

# Voices from the Deep: What the *Pacific Charmer* Tragedy Means for Preventing Fishing Accidents

Roger Boshier<sup>1</sup>

University of British Columbia, Canada

**Abstract:** *The CFV Pacific Charmer capsized, sank and two men died. Using interviews with survivors, associates of the deceased and rescuers, the author theorizes the incident and charts what needs to be done to prevent fishboat “accidents.”*

## Dying to Fish

Despite the collapse of commercial fishing on both coasts, 300 Canadian fishboats come to grief each year. Commercial fishing is a dangerous occupation – one of the worst. As part of the effort to ameliorate the situation, the *Workers’ Compensation Board* (WCB) now has a major responsibility for prevention education. However, their operations are excessively anchored in Functionalist discourse. Although fishing operations are important, more is involved in “accidents” and their prevention. Unlike the continuing fascination with the *Swissair* disaster or publicity generated by the loss of five recreational boaters after *Sunny Boy* ran over a towline in Vancouver harbour, a dead fisherman hardly merits public attention. Dying is “part of the game.” Hence, according to popular wisdom, particularly in fishing families, “fishing is dangerous” and accidents “just happen.” There is considerable fatalism and many consider death to be “part of the job.”

Roxy Stove, a 25 year old female cook died when *Scotia Cape* went missing. But, almost without exception, it is men that die. Why? One reason is that prevention efforts are almost entirely nested in techno-rational discourse. Numerous manuals are preoccupied with equipment and exhort fishermen to check flares and liferafts. They also try to foster awareness about flotation equipment. Yet almost no commercial fishermen wear Personal Flotation Devices (PFD’s). Most have elaborate “explanations” for their obduracy. Another problem is the top-down nature of prevention education. During studies at the local marine training institute, the author was told to “stop asking questions.” “Just write down what I say ... it will be on the exam.” Lectures dominate. Many lecturers have never worked a fishing vessel. Fishermen are largely silent. Their experience is rendered irrelevant.

It is a pity dead fishermen can’t talk. Their re-

port of what went wrong, or how it might have been prevented, could improve the content and processes of prevention education provided by marine institutes, the WCB, proprietary schools, fishing unions, owner and gear-type associations, trade organizations and insurers. Those who narrowly escaped have valuable perspectives. As well, the meticulous researcher can arrive at informed judgments about what happened and, by so doing, shape the content and process of prevention education. This is among the reasons that explained the widespread interest in Sebastian Junger’s rendering of *The Perfect Storm*.

## CFV Pacific Charmer

The *Pacific Charmer* was a large steel fishboat normally moored at McMillan Fisheries – under Vancouver’s Second Narrows bridge. The vessel was licensed to pack, but not to fish herring. Yet, the *Charmer* was entered into a Department of Fisheries lottery to fish food herring. On December 1, 1997 there were five men aboard as the *Charmer* dragged nets in Pylades Channel – just behind Valdes Island. The skipper was Len Trent,<sup>2</sup> a Newfoundlander with 44 years experience. In 1958 he had witnessed the death of his brother aboard the *Sheila Patricia* which caught on fire off Nova Scotia. Also aboard were deckhand Len Bravos (from Vancouver), Jack Edwards, engineer (from Prince Edward Island), Max Rock (from Newfoundland) and a fisheries inspector, Lawrence West (from Vancouver).

At about 1.15 a.m. on a frosty morning, December 2, 1997, the crew had 80 tonne of herring aboard and were making a last set. The plan was to get another nine or ten tonne aboard, anchor for the night and return to Vancouver in daylight. It was three weeks to Christmas and everyone looked forward to the money. Compared to other trips into high seas and mayhem off the west coast of Van-

couver Island, this was easy. Flat seas, plenty of fish and only twenty miles from Vancouver. The net was being hauled up the stern ramp at 1.29 a.m. when the *Charmer* listed to port. It paused then, as the net was hauled higher, rolled to starboard and didn't come back. Water poured through manholes open to receive fish. It also cascaded through other openings on starboard and, entering below-deck spaces, downflooded the lazarette through a door into the engine room that had been tied open. Openings normally secured in heavy seas were open because of calm weather.

