

Expert says busted hose caused boat dock tragedy

Carbon monoxide detector was disabled

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Authorities said Friday they discovered the cause of a carbon monoxide emission that killed one man and injured several others aboard a cabin cruiser docked at the Decatur Boat Harbor a week ago today.

Decatur Fire and Rescue and Alabama State Marine Police spent the week investigating the poisoning of Billy Wayne Thomas, 47, of Somerville.

"It was obvious that the main exhaust hose of the port engine was completely deteriorated, and it blew a hole. All the exhaust was blown into the aft cabin," said Kiko Villalon, president of Ancon Marine Consultants.

Villalon, a carbon monoxide expert, provided his services free to help investigators pinpoint the cause of Thomas' death.

The level of carbon monoxide issued into the Lady Lynn's cabin by the ruptured hose could kill a man in three breaths, Villalon said.

"The breach of the hose, he (Thomas) fell within minutes of that," he said.

Marine police officer Larry Adams said investigators checked the level of carbon monoxide inside the boat.

"Running the test near the doorway for five minutes, it was three times the lethal amount," he said.

Thomas ran the engine only about 30 minutes to an hour before he experienced mechanical problems and returned to the boat harbor Aug. 19, Adams said.

Thomas apparently ventured into the lower area of the boat about the time the hose ruptured. The hose was behind the bathroom wall, and the damage would not have been visible, Adams said.

"(Carbon monoxide) is practically the same density as air, so you don't know it until it overpowers you," Villalon said.

However, a carbon monoxide detector aboard the Lady Lynn could have saved Thomas's life, Villalon said.

"They did have one carbon monoxide detector, and we found it off. They had taken the battery out," he said.

Fire Marshall Darwin Clark said several civilians assisted Thomas and his wife, Terri, after Thomas collapsed. As a result, most of the rescuers suffered poisoning as well and were lying on the deck of the boat in various states of illness when firefighters arrived.

Blood found at the foot of the stairs in the lower cabin showed where Thomas fell and struck his head before his friends mounted an attempt to rescue him and dragged him back to the top of the vessel, Clark said.

Huge risk for rescuers

Adams said the rescuers took a huge risk by entering the lower cabin.

Decatur Firefighter James Prickett said that he, Firefighter Brandon Harbison and fire Lt. Lorenzo Jackson arrived at the dock to find bystanders yelling for aid.

"There was a guy laying on the edge of the boat, not completely unconscious, but not completely alert. There was a woman hanging out of the door opening, I guess trying to get some air, and a man standing with his head busted. I think he had done it trying to get the people out, but he couldn't get them out. I think these were all the attempted rescuers," Prickett said.

Prickett said he was checking on the injured when he saw the Thomases lying unconscious inside the upper cabin.

"I jumped into the boat, and I grabbed the woman and walked her down the stairs and handed her off. Her legs were a little bit woozy. She couldn't hold herself up. She was kind of in and out of consciousness. And then I went back in for the man, and when I got in there, I checked for a pulse, and he didn't have a pulse. So I yelled for Lt. Jackson that I needed help carrying him out. We carried him out and handed him off to the medics that were standing nearby. And then I went back in to make sure there wasn't anybody else in the boat."

Huntsville Hospital treated Terri Thomas, Brad Mitchell and Carol Vaughn for carbon monoxide symptoms, releasing them Sunday.

Another victim received treatment at the scene, firefighters said.