



Smith family photo

Before disappearance. A photo shows George Allen Smith IV and his wife, Jennifer Hagel-Smith, before his disappearance somewhere in the Mediterranean on July 4 during the couple's honeymoon cruise aboard a Royal Caribbean cruise ship.

Passenger deaths a cruise concern

BY DONNABALANCIA
FLORIDA TODAY

More than 50 people have gone overboard from cruise ships in the past decade, including suicides, unsolved cases and a handful of rescues, an analysis of incidents found.

Most recently, a 15-year-old Irish girl was reported to have fallen overboard from the Costa Magica about 2 a.m. Jan. 6 as the ship sailed toward Cozumel, Mexico.

And the disappearance last year of honeymooner George Smith IV — apparently pushed from a Royal Caribbean ship in the Mediterranean — has become fodder for cable-television news programs.

"It is unfortunate that these types of incidents happen, but no one wants this George Smith case cleared up more

Brevard angle

More than 1.2 million passengers embark on international cruises from Port Canaveral every year, making it the world's third-busiest cruise hub, just behind Miami and Port Everglades. In 10 years, two people have plunged from the Canaveral-based Sovereign of the Seas, owned by Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines. One has gone overboard from Fantasy, owned by Carnival Corp.

than we do," said Capt. Bill Wright, senior vice president of fleet operations for Royal Caribbean International.

See OVERBOARD, 8A

Cruise safety under congressional scrutiny

OVERBOARD, from 1A

There have been dozens of lesser-known incidents:

■ A Vietnamese-American couple, both seniors, willingly plunged to their deaths from the Carnival Destiny last May in an apparent suicide pact off the coast of Venezuela, witnesses reported.

■ A 23-year-old man jumped off the Sovereign of the Seas in 2001 after losing \$9,000 in the ship's casino. The captain told passengers a small gambling ship off Nassau, the Bahamas, picked him up.

■ Annette Mizener, a 37-year-old woman from Waukegan, Wis., disappeared while on vacation with her family aboard the Carnival Pride off California in December 2004.

Surviving families and plaintiffs' attorneys called last week for stronger safety standards.

"We would give anything to see Annette alive again," said Waldeemar Knerler, Mizener's father, who searched frantically for his daughter on the last night of their cruise.

"They say there's a silver lining to everything, and from this horrible event, I would like to see Congress get involved to make the cruise industry accountable for crimes that happen to the American people," he said.

Ships have experienced 52 cases of people going overboard — 40 of them fatally — in the past decade, most of them during Caribbean and Bahamas cruises, such as those that sail from Port Canaveral, according to a database compiled by Canadian professor and cruise critic Ross Klein.

That's about twice as many cases as mentioned recently by the industry, he said.

FLORIDA TODAY obtained a copy of his database, and analyzed it for this report.

Statistically, such incidents are rare, given that more than 8 million passengers vacation aboard cruise ships each year, Wright said.

But that's little comfort to families who have lost loved ones, survivors' attorneys say.

Details online

Check out a case-by-case breakdown at Professor Ross Klein's Web site, www.cruisejunkie.com

By the numbers

Klein, who has researched the cruise industry for books and a Web site, compiled the database of "overboard" cases based on a global search of media reports and accounts corroborated by at least two witnesses.

A FLORIDA TODAY analysis of the data also found:

■ Suicide, suspected suicide or attempted suicide was the leading known motive for people to jump overboard from cruise ships, accounting for 18 of the cases.

■ In 20 cases, the cause or motive remains unknown. Most of these passengers vanished while their ships were at sea, passengers reported.

■ There were just two accidental deaths in 10 years, including a 19-year-old man who slipped and fell into Tampa Bay while climbing on balcony railing.

■ There was just one known murder: A former mental patient threw a 69-year-old New Mexico woman overboard during a cruise through Norway's fjords in 2001.

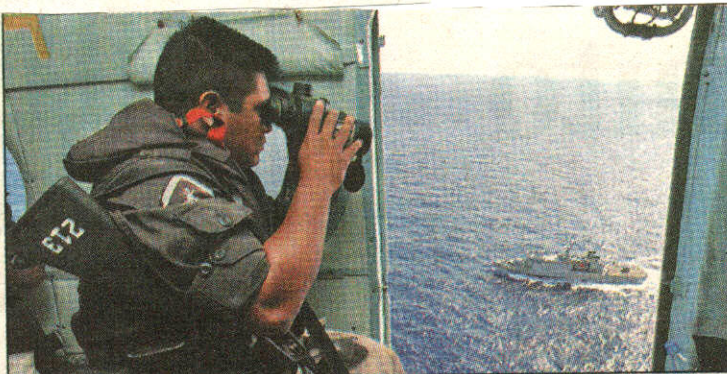
No cruise line or ship stands out from the rest when it comes to people going overboard. The cases seem to proportionately match the cruise lines' market share and destinations.

Carnival Corp., which controls more than half the world's cruise business through its Fun Ships and subsidiaries such as Costa Cruises and Holland America, experienced the most cases.

And about three out of five incidents of people going overboard occurred during cruises to the Caribbean and Bahamas, where most ships sail.

But one statistic stands out: Men outnumber women, 2-to-1.