From the wheelhouse Trent yelled "we're going over," Edwards rushed forward to rescue him and to wrestle (unsuccessfully) with a liferaft on the wheelhouse roof. Neither Rock or Bravos could swim but, fearing entanglement, held hands and jumped into the 5-degree water. Edwards and Trent followed. The only man wearing flotation was West who remained on the now upturned hull for as long as possible and, by so doing, gave himself a "five minute bonus." Later, rescuers would find West clinically dead but cajole him back to life with "heat-treatment" gear. Rock found West's sample pail. Using it as flotation, he made it to shore on Valdes Island. Edwards grabbed a fish tote and held on for 1.5 hours and was retrieved by the hovercraft. After he hit the water Bravos was not seen again. Trent also made it into the water alive. Although no mayday had been transmitted an *Electronic Position Indicator Radio Beacon* (EPIRB) floated free, alerted satellites and triggered a large search. The Coast Guard hovercraft from Vancouver airport found three survivors – West clinically dead in the water, Edwards severely hypothermic in the water and Rock very cold on the shore at Valdes Island. As daylight illuminated the scene two bodies (Bravos and Trent) were found.

### Going Ahead

#### Data

In many respects, the *Charmer* was typical of other fishing accidents. For the purpose of this and related projects (including a television documentary) the author interviewed survivors, friends and family in Lawn, Newfoundland (Trent's home port), fishermen at Macmillan's, the hovercraft crew involved in the rescue,<sup>3</sup> salvors who retrieved the *Charmer* from the seabed, *Transportation Safety Board* investigators and others with relevant knowledge. We interviewed the wives of Len Bravos and Max

Rock. We have 20 hours of videotape, numerous documents, photographs (e.g. video footage of the wreck shot from a submarine), the coroners report, notes from the inquest and Rescue Centre logs.

#### Purpose

The purpose was to inform prevention education. This was achieved by building a social cartography of the *Charmer* incident. A secondary purpose was to listen to those rarely consulted –wives and families of dead fishermen and, in a modest manner, invert "normal" power relations that shape prevention education.

#### Theoretical Perspective

Social cartography is the process of mapping theory and then deploying the map to analyze social phenomena (Paulston, 1996). The *Transportation Safety Board* concluded the *Charmer* rolled over and two men died because of downflooding and free surface effect (liquids slopping around in half full/half empty tanks). But, in our view, these were the results of the "accident." The multiple causes of this accident were in place long before the vessel left the dock. Some reside in habits, attitudes and frames of reference (or meaning schemes) Trent acquired as a boy fishing cod traps in Newfoundland. Others concern predatory capitalism. The virtue of social cartography is that it forces the accident investigator or, in this case, the prevention educator, to consider multiple (not just easy "technical") possibilities. A Functionalist analysis constructs the problem "scientifically" – e.g. fluids below deck. Supplementing Functionalist analysis with a Humanist, Radical Humanist and Radical Functionalist (Marxian) analysis, produces different "explanations" and, as such, troubling implications for the content and processes of prevention education.

Fig. 1 (available at AERC) shows Paulston's (1996) mapping of social theory. In this map the horizontal axis concerns ontology – the essence of phenomena. People vary in the extent to which they think there is an objective "reality" external to the individual. For some, there is a world inhabited by lawfully interrelated variables. They have a *Realist-Objectivist Orientation* and practice *scientism* (right side of Fig. 1). For others, reality is a subjective phenomenon that exists within consciousness. It exists "in the mind." Some people thus have an *Idealist-Subjectivist Orientation*. In extreme forms, they practice solipsism (left side of Fig. 1). The

women's movement has been a significant contributor to the popularity of *Idealist-Subjectivist Orientations*.

The vertical axis concerns power and self-interest. Somebody's interests are served when prevention programs are mounted. At the bottom are theories that pose no challenge to prevailing interests. These regard education as benign – a process of “giving information” or “creating awareness.” These theories are nested in *Equilibrium Orientations*. At the top are theories that challenge power relations. Hence, Radical Functionalism, in the context of the *Charmer*, would be less interested in individual errors made by Trent than in the political economy of the fishery, the behaviour of corporate owners, the role of government and unions. In the same way Radical Humanists are interested in oppressive power relations but more from the viewpoint of learner subjectivity. Theories at the top of the vertical axis represent *Transformation Orientations*.

