Coast Guard Begins Drill Barge Grounding Inquiry

DAN JOLING, Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — The grounding of a Royal Dutch Shell PLC drill barge off a remote Alaska island began with a bracket connected to a tow line being ripped off the vessel in heavy Gulf of Alaska weather, a Shell official testified Monday.

Norman "Buddy" Custard, Shell Alaska's emergency response coordinator, was the first witness at a Coast Guard marine casualty investigation hearing that will review the grounding of the Kulluk, a 266-foot diameter drilling barge that Shell used last year to drill in the Beaufort Sea off Alaska's north coast.

Damage to the ship from the grounding was a factor in Shell's decision not to drill in Arctic waters in 2013. The vessel is now undergoing repairs in Singapore.

The Kulluk was bound Dec. 27 from the Aleutian Islands' Dutch Harbor to a Seattle shipyard behind the 360-foot towing ship Aiviq. The vessels ran into 20-foot swells and 45 knot winds and the tow line "parted," Shell and the Coast Guard said at the time.

Custard, a former Coast Guard officer, mostly focused on the Shell response once the barge was adrift. However, he said the initial separation was caused by a failure of a towing shackle parting from a towing plate on the Kulluk. The 120-ton shackle has been missing since the initial separation.

"We don't know why the tow line separated," he said.

Custard said he received word of the incident and assembled the company's response team. The immediate concern, he said, was the 18 people on board the drill ship. Within hours, however, the Aiviq had retrieved and hooked up an emergency tow line streaming from the Kulluk.

"Everything was starting to stabilize," Custard said.

The plan was to tow the Kulluk to a sheltered bay near the city of Kodiak for repairs to the primary towing system but trouble quickly arose again. At 3:30 the next morning, Custard said, he took a call that the Aiviq had lost power to its four primary engines. It retained bow thrusters for steering but both vessels were adrift.

What followed were multiple failed attempts to control the Kulluk.

A Coast Guard cutter Dec. 28 attempted to tow the Aiviq but entangled tow lines in its propeller and had to withdraw. By late the second day, Custard said, the deck of the Kulluk was "lively" from the battering from the storm and crew members were

exhausted. Responders considered what would happen if the vessel grounded, or if lifeboats would have to be lowered in the pitching seas, and instead requested a helicopter rescue by the Coast Guard. The agency tried but decided it was too dangerous with darkness falling.

The tug Guardsman established a line to the Aiviq but that line failed.

On Dec. 29, the Coast Guard flew fuel injectors to the Aiviq, and repairs allowed the crew to fire up engines. The vessel remained connected to the Kulluk and another tug, the Nanuq, established a second line. The vessels began towing the Kulluk toward Kodiak, and during a lull in the weather, Coast Guard helicopters used baskets to lift off the 18 crew members.

However, both tow lines parted again Dec. 30.

The Aiviq and another tug, the Alert, established lines again to the Kulluk Dec. 31. However, the weather conditions proved to be insurmountable.

In 35 to 40-foot waves and wind that approached 70 mph, Custard said, the line to the Aiviq failed and the tug found itself being pulled to dangerous shallow water. The Alert attempted to maneuver the Kulluk to coastline where it would cause the least amount of environmental damage if its hull split, and when it was three miles from shore, the Alert cut the barge loose.

The Kulluk ran aground Dec. 31 in shallow water off Sitkalidak Island, just off Kodiak.

The Aiviq on Jan. 6 pulled the Kulluk off the rocky bottom with no fuel leaked. It was towed to protected waters in Kodiak Island's Kiliuda Bay, where its damage was assessed before a tow back to Dutch Harbor and then a trip by lift ship to Singapore.

The marine casualty investigation hearing will continue Tuesday and could last two weeks.

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