"There's a number that resulted from marital conflicts," said Klein, a sociologist at Memorial University in Newfoundland,



Searching. A Mexican sailor off the coast of Cancun on Jan. 8 aids in the search for 15 year old Lincey O'Brien of Ireland. Officials say she fell off of a cruise ship near Isla Mujeres, an island near Cancun popular with tourists.

Canada. "It's always the man who goes overboard, never the woman."

Two ships based at Port Canaveral have experienced cases of people jumping or falling overboard. Two people have plunged from the Sovereign of the Seas, owned by Miami-based Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines. One person has gone overboard from the Fantasy, owned by Miami-based Carnival Corp.

'Heartbreaking'

Knerler knows he can't bring back his daughter, Annette Mizener, a wife and mother who disappeared during a weeklong family cruise vacation.

On the last night of a West Coast cruise from Los Angeles, Mizener decided to try her luck at bingo.

"My daughter didn't drink. She was not a run-around," said Knerler, who was on the cruise. "Bingo was her thing, and she had won twice on the cruise already. She wanted to win the big prize."

The details get sketchy after that, he said.

Knerler said Mizener that night had socialized with a senior crew member.

"They tape everything in the casino and save it," Knerler said. "But, apparently, the FBI confiscated the tapes, which show Annette leaving the casino and show in which direction she was going, and that would show who, if anyone, she left the casino with. It is

my assumption she left with a crew member."

At about 10:10 p.m., an announcement came over the loudspeaker, asking for passenger Annette Mizener. Her purse had been found, Knerler said.

"I know that is not like my daughter — to just leave her purse anywhere — so we were extremely shaken," he said.

"We were brought to the place where the purse was found, and I looked up and saw a security camera nearby, but it was covered up," Knerler said. "We looked at our feet, and there was a paper cup — like the kind they hand out only to crew members. A crew member took the cup, and put it in a bag and stapled it. I was surprised by many things, but one thing I clearly remember was I remember the camera was covered up."

"And when we saw the purse, we were even more disheartened. It was a beaded purse, and many of the beads were removed. Believe me, we tried to pull the beads off the purse and we couldn't, so we believe a struggle broke out."

Knerler and his family have filed a negligence lawsuit against Carnival Corp.

Their attorney, Charles Lipcon of Miami, wasn't surprised by the number of people who have gone overboard. He has handled maritime cases for 30 years.

"This is a particularly heartbreaking case," Lipcon said of Mizener's disappearance. "There

was a failure to perform reasonable search and rescue. If the camera had been working, it would only have helped them find her faster."

But Vance Gulliksen, spokesman for Carnival Corp. in Miami, said the ship's crew handled the incident properly. It performed a vesselwide search of all guest and crew areas, and made numerous announcements to locate the passenger.

When Mizener didn't turn up, the crew contacted the U.S. Coast Guard, and the Pride turned around to retrace its path and search for the guest.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to Mrs. Mizener's family, and Carnival is deeply saddened for their loss," Gulliksen said.

The FBI would not comment on the investigation.

Defending safety

Analyzing how many people fall or jump from cruise ships has proved difficult, Klein said, because no government agency in any country tracks that information.

There could be more such tragedies, he suspects, especially among crew members far from home, with no family on board to alert the news media.

"The ones that are troubling to me are those who disappear with no explanation," he said. "I can't say that these cases don't involve foul play. But my sense is that those would be few and far between."

Cruise line representatives say the number of overboard deaths is low — much lower, in fact, than statistics of crimes that occur on dry land.

"I think if you look at the statistics objectively, you're much safer on board a cruise ship than any community in the United States," said Michael Crye, president of the International Council of Cruise Lines. "We have good security programs in place."

Still, Congress has taken an interest in the issue.

In December, House subcommittees on national security and criminal justice heard testimony from cruise executives and the FBI about several recent disap-

pearances, as well as an attempt by pirates to take over a ship.

Honeymoon mystery

Cable TV programs last week latched onto the case of George Smith, whose disappearance remains a mystery six months after the fact.

He and his wife were honeymooning aboard a Royal Caribbean ship in Turkish waters when it appears he went overboard.

Investigators found blood stains between Smith's stateroom balcony and lifeboats, possibly the sign of a struggle. His wife was found unconscious in a corridor elsewhere on the ship.

The cruise line said last week that the FBI is investigating an alleged rape of a female passenger by three young men last seen with Smith.

The case has raised questions about security on cruise ships.

Florida maritime attorney Tonya Meister, who until recently was based in Brevard County, said even one incident in a million is too many.

"It shouldn't be happening at all," she said. "I think people are under the misconception that cruise ships are safe and you're protected. . . . There are no background checks conducted on passengers or crew members, and there could be repeat criminals who come out on cruise ships."

But the companies say cruising has never been safer.

"We have an agreement with the FBI to always inform them of any allegation — even an allegation — of a crime against an American citizen," Royal Caribbean's Wright said. "And, in the case of George Smith, we did precisely that."

"If you have ever been on a cruise, you know that it's safe. And if you're talking about background checks, on land you can go into a restaurant or into a mall, and there could be people standing next to you have not undergone background checks. It's far safer on a cruise ship than it is on land." ■

Contact Balancia at 242-3647 or dbalancia@flatoday.net