Ferry Pilot Jailed for Fatal Crash



Working under the influence of alcohol or drugs that cause impairment can cause a lifetime of guilt if an employee's actions injure or kill others. It also can put that person in prison.

A ferry pilot convicted of manslaughter in connection with a fatal ferry crash in New York Harbor has been sentenced to 18 months' jail and his boss has been ordered to serve a year and a day after being convicted of related charges.

Assistant Capt. Richard Smith, who was fatigued and taking painkillers, blacked out at the controls of the Staten Island ferry on Oct. 15, 2003. The ferry, carrying 1,500 passengers, slammed into a concrete pier at full speed, killing 11 passengers and injuring dozens of others.

Court heard the painkillers he was taking – Tramodol and Tylenol PM – list drowsiness among their possible side effects.

Smith pleaded guilty to a charge of negligent manslaughter. The 57-year-old assistant captain who apologized in court to families of those killed and injured, fled the accident scene and tried to end his life by slashing his wrists and firing a pellet gun into his chest.

"I will regret for the rest of my life that I did not just call in sick," Smith told the court before he was sentenced. "I was on the wheel. I was responsible. I stand ready to suffer the consequences."

Patrick Ryan, former ferry director, also apologized to the court. He was sentenced to a prison term of a year and a day for failing to enforce a rule mandating that two ferry pilots be controlling the ship during a docking procedure. Smith was alone in the wheelhouse and not conscious when the crash occurred.

BOTTOM LINE:

As a supervisor a great deal of responsibility for ensuring your workers are working sober and are fit for duty rests on your shoulders. As this case shows, one doesn't need to drink alcohol or take illegal drugs in order to be a workplace disaster waiting to happen. Remind your workers that certain medications they may be taking – including certain cold medicines – can seriously impair their judgment. Often, alternative products that do not cause impairment are available.