

# Collision Investigations: What I learned, Part 3

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

My answer to the question at the end of Part two is incidental to the story; the decision about a “loss of confidence” lies with the officer’s superiors in the chain of command. Each case is unique and will be judged on its merits and in context. A British captain and professional acquaintance once shared that he remained in command after a collision and received a letter from the First Sea Lord that started, “You became a better Naval Officer today.” His ship was damaged but his career survived. I was fortunate in my close calls for reasons discussed earlier. That said, I do believe the Navy could be more forgiving, especially in the less severe cases. Accountability is a bedrock of the naval profession in all cases; the question should be whether given all the circumstances involved (and the investigation will uncover every misstep) that confidence in the individual responsibility is actually lost rather than an automatic assumption.

A Navy investigation has many purposes. The safety report is conducted by a separate team of experts, and covers lessons and process improvements in a non-attributational format. It is completely separate from a legal or manual of the judge advocate general (JAGMAN report), which is used to assign responsibility, culpability and, in Admiralty court, for determining financial liability. In the aftermath of the USS Porter (DDG-78) collision, many of the lessons were folded into the surface navy training programs, including a detailed scenario where the actual tape is played as a “voiceover” in the shiphandling simulator reconstruction of the event in Newport for all senior officers. Beyond seamanship, less tangible aspects from leadership to fatigue have been explored. Other lessons are beyond the scope of this discussion; the bottom line is that to serve these purposes, the level of detailed, expert analysis and meticulous documentation is among the highest possible-to do it right takes a great deal of time. For this investigator, the experience brought back chilling memories of a few very close calls in my own career, left me with a renewed appreciation for the unique challenges of the maritime profession, and drove home the very personal and human weight of responsibility that comes with command at sea.