

Collision Investigations: What I Learned, Part 2

Part 2 of 3. Read Part 1 [here](#).

The lead Judge Advocate General (JAG) officer came into my stateroom about five days into the investigation and said “you need to hear this!” A small digital recorder, attached with Velcro to a steel support near the bridge-to-bridge radio for a recent tasking—not part of normal ship’s equipment—recorded the conversations and orders of the bridge team up to and including the actual collision.

The team was told about the tape and listened to it for hours to get to the critical moments in question. The recording shed light on the timeline and snapped many pieces into place. It also shed light on the importance of context—commonly referred to as “command climate.” The events on any given night never occur in isolation—they reflect the results of months or even years of training, of personal interactions between the commanding officer and watch teams, and how the crew perceives and interprets the captain’s expectations. In the case of the USS Porter, these aspects were well covered in Captain Steve Coughlin’s excellent 2015 Proceedings article and have no bearing on current events. The tape has been released by the Navy and is still a chilling listen. The interviews filled in many blanks in this layer of the story.

Technology played a key role in finalizing the investigation but that took time—digital reconstruction of nearly a dozen separate systems was much more challenging and time consuming than we expected, but the level of precision and detail it provided was astounding and filled in most of the remaining blanks. The findings of fact, each firmly tied to a piece of evidence, and recommendations, each meticulously linked to a finding of fact, fell into place and the finished report began its trip up the review chain. Only then, after many additional weeks of reviews, questions, and answers did my boss ask my opinion. It was the hardest question I have had to answer in a 30-year career . . . should the captain remain in command?

To be continued tomorrow in Part 3 tomorrow. Read Part 1 [here](#).