 persons set out in three small craft to return to their cabin at the northern end of Grayson Lake after a fishing trip to the south-west portion of the lake. As they entered the main part of the lake, one of the small craft was swamped by high waves and subsequently capsized. A second craft swamped and capsized after it had rescued the persons from the first capsizing. The third craft made it to shore after also being swamped. Of the 12 persons aboard the three craft, 4 survived, 3 lost their lives and their bodies were recovered, and 5 were not located after extensive searches from the air, on shore and under water.

Ce rapport est également disponible en français.

Other Factual Information

All three boats are aluminium craft of open construction, powered by outboard gasoline engines fitted on the transom. One boat is 12 ft long with three wood-covered thwarts, built-in buoyancy and, at the time of the incident, powered by an 8 hp motor. A second is 14 ft long with four thwarts, no built-in buoyancy, and it was powered by a 9.9 hp motor. The third is a 17 ft transom-stern canoe with built-in buoyancy and powered by a 4.4 hp motor. All craft were reportedly serviceable and in good repair.

On 13 October 1995, all 12 persons from a wilderness camp located at the northern end of Grayson Lake took part in a fishing trip to the south-west portion of the lake. The group, led by the couple who operated the camp, consisted of their two teenage sons, a young adult female and seven other teenage males who were attending the camp.

After about six hours at the fishing site, the group started the five-mile return trip to the cabin, some time between 2330 and 2400. The fishing site was sheltered from the elements, and although the southbound passage had been overcast and windy, it was the group's experience that the wind and waves usually died down after sunset.

As had been done on the outward passage, three teenage males who were travelling in the low-powered canoe set out first to avoid holding back the others. The elder son of the group leaders was operating this craft. When the canoe cleared the sheltered portion of the lake, it quickly became apparent that, contrary to expectations, the wind had increased in force since the afternoon. With the waves about two to four feet from the north-north-west, the operator of the canoe initially considered heaving-to, to await the other boats but the canoe quickly drifted toward the shore. After two unsuccessful attempts to land on islands near the western shore, the canoe slowly traversed the lake. As they neared the eastern side, the occupants again tried to land and, on the second attempt, the canoe swamped, throwing them into the lake but very close to shore. They scrambled ashore and started a fire, using gasoline from the outboard motor. The time was about 0130, 14 October.

The operator of the canoe returned to the shore and used a flashlight to signal toward the other boats through the blowing snow and sleet that had started falling. As they had done earlier in the passage, lights flashed in response, but, because of the absence of contingency planning and pre-arranged signals, there was no significance attached to any of the flashes. The flashes only indicated the presence of others, not any predicament. When he attempted to signal later, at about 0200, and received no response, the operator assumed the others had also put ashore.

Some time after the canoe set out from the fishing site, the others broke camp and got under way to return to the cabin. The lead boat was the 12-footer, operated by the group leader, with his wife and

two male teenagers aboard. They were followed by the 14-footer, operated by the younger son of the group leaders and carrying the young adult female and the other three male teenagers. The return trip was uneventful until they reached the main body of the lake. In the two- to four-foot-high waves, the young operator of the 14-footer was having difficulty keeping the bow to the waves, and the boat subsequently swamped and capsized. All five persons clung to the overturned hull as they shouted and flashed their lights at the lead boat.

The 12-footer turned back and its operator advised the people in the water to hang on to his boat and that he would take them all to shore. Those in the water abandoned the overturned 14-footer, but shortly after they reached the 12-footer, it also swamped and capsized. Almost immediately, two persons floated away and disappeared. As the rest remained clinging to the overturned hull, one person, against the protestations of the others, decided to swim to shore. He was not seen again. During this time, the flashing light from what was believed to be the canoe was seen and responded to. As the night wore on, hypothermia took its toll. By daylight, only the young woman struggled ashore as the overturned boat grounded. She was suffering from leg cramps and hypothermia after having been in the 2° to 3°C water for about five hours. She managed to build a lean-to for some shelter from the blowing snow and cold wind.

