

## Aratere 'nearly capsized'

THURSDAY , 22 JUNE 2006

By ADAM RAY

**An Interislander ferry came "extremely" close to capsizing after its captain made "foolhardy" decisions crossing Cook Strait in rough seas, a maritime expert has testified.**

Captain Wayne Osmond's control of the Aratere during the nightmare crossing has been criticised, with a court being told that most passengers and crew would have died if the ship had tipped over.

Maritime New Zealand has suspended Mr Osmond as a master after the March 3 journey, when the ship heeled over 45 and 50 degrees on two separate occasions. During the sailing, five rail freight carriages were toppled and trucks and cars were damaged. Three passengers and a crew member were injured. One suffered a broken arm and the others had minor injuries. The usual three-hour journey took 7-1/2 hours.

The Aratere can carry 400 people but Toll NZ will not say how many were on it that day.

Mr Osmond is challenging his suspension in Wellington District Court, claiming it was unreasonable and unjustified.

Maritime NZ's expert witness Gordon Wood, a former ferrymaster, told the hearing's first day yesterday that Mr Osmond's captaining of the ferry during the crossing was flawed and "foolhardy". Mr Osmond steered the Aratere on autopilot on a course about 1-1/2 miles (2.4 kilometres) off Karori Rock – when tide and wind conditions made for "the worst possible conditions" in the Karori Rip, Mr Wood said.

"In my opinion such action in the circumstances was foolhardy."

The area off the southwest tip of the North Island was known for treacherous seas in certain wind and tide conditions and Mr Osmond should have sailed further offshore where waters were calmer.

Mr Wood, who skippered the freight ferry Purbeck and has crossed Cook Strait an estimated 10,000 times, said that as the Aratere sailed through heavy swells it was hit by a 10-metre wave at 4.44pm and heeled about 45 degrees – toppling railway wagons.

Mr Osmond should have slowed the ship, "heaved to" in the stormy seas to check how freight had shifted, or even returned to Wellington, the court was told.

Its course also put the ferry at a "dangerous" angle of about 45 degrees to the swell. though

At 5.29pm the Aratere was hit by another massive wave which heeled it over about 50 degrees. With the ferry already unbalanced by shifting freight, it came "extremely" close to capsizing, Mr Wood said. "A second or successive large wave and or swell is very likely to have capsized the vessel."

The capsize would have been sudden and without warning, trapping most passengers and crew inside the ship. Any who escaped into the water would not have had time to put on lifejackets and

could have survived only one to six hours in sea temperatures of 12 degrees, he said. Strong winds and high seas would have "severely hampered" rescue efforts.

"It is not unreasonable to conclude that heavy loss of life would have occurred."

Mr Wood gave evidence yesterday because he will be overseas when the case resumes next month. Judge Tom Broadmore said "other witnesses may have contrary opinions".

Mr Wood's evidence is strongly disputed by Mr Osmond, who will call a string of witnesses. His lawyer, Paul McBride, told the court yesterday that the Karori Rip would not have been visible or easy to detect in the conditions.

He said other Interislander ferry captains rejected Mr Wood's "speculative" claim that the Aratere was close to capsizing and that the ferry was heading toward a "lee" shore.

Under cross-examination, Mr Wood conceded he was not familiar with all the Aratere's characteristics and had not examined data on the ferry's stability.

He had applied for a master's position with the Interislander that Mr Osmond was later appointed to, the court was told.

Maritime NZ and Transport Accident Investigation Commission investigations into the sailing are continuing.

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