

Ocean Titan saves seven souls from North Atlantic

The M/V Ocean Titan in the early morning of Dec. 9 conducted a heroic rescue at sea in the Atlantic Ocean, saving the lives of all seven crew members of the bulk carrier M/V Florece as their vessel sank in extremely rough seas.

The tanker M/V Afrodite collided with the M/V Florece at about 3:30 a.m. that morning approximately 250 miles southwest of Land's End in the Bay of Biscay, according to VesselTracker. An hour later, the ship sank as the Ocean Titan arrived on scene. AMO member Capt. Christopher Hill, master of the Ocean Titan, described in detail the rescue operation, which was conducted in “near gale force winds and 12- to 14-foot seas on a pitch-black and bitterly cold winter North Atlantic night.”

As noted by Capt. Hill in his report, despite conditions at the time and a full load of cargo, including a shoreside crane with a high center of gravity, “I knew long before the rescue that I had on board one of the best crews, top to bottom, that I had ever set sail with.” AMO officers sailing aboard the Ocean Titan with Capt. Hill during the rescue included Chief Mate Thomas Lisante, Second Mate Daniel Landgrebe, Third Mate Zachary Gray, Chief Engineer John Vlahakis and First Assistant Engineer Sean Donovan.

Capt. Hill reported, in part, the following:

“From my bridge and with the scene of the collision lying broad on my starboard bow at about four miles, I could clearly see that the FLORECE was in a bad way. She lay broadside to the heavy swell and was heeled such that a goodly portion of her hull could be seen in the lights of the nearby AFRODITE. Her appearance was grotesque. As I looked at the stricken ship, and right before my eyes, the FLORECE sank. She sank neither by the stern nor by the bow. She sank suddenly and bodily while lying flat on her starboard side; there one second and gone the next. Her lights, her AIS information and her radar image were all instantly lost. Watching the FLORECE sink was, on the one hand, amazing and on the other, horrifying.

“Within a few minutes of watching the ship sink and while still a little stunned by what I’d just seen, a distress flare was fired in my direction from a distance of no more than a mile or two off my starboard bow. My lookout immediately reported a liferaft in the water. I was closer by two miles to the liferaft than the AFRODITE, but was still under the presumption that the AFRODITE was in the process of performing the rescue.”

A report posted on vesseltracker.com stated the Afrodite had attempted to “deploy its fast rescue craft but had been unsuccessful due to the sea swell.” Responding to an earlier offer of assistance, the Afrodite had previously informed Capt. Hill the situation was “in hand.”

“Upon seeing the flare, I backed the engines hard, called all hands and raised the AFRODITE’s captain on the VHF,” Hill reported. “I explained to him that I was much closer to the liferaft than was he and asked again if he needed assistance. The captain, this

time and without hesitation, acceded and asked me to make an attempt at rescue. I informed the AFRODITE's Captain that I would try, but was not sure given the heavy weather that I could maneuver my vessel close enough to the survivors to rescue them. I asked him to steam slightly to the South thereby providing me with some additional sea room and changed my course.

"I steered to windward of the liferaft and tried to keep enough way on the ship to prevent broaching while at the same time proceeding slowly enough so that I could stop upon reaching the raft. Too slow and I would lose control of the bow and run the liferaft down; too fast and I'd fly by the raft and risk getting the raft caught under my stern.

"As I closed on the liferaft, the scene became dreamlike. Each breaking wave was lined with unrecognizable debris from the Florece. Lights were flashing everywhere from locator beacons attached to lifejackets and liferings which had gone adrift on the water, orange smoke from emergency smoke canisters was being whipped across the water by the winds, reflective tape could be seen flashing everywhere and distress flares were being fired from the rafts in rapid succession and in every direction. Most of all I will remember how insignificant the liferafts looked under my bright deck lights rising and falling with each massive wave and how helpless, how scared the survivors looked in their survival suits waving their arms from the liferaft canopy's open hatchway.

"I had to watch the compass, the propeller pitch indicator, speed indicator, course indicator, rudder angle indicator, course over ground, speed over ground and the anemometer, adjust speed, give rudder commands and keep an eye on the nearest liferaft. I instructed the Chief Mate out on deck to tell me which way to swing the bow once rafts were alongside or nearly so. His performance was stellar. I revved the engines ahead and astern and went hard to port and hard to starboard on the rudder to remain on station against the wind and seas. After achieving a position to windward, and with the liferaft on my beam, I used the engines and rudder to maintain a constant heading without moving ahead or astern and used the wind to carry me to the rafts. Once close to the rafts, I used the engines and rudder to find a happy medium between blocking the swell and minimizing the roll and tried to maintain that circumstance just long enough to drag the survivors onto my decks. We did this by throwing a heaving line to the raft and, after the men in the liferaft had tripped their sea anchor, my crew hauled the raft into the vicinity of our pilot ladder. A safety harness made off to a safety line was then lowered to the raft for the survivors to secure over their survival suits. After donning the safety harness, and with my crew tending the safety line on deck, the men in the liferaft would, in turn, wait for a swell that was to their liking then lunge for the rope ladder. It should be noted that some of the survivors chose not to wait and braved the transition from raft to ladder without a harness."

After all seven made it onboard, "I made arrangements with the jurisdictional Coast Guard to make a quick port call into Lisbon, a day and a half away, to disembark the survivors," Hill reported. "We, the crew of the OCEAN TITAN, would in that day and a half get to know the men we rescued well enough to know that they were worth the risks we took.

“The seven survivors were put ashore in the Port of Lisbon on the evening of 10 December. All were in good health and in good spirits. The OCEAN TITAN was showered upon arrival into Lisbon with high praise.”

In a thoughtful handwritten letter to Capt. Hill, the captain of the Port of Cascais, wrote in part: “Please accept this very small token of our appreciation for a job very well done in the best tradition of seamen in general and those belonging to the U.S. merchant marine in particular.”

John Toner, technical director for Maritime Management, responsible for the Florece, also expressed his gratitude to the officers and crew of the Ocean Titan:

“I would like to send our sincere and heartfelt gratitude to you and particularly Captain Hill and his crew for the noble, professional and valiant actions on Friday morning to save the entire crew of our vessel Florece.

“In these days of procedures, audits and endless inspections it is easy to lose sight of the real profession of seamanship and the need for prompt decisions and actions which you demonstrated in rescuing men in peril on the high seas.

“You were their only chance of survival at that location. There are many sons, daughters, wives, mothers, fathers and friends of the men you have saved who will be thinking of you and how you have brought their loved ones back safely.”

The 390-foot heavy-lift ship Ocean Titan is operated by Pacific-Gulf Marine and manned in all licensed positions by American Maritime Officers.