The three teenage males who had been travelling in the canoe finally reached the camp at the northern end of the lake at about 1715 on 14 October, after spending part of the day recovering in a cabin near the area where the canoe had been swamped. They called out using the battery-powered high frequency (HF) radiotelephone at the camp, but after reaching the Thunder Bay radiotelephone operator, their initial attempts were frustrated by their calls going unanswered and by atmospherics. In later attempts, they were not even able to raise the radiotelephone operator, and it was subsequently found that the long wire antenna for the radio had come down. This most likely had occurred during the strong winds experienced over the previous 24 hours.

Meanwhile, with the others still missing but believed to be safely ashore, they fired four rifle shots into the air to let the others know that the cabin was occupied. Food, clothes and other equipment were prepared and taken to the canoe, but as it was dark by then with blowing snow and poor visibility, a search for the others was put off until morning. Two chartered floatplanes were expected from Armstrong the next day to bring in a party of three and take eight people out.

The three reloaded the canoe in the morning, and as the weather did not appear to be conducive to the expected morning flight, they departed on their search. As they proceeded down the lake, a floatplane flew over and landed at the north end of the lake. The searchers headed back and discussed the situation with the pilot. It was decided that the pilot would fly out two of the teenagers

and search the lake and shore for the others on his way south. As the departing plane overflew the area, an overturned boat and a body wearing a lifejacket were seen near the shore in the area where the boats had experienced difficulties the previous night.

The aircraft returned to Armstrong arriving about 1035, and the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) was notified after the plane landed. The second expected aircraft landed at Grayson Lake at about 1030. Its three passengers and pilot were met by the couple's elder son, who apprised them of the situation. The pilot was asked to conduct an air search of the lake on his way south. However, shortly after take-off, the area was covered by an extensive snow squall, preventing an aerial search, and the aircraft returned to Armstrong.

The three new arrivals and the couple's elder son conferred in the main cabin. They decided that two of them would remain at the cabin in case the missing persons showed up, while the other two would conduct a shore search using the canoe. They departed at about 1115 proceeding directly to the cabin at which the occupants of the canoe had spent some time recovering the previous day. As the waves were still significant, they transferred from the canoe to a more suitable boat that was located there. They left a note at another cabin on a nearby island and, at about 1300, continued their search. On reaching the area where the boats had had difficulties the previous night, they saw the young woman on the shore. Because of her poor physical condition, she was taken to the large cabin on the island, warmed and given dry clothes. One of the rescuers, who was an ambulance attendant, monitored her vital signs and checked for any physical problems. Given her hypothermic condition, she was unable to provide any information regarding the group she had been with.

When satisfied that she was in stable condition, the two left to continue the search. South of where the young woman had been found, they located the two overturned boats, some identifiable debris and the bodies of two young males and that of the other adult female. The bodies were pulled ashore, but it was too rough to recover the boats. The searchers were cold, wet and concerned about the young woman survivor. They returned to the cabin where they warmed and dried themselves, and after bundling up the young woman, all three headed back to the camp.

An OPP helicopter overflew the camp as they arrived, and shortly thereafter, an OPP floatplane arrived and evacuated the young woman to a Thunder Bay hospital where she was treated for hypothermia and exposure. She had had no food, heat or dry clothes from the time she was thrown into the water until she was located by the rescuers some 36 hours later. Her determination to survive came from her resolve not to share the same fate as her father who had disappeared, presumed drowned, about 16 years before, just south of Grayson Lake.

OPP divers and the land search team arrived the next day. An air search was also commenced. The three bodies that had been found were recovered and flown out to Thunder Bay. A backpack recovered from the lake bottom was identified as belonging to one of the group.

Another OPP team of divers was called in to assist using underwater cameras; however, despite their best efforts in the frigid, black waters and the best efforts of the land and air search teams during inclement weather conditions, nothing further was found. The search was reduced to a missing persons report with overflights of the area by OPP aircraft.

