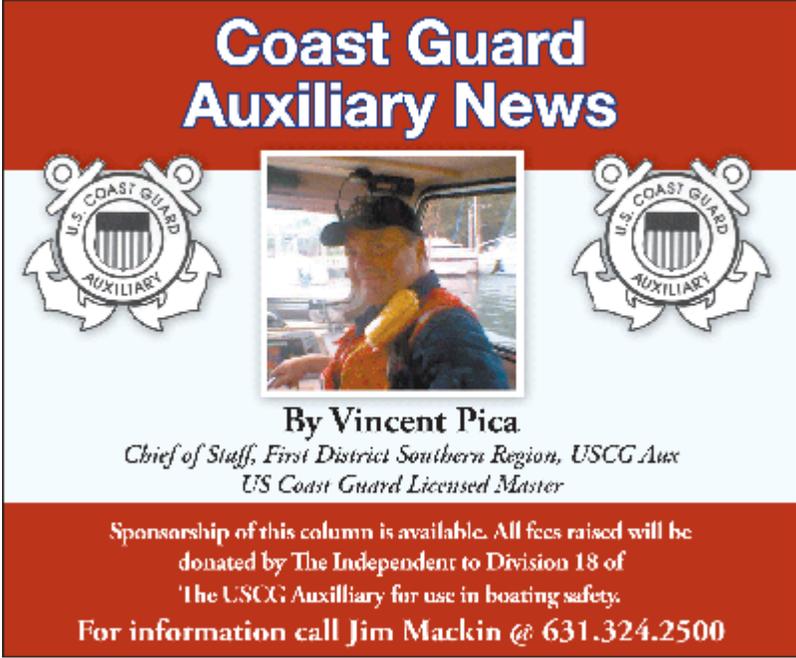


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INDEPENDENT

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Coast Guard Aux NEWS ▶

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**Coast Guard
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The Costa Concordia - Can It Happen Here?

By Vincent Pica

The world's eyes and attention have been on the wreck of the Costa Concordia cruise ship off the Italian island of Giglio? Most professionals believe that, given the way the the captain and certainly some of the crew acted, had it happened in the north Atlantic rather than along the shore of Italy, the disaster would have been far worse. While the details of the wreck and allegations of wrongdoing are still coming out, there are a few things to keep in mind about disaster at sea. This column is about that.

Sinking isn't, believe it or not, that uncommon

I have seen stats that say that vessels sink quite commonly, on average once a week on a world-wide basis. They don't draw the attention of a vessel like the Costa Concordia – but they happen. This means that safety drills are really important! Unlike the wearied traveler that doesn't want to listen to a stewardess tell them again how to put on a seat-belt or how to evacuate a plane, travelers at sea must not only pay attention but participate in the drill(s.)

It's not like the Ol' Days

In the era of the Titanic, there was only one way to go from Europe to the US and vice versa – by sea. Now, seafaring, for the private citizen, is a vacation, not a transit. The ships are technologically as far advanced as space ships – more so in a fashion because they have become floating cities. Also, search and rescue has become far more sophisticated, including the development of the AMVER system by the US Coast Guard, back in the 50s. With AMVER, ships at sea are automatically notified of pending disasters in the path of their travels and thus can provide Good Samaritan aid usually more quickly than otherwise possible (see The Independent, "The Good Samaritan – Safety of Life at Sea", 11/17/10.)

But Not Everything is State-of-the-Art

Most ships though don't have internet capability, largely because it is still expensive to go up to the satellite and back. This also applies to "sat-phones" – expensive and thus not omnipresent like cell phones on land. So, drills, drills and drills are still necessary to "buy time" for the rescuers to arrive in scene.

Having said that, a friend of mine, Captain John Konrad, recently observed, "They can build a \$1 billion ship in one year, but to build a \$1 million captain to pilot that ship takes 10 years." So, the basic element in the equation is still people, starting with the captain of the ship.

Therein lies an issue that will consume a great deal of soul-searching in the days and weeks ahead within the commercial seafaring industry...

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