### Prevention

Fishing families, fish companies, unions, WCB, insurers and rescuers derived no joy from the loss of Trent and Bravos. Edwards was traumatized and West gave up fishing. Rock still goes out on large draggers but has disturbed sleep and suffers. What can be learned from the *Charmer* that might help prevent a reoccurrence? Families want an “explanation.” There is more than one story and each depends on the theoretical proclivities of the person telling it. As such, there is more than one prevention strategy. In the remainder of the paper, the task is to theorize the *Charmer* from four perspectives and, at the end, point to implications for prevention.

#### *Functionalist Story*

This dwells on the material (and observable) “facts” and deploys “science” to reach conclusions. It focuses on what happened aboard the vessel and is not likely to involve analysis that invokes politics or digs behind “observable facts.” Fluids in fresh water, fuel and other tanks had not been moved around properly and hence there was free surface. After the first inclining test, new (and heavy) equipment had been welded in place. Nets and gear were stored on the wheelhouse roof. Doors were open below decks. The vessel was vulnerable and, as the last net of fish was hauled up, the relationship between the centre of buoyancy and centre of gravity became

unstable. Of the five men aboard only one was wearing flotation equipment. None carried emergency lights. Several could not swim. The water was a chilly 5-degrees. A man with normal build could last a maximum of 1.5 hours in such water. Several crew were obese and the skipper had heart disease and diabetes. Two died.

#### *Humanist Story*

Humanists are subjectivists in that reality is what it is construed to be. They are concerned with how the world appears. Trent, Rock and Edwards all hailed from eastern Canada where fisheries are characterized by a boozy fatalism and disdain for flotation devices. Like Lawn, the place of his childhood, Trent lived “on the edge” in significant ways. The relationship with his wife had been overwhelmed by alcohol, two brothers had perished in marine accidents and, after 44 years fishing, he'd “seen it all.” Having previously packed more than 100 tonne of hake, bringing in 90 to 100 tonne of herring on calm seas would not be a problem. But herring have a different density than hake and, because of added weights and gear up top, and below-deck openings, the vessel was vulnerable. Trent was only a few trips away from retirement and had a partner who expected marriage. He was a notorious but charming flirt and occupied a lot of space when he entered a room or fisherman's pub. Like his boat, he was the Pacific “charmer.”

In this story, tying back blow deck doors open, or “forgetting” to have a pre-trip safety meeting (when liferaft and other procedures are discussed) was not a functional matter. Within Trent's frame of reference, tying doors back or skipping the safety meeting was normal – part of the culture of the vessel and an extension of life ashore. What was Trent thinking or what did he mean by forgetting the safety meeting or not securing the doors? After having two brothers die why did he go into freezing water without flotation or a light?

Trent had a major case of the “experienced skipper syndrome.” He knew everything. But didn't know what he didn't know. In the end, not understanding free surface or the difference between hake and herring cost him and Bravos their lives. It was an on-the-water representation of his life on land. On the surface, he was knowledgeable, bombastic and confident. But, underneath barely literate and in constant fear of being unmasked. Even after the *Charmer* was launched he couldn't admit he hated

it.

Courses taught in marine training institutes would have almost no impact on Trent and, it would be dangerous and difficult (but not impossible) to design a process wherein it would be safe for him to share his experience, vulnerabilities and, worst of all, admit he didn't "know everything." In this story two men died because of the way Trent interpreted the world.

### *Radical Humanist Story*

Radical humanists are also interested in human subjectivity but want to upset extant power relationships. Many employ ideas from Marx to describe how people carry ideological superstructures that limit cognition or create "false consciousness" which inhibits the ability to "see" what's happening. Although Edwards had worked on the *Charmer* for several years, Trent was the undisputed master. Bravos had previously skippered his own boat but was now deckhanding. Rock had come from Newfoundland and, when the boat rolled, did not know where he was. West – the fisheries inspector – had landed on the *Charmer* only two hours earlier, felt "uneasy" about the boat but didn't say anything. Like Rock and the rest, he had no power. Everyone aboard was familiar with fishing superstitions but, after the *Charmer* rolled, there was no time to invoke protective rituals of avoidance. Rather, as West said, it was "every man for himself."

