

NTSB hearings shed light on violations

by Jennifer Gordon

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National Transportation Safety Board hearings on the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill started last week, shedding light on questionable practices and violations by the crew that may have led to the disaster.

Third Mate Gregory T. Cousins was the first of 28 witnesses to take the

stand at the Hotel Captain Cook in Anchorage Tuesday and face a grilling by the board of inquiry and technical panel.

Cousins admitted in his testimony that although he was put in charge of the ship by former Capt. Joseph Hazelwood, he was not certified to run the vessel. While he said that he felt capable of steering the ship through

waters full of ice, he said the ship would not respond properly when he tried to turn it back toward the shipping lanes.

Cousins' testimony did not match information released from the ship's course recorder. He said that he started turning the ship about five minutes from Bligh Reef, but the recorder shows the action taking place

only one minute before the ship hit the reef.

Capt. William E. Murphy, who piloted the *Exxon Valdez* up to Rocky Point, said it is possible the ship didn't react normally when Cousins tried to turn it. He said that in shallow water a vessel will sometimes "smell" the bottom and become sluggish to

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commands.

Murphy said Hazelwood left the bridge about 20 minutes after departing the port. He said it is normal for a captain to leave for short periods of time, but not for 90 minutes.

"Outstanding" was the way Murphy described Hazelwood's record before the spill. He said, however, that he had smelled alcohol on the captain's breath when they were talking in the wheelhouse.

After the pilot left the ship at Rocky Point, Hazelwood came back up to the bridge and gave instructions to head toward Busby Island and to put the ship on autopilot, said Harry L. Claar, helmsman on the *Exxon Valdez*. Claar said he thought the instruction was unusual, because ships are normally hand steered through the sound.

The ship was also put on "sea speed," a speed much faster than usual for a closed area such as the sound. Cousins said that he took the ship off autopilot and slowed the speed long before the ship hit the reef.

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The crews' reaction to the grounding ranged from panic to apathy. James R. Kunkel, chief mate of the ship, said he had a hard time sitting still, waiting for officials to arrive. Claar, however, said he went to bed.

"If they wanted me, they knew where to get a hold of me," Claar said.

Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Thomas Falkenstein was the first to arrive on board the *Exxon Valdez* after the grounding. At the hearing, he said he was more than two feet away from Hazelwood when he smelled alcohol

on the captain's breath. The captain was also smoking a cigarette, which Falkenstein asked to be extinguished, considering the strong fumes in the air.

Falkenstein said that when he asked Hazelwood for a urine sample for a drug/alcohol test, the captain declined and did not consent until after a specialist was flown in to take blood samples.

Officials at the hearing questioned the crew about fatigue and overwork. Most said that it was part of the job, and that they had never been impaired in their work by fatigue. Kunkel said that it is not unusual for him to work 24-hour shifts.

The NTSB said results from the hearings would not be available until later this year.