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Ex-skipper blasts Hazelwood actions

By DON HUNTER
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Capt. Joseph Hazelwood recklessly put his ship and crew in danger through a series of bad decisions that included a risky attempt to free the ruptured Exxon Valdez from Bligh Reef, a former tanker captain testified Tuesday.

Robert Beevers said Hazelwood acted rashly in leaving the bridge of the Valdez during a critical maneuver, placing the ship on autopilot in the confined, ice-laden waters of Prince William Sound, and leaving unqualified seamen in charge of the ship during his absence.

"He created the risk of grounding the vessel, he created the risk of completely losing the vessel, he created the risk of fire and explosion and possible death of his crew," Beevers said.

Hazelwood is charged with felony criminal mischief and three misdemeanors, including operating a vessel under the influence of alcohol. Previous witnesses have testified he spent much of the afternoon before the grounding drinking vodka in two Valdez bars. If convicted, he could be jailed for seven years and fined \$61,000.

The Valdez slammed into Bligh Reef a few minutes after midnight, spilling nearly 11 million gallons of oil. The mess fouled hundreds of miles of shoreline, killed thousands of seabirds and mammals, and canceled commercial fishing seasons in Prince William Sound.

Shortly after the Hazelwood trial ended for the day in state court, a federal grand jury issued an indictment charging Exxon with violations of environmental and shipping laws, including two felonies. Apparently in anticipation of the pending indictment, Superior Court Judge Karl Johnstone broadened his regular admonition to jurors in the Hazelwood case, warning them to avoid all news reports about the oil spill and reminding them he can sequester the jury.

Beevers worked in the merchant marine for 24 years, served as a tanker captain for 14 years, and made an estimated 50 to 60 trips through Prince William Sound. The state is paying him about \$35,000, plus expenses, to testify as an expert.

In testimony frequently interrupted by unsuccessful defense objections, Beevers faulted Hazelwood for poor judgment in practically every significant decision the captain made on his last, brief voyage.

If jurors believe him, Beevers could devastate Hazelwood's defense. The defense has a slate of tanker captains in the wings who presumably will counter Beevers' testimony.

As proceedings closed Tuesday, defense attorney Richard Madson was attempting to chip away at Beevers' credibility, alternating sly jibes and heavy-handed slaps.

"I'm not standing in the sight of God, am I?" Madson said, asking if Beevers believed himself perfect or if he would concede having made a mistake or two in his career. Beevers acknowledged erring on occasion, but said he hadn't run any ships aground, either.

According to Beevers' analysis of the ship's course recorder and other instruments, Third Mate Gregory Cousins and Helmsman Robert Kagan either lied about taking the ship off automatic pilot or failed to make a course change when they said they did.

Hazelwood put the ship on automatic pilot after issuing a course change to avoid ice ahead. Cousins and Kagan both testified

the autopilot was disengaged moments after the captain went below. Cousins said he followed Hazelwood's order and issued a new course change at 11:55 p.m., as the ship reached a point designated by Hazelwood.

But Beevers said the ship's automated course recorder indicates the Valdez didn't register a turn until 12:02 a.m., about seven minutes after Cousins said he ordered Kagan to execute a 10-degree right rudder maneuver.

Beevers said the course recorder should have shown such a turn within 20 to 30 seconds after Kagan moved the wheel.

Beevers also testified that he believes Hazelwood tried to force the Valdez off Bligh Reef after the grounding, a maneuver that experts agree could have capsized the vessel. Although Hazelwood said in a tape-recorded radio conversation with the Coast Guard shortly after the grounding that he was trying to maneuver the ship "off" the reef, he now claims he was trying to hold the ship on the reef.

But Beevers said he had analyzed the engine and rudder orders issued by Hazelwood that night and concluded Hazelwood in fact was trying to free the ship.

Beevers said Hazelwood also displayed bad judgment by:

- Returning to the Valdez shortly before the vessel was to depart, instead of being on hand hours before to see to cargo loading, check on weather and ice conditions and prepare the ship for departure.

- Leaving the bridge while harbor pilot Ed Murphy saw the vessel through Valdez Narrows. Murphy was a qualified pilot, but Beevers said the captain of a vessel should stay on the bridge, ready to take over if the pilot erred or an emergency arose.

- Prematurely deciding to divert the Valdez from the normal, outbound tanker lane to the inbound lane in order to detour around ice. Beevers said Hazelwood should have reduced speed and made a closer approach to the area where his radar showed floating ice "bergies," before deciding if he wanted to change course or simply maneuver through the ice field.

- Leaving the bridge a second time, in the middle of the maneuver around the ice.

- Putting Cousins in charge of the ship during the maneuver. "He had his ship heading into a dangerous situation, a situation that needed someone with experience to maneuver it, a situation that was beyond what you'd expect any relatively inexperienced third mate to do on his own," Beevers said.

- Leaving Kagan at the wheel during a critical maneuver in a confined area. "(It would be) much more prudent to put a person you had confidence in on the wheel than to put a man that you knew had had problems steering," Beevers said. Previous witnesses have testified Kagan was sometimes unreliable and needed supervision even when performing simple tasks.

- Pulling the ship's lookout from the bow to a wing near the bridge. When maneuvering through ice, Beevers said, it is better to have two sets of eyes on the bow, and he said he would have sent his chief mate to the forward lookout position.

- Ordering the ship ahead at a speed about twice what Beevers said he considered prudent for maneuvering near ice.

- Failing to order all hands on deck with their survival suits. Two cooks earlier testified they dozed through the grounding and didn't realize the ship was in danger until hours later.