In this story the following were important. First, unequal power relations between those aboard. Secondly, the "flotation devices are for wimps" (or "you can't work in them") discourse promoted by Trent and widely endorsed by Newfoundland and many B.C. fishermen. Despite Trent's skillfulness, obsession with machinery and affection for new gadgets, there was a culture of neglect on the vessel (as represented by doors tied open, nets on the roof). As well, an embrace of superstitious ritual (and rationalization when things went wrong). Because of vastly unequal power relations between skipper and crew, deckhands had few options.

### *Radical Functionalist Story*

Radical Functionalists share assumptions that buttress Functionalism but are committed to the overthrow of oppressive and disempowering social structures. If Radical Humanists focus on consciousness and meaning, Radical Functionalists dwell on structures, modes of domination, deprivati-

tion and contradictions within an objective social world. The political economy of the fishing industry – its corporations, unions and other parties – are at the front of this story. Trent owned half the *Charmer*, McMillan Fisheries the rest. At the time of the sinking, Macmillan's were in receivership and there was pressure to catch fish. As well, Trent had inherited the fish-quota of the *Arctic Ocean* (also a McMillan boat) which had snagged its net and returned home early. The *Charmer* was not licensed to fish herring yet was entered into a ballot to do so. In the days leading up to this tragedy did corporate owners – safely home in bed while Trent and the rest were fishing – consider it their duty to challenge cultural traditions on this vessel?

After the *Charmer* was built, Trent considered it unstable. Hence, steel was welded to the keel to make it stiffer. As well, extensions were put on net drums. As half-owner of the vessel Macmillan's apparently did not consider it their duty to subject it to a new inclining test. Did anyone look at the liferafts and wonder if they'd deploy when the vessel was upside down? In much the same way *B.C. Packers* sent out *Scotia Cape* without an EPIRB and several people perished. In the Radical Functionalist story, predatory capitalism caused the *Charmer* "accident." However, survivors and, in significant ways, the fishermen's union, didn't see it this way. To them it was mostly a "mystery."

### **Safe Harbour**

This accident quickly faded from public consciousness but continues to aggravate survivors and families of the deceased. The theoretical approach deployed here, which puts socio-cultural and psychological issues on the table, has vital implications for other occupations and settings – such as logging, farming, construction and aviation. It also demonstrates the power of social cartography and its tendency to embrace pluralistic perspectives and challenge hegemonic (usually techno-rational) discourses. It reminds prevention educators that, in fishing, as in other industrial accidents, there's usually more involved than equipment and operations. Regrettably, there is little evidence of material that lays outside Functionalism and its techno-rational discourse in the curriculum and processes of marine training institutes or the WCB. Prevention practitioners are often afraid to step beyond "facts" associated with chartwork, electronic devices, collision regulations and other "technical" matters. The

*Charmer* points to the following. Prevention programs entirely nested in techno-rational discourse will have a minimal impact on safety. A more holistic program that embraces issues arising from Humanist, Radical Humanist and Radical Functionalist perspectives will have a greater impact. Incidents like the *Charmer*, only one of many, demand a broad program content.

What about prevention-education processes? Most fishermen hear stories of who did what to whom. Almost all have had “close calls” and some read TSB casualty reports. Hence, prevention educators should rely less on notes in ring binders and more on the experience of fishermen (particularly

survivors like West, Rock and Edwards). They should deploy principles of adult education which place the experience of fishermen in the foreground. Rather than lecturing from raised platforms, prevention educators should come down to deck level and use participatory techniques where fishermen learn from dead comrades and those (like Edwards, West and Rock) that got away.

### Reference

Paulston, R. (Ed.) (1996). *Social cartography: Mapping ways of seeing social and educational change*. New York: Garland.

---

<sup>1</sup> [Roger.Boshier@ubc.ca] Adult Education Research Centre, Department of Educational Studies, University of B.C., 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z4, CANADA

<sup>2</sup> We’ve changed the names of survivors and deceased fishermen.

<sup>3</sup> Captain Tim Theilman, First Officer Susan Neale (now Pickrell) and Rescue Specialist Tim MacFarlane. The survivors owe their lives to the professionalism of these three as well as the efforts of Dennis Kimoto and Mike Stacey at the Rescue Co-ordination Centre in Victoria.