

# *Diary of a two-day reporting effort*

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## ***Monday, Jan. 5, 1998:***

**A call from a reader:** Steve Finley, a person I know to be an expert on maritime issues, leaves this voicemail: “Over the weekend I saw the movie Titanic and it reminded me of something. You know, the Titanic just had life rafts for about a third of the passengers. You know the Washington State Ferries, they don't have 100 percent life raft capacity . . . On a day like today, I don't know how many people would last in the water. Not a long time. And how many people would die. Since everyone has been seeing the movie Titanic, this might be a time to revisit this and ask the question, why don't we have 100 percent life raft capacity on the wash. state ferries?”

## ***Wednesday afternoon, Jan. 7:***

**The assignment:** I pass on Finley's thoughts at an I-team meeting, thinking someone else might want to do the story. I-team kicks it around and my editor Dave Boardman wants to know if I could have it ready for Sunday.,

**Quick research:** Seattle Times database reveals 10-year-old stories on the issue but very little that is new. I ask librarians to do a national search. Fellow investigative reporter Deborah Nelson pulls from her files a 10-year-old National Transportation Safety Board study on passenger-boat safety that hits the lack of life rafts on ferries.

**Starting down the people trail:** I never start with a p.r. person, so I study the ferry system phone directory and select the ferry system safety director. He's new to the job, so I get from him the name and current location of his predecessor. I gently ask him to explain how the ferry system records work. For life rafts, there's the U.S. Coast Guard Certificate of Inspection, posted on the wall of every ferry, which tells the maximum number of passengers and the number of life rafts on each boat. I also ask: “When someone screws up in the ferry system, where do they write it down?” Then I get the exact location in the ferry office of all these records, and their flow through the organization. Eventually, the safety directors gets wary and suggests I talk to the p.r. director. I tell him, honestly, that I will be talking to her.

**Exploring the ex-employee trail:** I call the former safety director at his home 100 miles from Seattle. He is very critical of the ferry system for not installing sufficient life rafts for all passengers, and I get a detailed, chronological story of anything he knows about

the issue and the names of others – ferry captains, bureaucrats, etc. – who were involved. I get a brief synopsis of his life story, like I do with everybody..

**Working the voicemail:** I call the others, catching some and leaving courteous voicemails with the others.

**Starting down the paper trail:** The ferry system public relations person has heard by now that I'm working on the story, but when I call she's not yet available. I fire off messages to all her bosses and she quickly calls back. It is easy getting what I want, in part because I already know the records I need, where they are located and who I need to talk with.. I quiz her, too, looking for other documents, sources and her knowledge. I am honest with her about the kind of story I am doing, and I think that helps.

**Getting control of my information:** In my computer, I create my control files: -- a list of names, a "to do" list, and a chronology. Reviewing my interview notes, I start marking the good stuff with words preceded by asterisks which are easily searchable -- \*quote, \*fact, \*checkthis

**Moving in:** Late in the afternoon, I arrive at the ferry system office to copy documents, but another purpose is to insert myself into the operation. Leafing through paper, I talk with the manager of operations and as he mentions other documents. I ask for copies. Pretty soon I've got several people rifling the files for me. I even get stuff like a list of cell phones for all the engine rooms on the ferries. And I get people's home phones. While I am using the fax machine, the ferry system operations director Joe Nortz walks in. The p.r. director had told me he didn't want to talk about life rafts, but now he has no choice. *It pays to be there.*

**Analyzing data:** Back at the office that evening, I enter data from the U.S. Coast Guard Certificates of Inspection into an excel computer program. It tells me the ferries have only enough life rafts, on average, to serve one passenger out of seven when fully loaded. Worse situation than I had expected. An editor re-checks my data. I ask the photo desk to put a photographer on a heavily-loaded ferry the next day. I read my new documents and organize the stuff into my computer. Planning a ferry ride the next morning, I check the schedule.

### ***Thursday morning, Jan. 8:***

**Contacting the regulators:** On the way to the ferry terminal, I call the National Transportation Safety Board on my cell phone. I get a guy who wrote a report calling for more life rafts, He's in a hurry, but I slow him down to gather recollections. He put me in touch with a co-worker who find a chronology of NTSB efforts and faxes it to me.

**Going to sea:** On the ferry, I want anecdotes as well as passenger opinions. One woman was thinking about the Titanic movie on the way to the ferry, and I put her in slow motion to get all the details. (See my interviewing handout: Loosening Lips)

**Hanging around:** Back at the ferry terminal, I revisit the p.r. woman, so I can hang around the main office again, getting more documents and meeting more people. Even in a hellish hurry, journalism-by-hanging-around pays off. As I am talking to the p.r. woman, a ferry captain walks in who has been assigned to study ferry system safety regulations. As we chat, he looks over at the ferry system p.r. woman and blurts: "I can't lie to the reporter, If I had my druthers, I'd love to see life rafts for everybody. If we had a fire on board, with a simultaneous grounding, it would be much safer."

### ***Thursday afternoon:***

**Looking for holes:** Back at the office, I organize my new material and rough out a story outline. Though I'm not ready to write, this is a way of looking for holes in my reporting.

**Filling the holes:** On the phone, a ferry system naval architect gives a detailed account of how the ferry system talked the Coast Guard out of requiring more life rafts two years ago. Like the Titanic, he says the ferries are virtually unsinkable. Coast Guard officials confirm the naval architect's account, but say they think life rafts are necessary. Documents are arriving by fax from the NTSB and Coast Guard. I interview, among others, an ex-congressman who had tried to force more life rafts in 1988, and a leader of a ferry passenger group, and more experts.

**Writing:** I write all night, calling more people to fill holes as holes appear. *I re-check everything.*

### ***Friday, Jan. 9:***

I turn in my story to Boardman at 6 a.m. and head for home.

### ***Saturday, Jan 10:***

I call the ferry system p.r. woman, the naval architect and others to re-check the details of my story. .

### ***Sunday, Jan 11:***

After my first story hits the streets, I started calling policymakers to do a follow story.

### ***Tuesday, Jan. 13:***

The original tipster, Steve Finley, calls. He says he had no idea that the situation was that bad, that there was only one life raft for every seven people. He thought there were at least enough for a third of the passengers.