

Unusual events led to deadly river crash

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MARYCLAIRE DALE
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A tugboat pilot distracted by cell-phone calls amid a family emergency was sentenced Tuesday to one year and a day in prison for a deadly river crash in Philadelphia that killed two young tourists.

Pilot Matthew Devlin of Catskill, N.Y., was virtually driving blind as he pushed a barge nearly the length of a city block through a busy shipping channel on the Delaware River, prosecutors said.

Mr. Devlin spent almost an hour on the cellphone and laptop, and turned off a marine radio, stifling mayday calls from a six-wheel-drive amphibious truck, called a duck boat, and other nearby vessels before the July 7, 2010, crash.

And he had moved to a lower wheelhouse so he could hear better, even though it sharply reduced his view of the river.

"Goodness gracious; everybody knew this was happening but you," U.S. District Judge Legrome Davis told Mr. Devlin.

A video played in court for the first time shows the 70-metre-long barge inching toward the idled duck boat. Six minutes later, the barge drives right over the duck boat, killing two Hungarian students and sending 35 others aboard into the Delaware River shipping channel.

"There was plenty of time to avoid this accident," Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Zauzmer said.

Mr. Devlin, 35, had faced up to three years for his involuntary-manslaughter plea.

Both sides agreed that a string of incredible events converged before the crash. The tugboat pilot discovered his son had suffered a complication during supposedly routine surgery. The duck boat overheated on the 40-



Former tug pilot Matt Devlin and his wife, Corinne, leave the U.S. Courthouse Tuesday in Philadelphia. MATT ROURKE/AP

degree day because someone left a radiator cap off. The captain mistook the steam for an engine fire and turned off the boat and dropped anchor. Half of those aboard the duck boat were from Hungary and spoke limited English.

But Judge Davis noted that if Mr. Devlin had done just one thing differently, he could have broken that unlucky chain and avoided the crash.

Instead, Mr. Devlin failed to go on break after learning his five-year-old son had been deprived of oxygen during the surgery. He made or received 21 cellphone calls during the next hour and did medical research on the laptop.

Mr. Devlin, a married father of two who coaches youth baseball

and ropes calves in his spare time, spoke publicly about the crash Tuesday for the first time. His son has since recovered.

He said he wakes each day to images of bodies and orange flotation devices floating in the river. His wife, Corinne, feels responsible for calling him on the job that day.

"There isn't a morning I don't wake up with a tremendous pit in my stomach that I was even involved in this accident," Mr. Devlin said. "And for this past year and four months, there hasn't been one night that we have laid in bed at ease."

Szabolcs Prem, 20, and Dora Schwendtner, 16, drowned in the crash. They were part of a group of Hungarians visiting the United States through a church

exchange.

"Two families lost the only child they had, and they're past child-bearing years," Judge Davis said. "They send a child off with a school group to come to America and the child doesn't return. ... That's just sad."

The families have lawsuits pending against the operators of both boats, the city and others. They listened to the sentencing hearing in Hungary through an open phone line, with a lawyer and translator beside them.

Mr. Zauzmer hopes the sentence sends a message to commercial operators that "they can't be using all these wonderful devices we have while carrying out their duties."

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