



PRELIMINARY REPORT

MARINE

DCA19MM047

The information in this preliminary report is subject to change and may contain errors. It will be supplemented or corrected during the course of the investigation.



Preaccident photo of *Conception*. (Source: Truth Aquatics)

On Monday, September 2, 2019, about 3:14 a.m. Pacific daylight time, US Coast Guard Sector Los Angeles/Long Beach received a distress call from the 75-foot commercial diving vessel *Conception*, with 39 persons on board. The *Conception* was owned and operated by Truth Aquatics, Inc., based in Santa Barbara, California. The *Conception* was classified by the Coast Guard as a small passenger vessel that took passengers on dive excursions in the waters around the Channel Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara. The accident voyage was a three-day diving trip to the Channel Islands. On the last night of the voyage, the vessel was anchored in Platts Harbor off Santa Cruz Island, 21.5 nautical miles south-southwest of Santa Barbara, when it caught fire. Weather conditions were reported as slight to no winds with patchy fog, 2–3-foot seas, and air and water temperature about 65°F. The *Conception* was carrying 39 persons, 6 of which were crew. Thirty-three passengers and one crewmember died.

The wood and fiberglass vessel was built in 1981. The vessel had three levels: the uppermost sun deck, containing the wheelhouse and crew rooms; the main deck, which included the salon and galley; and the lower deck within the hull, which housed the passenger berthing (bunkroom) and shower room, as well as the engine room and tanks.

Initial interviews of three crewmembers revealed that no mechanical or electrical issues were reported. At the time of the fire, five crewmembers were asleep in berths behind the wheelhouse, and one crewmember was asleep in the bunkroom, which was accessed from the salon down a ladderwell in the forward, starboard corner of the compartment. The bunkroom had an emergency escape hatch located on the aft end, which also exited to the salon. There were two, locally-sounding smoke detectors in the overhead of the bunkroom.

A crewmember sleeping in the wheelhouse berths was awakened by a noise and got up to investigate. He saw a fire at the aft end of the sun deck, rising up from the salon compartment below. The crewmember alerted the crew behind the wheelhouse. As crewmembers awoke, the captain radioed a distress message to the Coast Guard.

The crewmembers attempted to access the salon and passengers below. Unable to use the aft ladder, which was on fire, the crewmembers jumped down to the main deck (one crewmember broke his leg in the process) and tried to access the salon and galley compartment, which was fully engulfed by fire at the aft end and by thick smoke in the forward end, through a forward window. Unable to open the window and overwhelmed by smoke, the crew jumped overboard.

Two crewmembers and the captain swam to the stern, reboarded the vessel, opened the hatch to the engine room, and saw no fire. Access to the salon through the aft doors was blocked by fire, so they launched a small skiff and picked up the remaining two crewmembers in the water. They transferred to a recreational vessel anchored nearby (*Grape Escape*) where the captain continued to radio for help, while two crewmembers returned to the *Conception* to search for survivors around the burning hull. Local Coast Guard and fire departments arrived on scene to extinguish the fire and conduct search and rescue. The vessel burned to the waterline by morning and subsequently sank in about 60 feet of water.

Later that day, the Coast Guard declared the accident a major marine casualty. The NTSB was named as the lead federal agency for the safety investigation and launched a full team to Santa Barbara, arriving on scene the following morning. The Coast Guard, Truth Aquatics, Inc., Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office, and Santa Barbara County Fire Department were named as parties to the NTSB investigation.

Investigators have collected documents from recent Coast Guard inspections and visited another Truth Aquatics vessel, *Vision*, a vessel similar to the *Conception*. Salvage operations to bring the wreckage to the surface for examination and documentation have begun. Investigators plan to examine current regulations regarding vessels of this type, year of build, and operation; early-warning and smoke-detection and alarm systems; evacuation routes; training; and current company policies and procedures. Efforts continue to determine the source of the fire.