

No Answer

by Tim Coleman

At 7 p.m. on September 22, 1978, the 75-foot offshore fishing boat *Lobsta 1* left Point Judith, RI for a fishing trip. At roughly 2 p.m. the next day, a Greek tanker spotted the boat capsized, part of its bow still above the water, with no sign of the captain and four crewmembers. Later the craft vanished from sight, sinking in roughly 245 feet of water about 40 miles southeast of Montauk Point.

The men aboard were lost, and to this day no one knows for sure what happened to the vessel and the five people on it. According to news accounts from the *Westerly Sun* and the *Providence Journal*, the ship was constructed at the Bender Shipyard in Mobile, AL and launched in 1972, at a cost of \$200,000. She was said to be a "model of safety and efficiency," complete with a full refrigeration system.

After discovery by the tanker, someone, perhaps aboard the tanker or an aircraft, took a photo of the boat bow up, in the seas. However, by the next morning the *Lobsta 1* disappeared from sight, causing a massive search coordinated by the Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Center on Governor's Island, NY. Both aircraft and the cutter *Chilula* from Morehead City, NC were involved.

By darkness on that Sunday night, nothing had been found after "searching tens of thousands of square miles," said a Coast Guard spokesman. Besides the Coast Guard, the owner of the craft was also up in a plane looking over 600 square miles until his eyes burned from the searching and staring. All he turned up was an unmarked lobster pot and two unmarked buoys of the type used on board. The owner surmised that the trawler was too seaworthy to capsize "without cause" and believed that the vessel was rammed and sunk by another ship.

The captain of the *Lobsta 1* was the son of the press secretary of First Lady Rosalyn Carter, wife of Jimmy Carter, then President of the United States. Despite no sign of any contact, I suspect pressure was applied to the Coast Guard to keep searching. At the height of the effort, two airplanes, a helicopter, a cutter and a Polish research vessel all combed the ocean for naught.

Relatives of the crewmembers criticized the search effort saying that the Coast Guard should have sent out a diver, hopefully to rescue any persons trapped under the capsized hull. The Coast Guard responded by saying that they were informed the Greek ship had sighted a lifeboat, not a capsized 75-foot fishing vessel.

After determining that the ship was no longer afloat, a Navy plane with detection equipment was brought in to run a search pattern over the area, looking for wrecks on the bottom. The plane came up with five targets and investigated with side-scan sonar on the cutter *Chilula* to find which of the five was the *Lobsta 1*.

Side-scan sonar consists of a small, torpedo-like towfish pulled through the water at slow speeds, connected by cable to a receiving



The 75-foot offshore fishing boat "Lobsta 1" at her berth in Point Judith, RI before she sank under mysterious circumstances on or about September 22, 1978.

Photo courtesy Providence Journal.

computer/monitor. The towfish sends out a beam from either side, recording any objects that stick up on the bottom; it also can detect density of wrecks - an old, beat-down wooden fishing boat versus a recently sunk steel trawler. The more expensive sonars can literally produce a photo-like image on a computer screen of the sunken object if sea conditions are calm, conditions sometimes required to get an optimal image.



The day after she left port, this photo was taken of the vessel capsized from unknown causes. She later sank in roughly 245 feet of water roughly 40 miles southeast of Montauk Point.

Photo courtesy Associated Press.

In time, the *Lobsta 1* was identified and the search for the five men called off. By Thursday, September 28, it was obvious that the men were gone, another vessel that would not be returning home, its name joining the ranks of the estimated 6,000 shipwrecks on the bottom off the New England coast.

Later, cameras were lowered to the

wreck and found a dent in the hull just behind the wheelhouse on the starboard. Photos of the craft on the bottom and the suspicious dent were made available to the public at the hearing on the matter held in Providence, RI on January 10, 1979 by the Coast Guard. Officially the Coast Guard did **not** think the *Lobsta 1* was rammed, but the owner continued to argue otherwise. To this date, no one knows the reason this stout-looking fishing boat never returned home, taking five men to their graves.

There has been speculation galore about the reason for the sinking, with all types of ideas put forth; others wondered about the ID of the other four wrecks found by the Navy search. No mention of them was made in the newspaper accounts I've looked at, but I suspect some research into Coast Guard archives would turn up the answer.

To the west of the *Lobsta 1* sinking, sit the remains of a wreck my commercial fishing sources say

is a fishing boat called the *Allison* and to the west-southwest is the U.S.S. WWII submarine *Spikefish*, subject of an earlier article in this magazine. Off to the north-northwest, is an unknown wreck, said to come up quite a bit off the bottom and visited from time to time over the years by long-range party boats from Montauk and Point Judith. And, to the northeast of the *Lobsta 1* is the small wreck of a recreational fishing boat, the *Little Fishbucket*.

Completing the sweep around the site, we find another unknown wreck 10 miles to the east-northeast, a site listed on many commercial fishermen's list of underwater obstructions as the place where a large dragger hung up and bent one of its outriggers trying to free its bottom gear from the wreck below.

Last on the list of possible targets the Navy plane may have found is a location nine miles to the east-southeast where a dragger from Point Judith lost everything in its bottom trawl: net, doors, and cables used to get the net to the bottom. It's been my experience that when a fishing boat loses everything like that a substantial wreck or bottom obstruction

is the culprit.

The tragedy of the *Lobsta 1* makes all aware of the power of the sea and what may happen when we venture out on the domain of Mother Nature. Let's all take heed and give safe passage its due, never underestimating that bad things happen and that we should always be on guard on the water.