

# Doomed ship defies Antarctica odds

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PUNTA ARENAS, Chile --

A rare calm in Antarctic seas and the swift response by a passing ship helped save all aboard a Canadian cruise liner that struck an iceberg in the night and sank, rescued passengers and experienced sailors said Saturday.

The MS Explorer, a Canadian-operated cruiser built in 1969 as a pioneer among rugged go-anywhere tourist ships that plied waters from the Amazon to the Arctic and Antarctic circles, struck ice Friday, took on water and dipped beneath the waves more than 15 hours later.

All 154 passengers and crew spent hours bobbing in life rafts on chilly seas before a Norwegian cruise ship plucked them up shivering but safe and took them to two military bases on King George Island for flights out.

A Chilean air force plane flew the first 77 survivors to the South American mainland Saturday from the island 660 miles south of here. The rest were to be flown out Sunday.

American Ely Chang of Urban, Calif. was among the first to get out of a Chilean Hercules C-130 in Punta Arenas, clutching his life jacket like a precious souvenir and reminder of anxious hours spent adrift.

"It was very cold but I'm so happy because we all survived this and everyone's all right. Now I'm going home," he said.

Dutch citizen Jan Henkel said he decided to propose to his girlfriend Mette Larsen after they survived the ordeal.

"There were some very frightening moments but the crew was very professional and the captain very good and had everything under control," said Henkel.

Others in Antarctica counted the survivors lucky.

"They were fortunate because other ships just happened to be in the area and came to their aid rapidly," said Lieutenant Col. Waldemar Fontes, chief of the small Uruguayan base where the rescued tourists and crew took shelter overnight. "The seas were calm and there weren't any storms. That doesn't happen often in Antarctica."

Capt. Arnvid Hansen, whose cruise ship Nordnorge rescued the castaways, said Explorer's distress call came hours before dawn and he steamed 4 1/2 hours "full ahead" to the rescue before weather could close in.

"We have to work together with the forces of nature, not against them," Hansen said.

He said blinding sleet, fog, high winds and treacherous seas are common in Antarctica, Earth's windiest continent, even in the October-to-April "summer" when cruise ships flock to the area by the dozens.

"I've been a captain for four seasons in Antarctica," Hansen said. "It's not dangerous but sometimes it's tricky and it's a challenge."

Hansen said calm seas and benevolently light winds prevailed as his crew took just an hour to collect the 154 passengers and crew, rounding up their lifeboats and rubber rafts as the crippled Explorer listed every more steeply to starboard, its hull gashed.

High seas would have made picking up the lifeboats much trickier and would have exposed the castaways to brutally cold weather and the chance of hypothermia.

Instead it was over barely before passengers aboard the Norwegian rescue vessel could finish breakfast, with many watching the orderly rescue through portal windows.

Shortly after the rescue though, winds began picking up considerably. After midday, when he reached a Chilean base at King George Island nearby, the winds and waters were so rough the captain had to wait hours to unload the passengers.

"The weather can change in a half hour in Antarctica and you never know if we are going to have it very good one moment or very bad," Hansen said.

On board the Explorer, a blackout had been triggered by water rushing in, shutting down bilge pumps of the doomed ship, Hansen said.

First reports suggested only a small hole was punched into the Explorer's hull, but the Argentine navy later said it received reports of greater damage as the ship slowly turned on its side and sank Friday evening.

Jerry DeCosta, vacationing on the Explorer, told The Associated Press from the bigger Chilean base nearby that passengers were grateful the rescue went so smoothly.

"Everything was done right: The captain got everybody off and the weather was ideal. It was a fluke of nature and luckily we got out," he said, marveling at Nordnorge's swift response. "We sent out a distress call and people came to help."

Guillermo Tarapow, captain of an Argentine navy icebreaker, Almirante Irizar, that caught fire last April 10 off Patagonia while returning from Antarctica, said he thought the dangers of castoff Antarctic ice to shipping were on the rise.

Tarapow, who saved his stricken ship from sinking and won praise for safely evacuating his 296 passengers, said he has seen a dramatic increase in the number of icebergs over 20 years and blamed climate change.

"You now see many more icebergs ... where there didn't use to be. It makes navigation difficult and they are all very dangerous," Tarapow told AP.

Susan Hayes of G.A.P. Adventures of Toronto, which runs environmentally oriented excursions and owns the stricken MS Explorer, said all passengers were accounted for and doing well.

She said the ship's 91 passengers hailed from more than a dozen nations, including 24 Britons, 17 Dutch, 14 Americans, 12 Canadians and 10 Australians. The ship also carried nine expedition staff members and a crew of 54.

The Explorer was on a 19-day circuit of Antarctica and the Falkland Islands, letting passengers observe penguins, whales and other wildlife.