

The sinking of the motor vessel Leader L, March 2000

The following is an excerpt from a write up by by Rear-Admiral John Newton, Commander Joint Task Force Atlantic and Maritime Forces Atlantic 13 Oct 2016

Sailors respect the power of the sea. The relentless motion of a ship saps the energy of even the fittest. Personnel instinctively brace against the repetitive slamming and heavy rolls. The experienced tune their senses to smells, sounds and sensations; uncanny early warning of equipment working under strain. Unnerving vibrations radiate through the hull as rigid steel flexes like plastic; stress that insidiously works away at welds and joints.

Lessons handed down from centuries of seafaring, the shared experiences of a crew, and good leadership soothe anxieties in the most dangerous conditions. Crews tend intently to the idiosyncrasies of machinery systems. Electrical power and propulsion are life. When they fail, the energy of a storm attacks every material weakness possible. Countless hours of diligent attention to equipment maintenance assures that emergency systems will operate in defiance of nature's propensity to overwhelm the less prepared.

The crew of the Leader L had no doubt seen worse. Yet, circumstances vary in every experience. In this storm, hull plating failure started the chain of reactions. Flooding turned the ship's cargo of salt to slurry. Sloshing in the holds created unbearable stresses on the hull. Ruptured hatch covers hastened flooding. There was only a brief interval between realizing that all was lost, and the moment when flooding drove the bow below the surface and power failed.

As we raced to the last known position of the Leader L, we focused on our own safety. Crashing waves had ripped a hatch from our fore deck, flooded the gun turret, destroyed electronics and stove in the steel face of the superstructure. Hours of battling through heavy seas fatigued the crew, but as the position was approached, extra lookouts appeared and boats were readied for launching.

In time, an eerie scene developed ahead. Illuminated by flares from circling planes, a frantic search was underway by helicopters sent forth from our Task Group. Salt water activated lights marked lifesaving gear rapidly dispersing on the windblown sea. The 750-foot-long freighter had disappeared from humanity in the seconds following explosive hull failure. Orderly abandonment was all but impossible.

An object thought to be a lifeboat was spotted dead ahead. Before our speed could be reduced, an ugly spectacle slid past the starboard side. Where we had hoped to discover survivors, we were horrified to see a massive steel hatch cover torn free from the sinking ship. Floating vertically like a giant razor blade, its 20-meter length periodically appeared and disappeared in the passing waves. Then it was gone, into the darkness astern and not long afterward, into the deep. We had missed by mere meters becoming ourselves a casualty in the search and rescue.

Our boats' crews stayed on the water for hours, fighting cold and fatigue while executing some of the most dangerous boat work that I have ever witnessed. Miraculously, 13 members of the Leader L crew were rescued. It was a mere coincidence that found our Task Group only 200 miles distant from the floundering freighter. Sadly, 18 Filipino and Indian crewmembers perished in the violence of the sinking, from drowning and hypothermia.