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## The Seventeenth District Online Magazine

### ***Stellar Assistance***

***Feature by PA2 Thomas McKenzie***

On the night of Tuesday, January 16, a debilitating engine room fire aboard the 316-foot Stellar Sea left the 142-person crew in an unenviable position – adrift, 120 miles north of Dutch Harbor in the notoriously cold, black waters of the Bering Sea, powerless in 20 to 30 knot winds and swells of 8 to 10 feet.

Fortunately, the ship's crew was in the habit of conducting drills and a fire drill had been held just 4 days prior to the casualty. When fire broke out, the ship's fire team members mustered with the necessary gear.



BERING SEA (Jan. 17, 2007) Crewmembers aboard the US Coast Guard Cutter Mellon maintain watch over the fish processing vessel Stellar Sea which suffered a debilitating engine room fire January 16, leaving it powerless and adrift in the Bering Sea north of Dutch Harbor. There were no injuries reported among the 142 person crew. Official Coast Guard photo courtesy of CGC Mellon.

They were able to discharge the CO2 system, and they waited an hour and 40 minutes before accessing the space with each person wearing a self-contained breathing apparatus. Meanwhile, all non-fire team crewmembers mustered at abandon ship stations with survival suits and other gear. As a result, there were no injuries reported among the crew, and the damage was limited to the engine and some of the wiring. While this left them without power, propulsion, heat, or galley services, they were able to communicate via HF/VHF radio using an emergency generator.

The Stellar Sea's Mayday was picked up by Communications Station Kodiak.

Petty Officer Jeremy Dawkins, a Search and Rescue controller with the 17th District, was on duty in the North Pacific Search and Rescue Coordination Center (NPSARCC) when news of the Stellar Sea arrived.

“The first thing that pops into my head when we get calls like this is ‘Where’s the closest Coast Guard asset?’ The second thing is just getting a UMIB (Urgent Marine Information Broadcast) out there,” said Dawkins, previously stationed with Sector Baltimore.

The NPSARCC team determined that the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Mellon was an estimated six hours from the Stellar Sea . As luck would have it, the Alaska Patriot, a nearby Good Samaritan vessel was just four hours away. But when it arrived on board, it was discovered the vessel lacked the capability to tow the Stellar Sea . Still, the Alaska Patriot remained with the stricken vessel until the Mellon arrived on scene and relieved them.



BERING SEA (Jan. 17, 2007) Crewmembers aboard the US Coast Guard Cutter Mellon maintain watch over the fish processing vessel Stellar Sea which suffered a crippling engine room fire January 16. It was later towed to Dutch Harbor by a commercial tug. There were no injuries reported among the 142 person crew. Official Coast Guard photo courtesy of CGC Mellon.

Once alongside the Stellar Sea , the Mellon placed the stricken vessel in stern tow and began the 120 mile trip toward Dutch Harbor , traveling through the darkness at an arduous 5 knots in 20 knot winds and 8-foot seas.

“There’s no such thing as a typical SAR case, really,” said Dawkins. “We don’t get a lot of cases like this, mostly medevacs. But weather always plays a big part.”

Further complications arose. The James Dunlop, a commercial tug which departed Dutch Harbor in order to assume the Mellon’s tow responsibility, discovered their port propeller had become fouled. Freeing it would require divers, forcing the James Dunlop to return to Dutch Harbor .

In addition, the towing bridle aboard the Stellar Sea had parted, and needed to be re-rigged. The crew of the Mellon determinedly pressed on.

When the crew of the James Dunlop was able to free their port propeller, they made relieved the Mellon and assumed the tow. The NPSARCC would maintain a close watch.

Once the Stellar Sea was moored safely in Dutch Harbor at 3:30 p.m. the following day, a Coast Guard Marine Safety Technician conducted a routine examination of the vessel. Meanwhile, the weary crew departed the vessel. It had been a long night.

“Mark Weed, the owner of the Stellar Sea, wrote the vessel’s main-space fire doctrine drawing heavily on specific lessons learned from the Galaxy fire,” said Lt Danielle Wiley, Fishing Vessel Safety Program Coordinator with the 17th Coast Guard, referring to the 171-foot catcher processor that suffered a main



BERING SEA (Jan. 17, 2006) Crewmembers aboard the US Coast Guard Cutter Mellon maintain a watch over the fish processing vessel Stellar Sea. A crippling engine room fire January 16 left the 316-foot vessel powerless and adrift in the Bering Sea 120 miles north of Dutch Harbor. There were no injuries reported among the 142 person crew. Official Coast Guard photo courtesy of CGC Mellon.

space fire and explosion on October 20, 2002. “The Galaxy investigation found evidence to suggest that drills were not being performed as required.”

When the fire broke out aboard the Galaxy, some of the fire team members mustered while others panicked and fled to their abandon ship stations, some of them without survival suits. Those remaining to combat the flames then attempted to discharge the CO2 system, unaware that the manual activation failed. Unable to recognize warning signs that the fire was still burning, they accessed the space less than 5 minutes later, causing a backdraft explosion. Of the twenty-six persons aboard the Galaxy, there were 5 injuries, 2 dead, and 1 person reported missing.

"Casualties at sea can be catastrophic and sudden," said Wiley. "Help is often a great distance away in Alaska . Fishermen who know their safety equipment and practice using it together during frequent and realistic drills are in the best position to save themselves and their vessel."

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