

Barcelona (17 January 1977)



Catastrophe Strikes



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Catastrophe struck in the early morning hours of 17 January 1977 when the LCM-6, leaving fleet landing at 2 AM on a final run back to the ships with 124 enlisted sailors and marines dressed for the cold winter weather, collided with the 390-ton Spanish freighter "Urlea" in the inner harbor. The collision occurred about 80-feet off the end of a high commercial pier where the vision of the coxswain was obstructed by the height of the pier as the two craft rounded the pier from opposite sides. Neither craft had time to react before the bulbous bow of the freighter lifted the bow of the LCM-6 and capsized the boat tossing the occupants into the dark harbor water. Personnel on the pier and at Fleet Landing scrambled to assist those in the boat but many who had been in the liberty boat were disoriented or trapped under the high sides of the LCM-6.

GUAM, notified by the Beachguard of the accident, mustered the Rescue and Assistance Detail and sent them by boat to assist with the rescue efforts. The first word back to the States about the accident was garbled and reported that the GUAM and TRENTON had collided and that the GUAM had overturned. While that misinformation was later corrected, the consternation created among the concerned families of the deployed ships and embarked units was understandable. Rescue efforts continued throughout the night but by first light the effort had become one of recovery of our shipmates. The ships would end up spending several more days conducting accurate musters and accounting for the missing.

As the Assistant Command Duty Officer on GUAM, I was assigned as the Boat Officer of GUAM's Captain's Gig and I and the 2-man crew of the LCPL were sent to the beach in anticipation of a scheduled protocol visit by the Mayor of Barcelona. Spanish Navy divers had arrived in the early morning hours to survey the accident scene and conduct the recovery. The magnitude of the loss quickly became evident and it was not too long afterward that we were redetailed and assigned as the prime recovery platform for this grim task. **Forty-nine crewmen and marines from GUAM and TRENTON were lost in this tragic accident.**

Several days later, GUAM moved pier-side to the same molo adjacent to the accident site and she remained moored for the duration of the port visit. At the conclusion of the port visit a very touching moment occurred as the ship was leaving the pier and heading for sea. An older Spanish woman, dressed traditionally in black with her head covered, quietly appeared on the pier and, one by one, slowly tossed red roses into the harbor water, one for each of our lost shipmates.



Guam pier-side in Barcelona (Photo by Fabio Pena (1977))

In 1978, one year later, a 12-foot granite and iron [memorial](#) to these men was erected in Barcelona near the Muelle de Barcelona. "Two survivors of the incident who attended the ceremony were CPLs Alfonso Valent, Jr. and Harry L. Thomas. Their memories of that night are still vivid and both are still reluctant to ride in liberty boats.

"After I was thrown into the water I was sucked under about 15 feet and became disoriented," said Valent. "I struggled to get back to the surface but I think that I was actually swimming downward. I began swallowing water and had given up and relaxed when I suddenly broke through to the surface."

Thomas escaped from the capsized boat by swimming down and then coming up outside. "After the freighter passed by everyone in the water swam back to the boat and climbed up onto its bottom," he said. "It was cold and dark and everyone was in a state of shock. None of us realized at that time the extent of the tragedy.""

Sources: personal memories, newspaper accounts, and article by JOC Roger Busby

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