

Ship victim is Williamsburg man

Fire-fighting system blamed in 2 deaths

By William H. McMichael
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NORFOLK

Williamsburg resident William B. Turek, 44, was one of the two men killed in an accident Wednesday aboard a ship at Norfolk Shipbuilding and Drydock Corp., authorities said Thursday.

Turek, a Coast Guard lieutenant commander, was the senior Coast Guard resident inspector at the shipyard.

In January last year his wife, Patricia, died at age 38. She was director of education and the medical library at Williamsburg Community Hospital. They had a daughter who is now 13, according to Carol Heisler, a nursing supervisor at the hospital.

Heisler described William Turek as easy-going. "He was very attentive to his wife. He spent a lot time with her," she said.

Also killed was Peter Humphries, also 44, of Norfolk, an employee of VSE Corporation of

Alexandria.

Investigators are looking at the possibility that a faulty valve on the ship's fire-suppression system was a cause of the accident aboard the Cape Diamond, a freighter owned by the Maritime Administration. It was scheduled to leave for Jacksonville, Fla., on a sea trial Thursday.

A shipyard spokeswoman said Turek was examining the fire-suppression system.

The system normally floods a room on fire with carbon dioxide, starving the flames. At the time of the incident, there was no fire, said Norfolk Fire Department spokeswoman Beverly Oliver.

The potential problem with the valve was mentioned during a Thursday briefing in Norfolk by the investigating officer, Lt. Cdr. Michael Kearney, senior inspector with the Baltimore Marine Safety Office.

Kearney toured the ship prior to the briefing and said he decided "to place a seal on one of the valves that may have had something to do with this" to ensure that no one could tamper with the valve. The

room in which the valve is located is now sealed and under 24-hour guard.

Kearney said the Cape Diamond has a "low pressure" fire-extinguishing system fed by two large bottles of carbon dioxide. At the time of the incident, he said, "the engine room was flooded with carbon dioxide." The engine room, he said, "is not typically considered a closed space. But when the system goes off, the ventilation system shuts down."

He also noted that an alarm is supposed to go off when the system is activated. Workers reported hearing an alarm Wednesday, but it's uncertain whether the alarm was a genuine signal or an unrelated test.

Six men, including two fire-fighters, were also injured in the accident.

A fire-extinguishing system was also the culprit July 31, 1992, when three sailors aboard the USS Sumter, moored at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base, were killed by carbon dioxide fumes that flooded a storage room on the main deck where they were working.

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