The Wilderness Camp

The camp at Grayson Lake had been operated by the same family since about 1980. Over the years, the camp had been a commercial trapline and a family retreat. It was also a place where young people from a rural community west of Thunder Bay were brought for wilderness trips. The two other cabins on the lake, visited during the search, are operated by commercial outfitters but they were unoccupied at that time of the year and neither has any communication equipment.

Experience and Planning

The couple who operated the camp had considerable bush experience and knowledge of the area, having operated traplines at the camp and further south for about 20 years. They had also spent a winter at the camp. On past occasions, the couple had made many trips similar to the fishing expedition. On the two evenings preceding the occurrence, uneventful trips were made to the planned fishing area to ensure the whitefish were running. It was decided that the Friday night would have a good run of whitefish and that all would make the trip.

Weather

Grayson Lake is approximately midway between the weather observing stations at Armstrong, to the south-east, and Pickle Lake, to the north-west. Observations at Pickle Lake on Friday, 13 October through Sunday, 15 October show that the weather was cloudy with low ceilings, temperatures between 0° and 8°C, rain and wet snow, wind north-east to north at 20 kmh, gusting to 40 kmh, increasing to 30 to 50 kmh, and not diminishing until late Sunday. The weather synopses issued at 0530 EDT and 1600 EDT on 13 October by Environment Canada, respectively forecast and confirmed an intense disturbance moving across north-western Ontario that morning. The 0000Z 14 October surface analysis chart indicates that the intense disturbance was centered very close to Grayson Lake at the time of the incident.

The camp at Grayson Lake does not lie within the operating range of any commercial or government radio or television broadcasting station. To obtain a weather forecast for the area, the cabin occupants had to make a radiotelephone call to a weather office, but in this instance they elected not to obtain a forecast.

Personal Flotation Devices

It was reported that there were sufficient flotation devices for all 12 persons available at the camp. Reportedly, in the week before

the occurrence, there did not seem to be any consistency regarding the carriage and wearing of personal flotation devices (PFDs) while engaged in activities on the water. Only two PFDs were carried on the evening of the occurrence. Two of the victims were wearing them when recovered. In one instance, the victim was also wearing chest waders which had filled and become waterlogged. As a minimum requirement of the Small Vessel Regulations, all craft are required to have one approved lifejacket, PFD or life-saving cushion for each person on board.

Analysis

It is not certain what consideration was given to evaluating the meteorological conditions before departure. Given the experience of the couple who ran the camp, it is likely that the forecast dramatic change in the weather would have influenced their planning of the fishing trip. Because they were unaware of the weather forecast, they did not postpone the trip or plan to remain in the very sheltered fishing area overnight, to return during daylight.

The difficulties experienced in the unexpected bad weather conditions on the return trip also highlight the lack of emergency or contingency planning. With no meaning to the flashes from the other boats, those in the canoe were not aware that assistance was required.

Findings

1. No weather forecast had been obtained, and the group was unaware that a major low pressure system was rapidly approaching the area.
2. There was no emergency or contingency planning by the group leaders before departure.
3. The severe wind and rough water caused the boats to swamp and/or capsize, resulting in loss of life. Only 4 of the 12 persons in the group survived.
4. The group consisted of 12 persons, but only two personal flotation devices (PFDs) were taken on the trip.
5. The three survivors from the canoe believed the others were safely ashore, and they did not alert the radiotelephone operator to the situation.

Causes and Contributing Factors

The three small open craft proceeded on the return trip after dark in deteriorating weather conditions. Because no weather forecast had been obtained, the group was unaware of the forecast severity

of the winds and did not expect to encounter rough water. Contributing to the loss of life was the insufficient number of personal flotation devices taken on the trip and the absence of any contingency planning.

This report concludes the Transportation Safety Board's investigation into this occurrence. Consequently, the Board, consisting of Chairperson Benoît Bouchard, and members Maurice Harquail, Charles Simpson and W.A. Tadros, authorized the release of this report on 22 May 1997.