Youth Drowns in Sight of Shore and Coworkers

It was a good day for a swim; it was only 35 yards from the shore; the water was only 15 feet deep. Plus, there were plenty of people around. So what went wrong?

On a hot day in June 2000, in Oklahoma, a 17-year-old laborer was enjoying his second day working for a boat-building company. The crew were transported by barge to a vessel being built on a freshwater lake, where the barge was also being used as a workstation.

In the afternoon the barge captain, who was also the crew supervisor, transported some of the crew back to shore to offload some material. It was 84°F and the supervisor agreed to stop the barge halfway back to shore to let the three 17-year-old crew members swim in the lake to cool off. He even agreed to let them swim ashore. They jumped in with youthful enthusiasm.

The captain, before steering the barge to the ramp, watched as the young men raced toward shore. But two or three minutes into the race, one of the swimmers started to splash around, calling for help.

At first, his co-workers and observers on shore thought it was a joke and ignored his calls. When they finally realized this was no joke, a co-worker swam back to help. He reached down to get hold of his co-worker, but had to let go as the drowning youth was pulling him under, too.

A throw bag (flotation device) was tossed to the victim from shore, but he couldn’t reach it. Several coworkers on shore, as well as nearby fishermen, rushed in to help, but they could not keep hold of the victim and eventually lost him in the murky water. His body was not recovered for another two hours.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Swimming or working in water should not be permitted unless it is essential to the job. Also, personal flotation devices should be kept nearby. The victim was wearing sneakers while swimming, which could have contributed to his fatigue. The victim had also not received any safety training, and neither the victim nor his supervisor accurately assessed the hazards.