

## LaConte Ferry Blackout Traps 53 People and a Dying Dog

By Kathleen Dean Moore, on board the LeConte.

The sun was burning hot and the blackflies ferocious as the LeConte ferry from Juneau via Tenakee Springs tied to the dock at Angoon around noon on Thursday. It would not leave for 10 hours, trapping 53 people on board. An electrical blackout shut down all functions, including the winch that would have lowered the bridge to the dock, releasing the passengers. Shut down also were toilets, running water, refrigerators, and fans.

As the hours wore on, with no word on progress or plans, conditions on board the LeConte grew unpleasant. The decks baked in the sun and the lounges became unbearably hot. The crew set out cases of bottled water, which were quickly gone. Toilets filled, backed up. The people bound for Angoon could wave to their families, but had no way to leave the boat.

“It wasn’t right,” said a passenger returning to Angoon from Texas. “They could have figured this out way sooner. And the Captain could have come out. We looked for him for thirty minutes before he finally came out.”

When some passengers were admitted to see him, Captain Flores, wearing a crisp white shirt, stood on the bridge in air blowing from a fan on auxiliary power. “You think it’s hard to be a passenger on this boat,” he said, “You should try being the captain.”

After six hours, word spread that as long as supplies lasted, passengers could help themselves to one of the plastic-wrapped sandwiches that were gradually warming in the useless coolers. Fully seven hours after the electrical system broke down, technicians arrived by seaplane.

Passengers were generally stoic. “We’re Alaskans. We’re tough,” said Tomi Strong, from Tenakee. But the babies were fretful in the heat, and a small child begged her grandmother to call her daddy to come save her. Little boys ran around, slapping horseflies with Tarzan magazines. Passengers waylaid crew members, begging for information, but there was no official word about any plans. On the car deck, people did as well as they could to keep their dogs from

suffering from the heat. But a large dog bit a tiny white dog. She lay bleeding on the car deck, with people gathered around, crying.

Eight hours after the shutdown, the captain decided to use an auxiliary generator to lower the bridge, and the Angoon passengers disembarked into the arms of their families and friends. Another hour later, the crew of the Whaler's Cove Resort arrived by skiff with bins of donated food – crab, salad, pasta, which were off-loaded and never seen again, at least not by the passengers.

“Frankly, this is grim,” said Juneau passenger John Shedd, who turned down a sandwich so there would be enough to go around. “They waited for hours before they did anything. It was all about saving money, with no concern for the passengers.”

‘I assumed,’ he went on, “that when we bought a ticket, they would be responsible for us.”

Although Captain Flores was hopeful for a repair at any moment, he seemed to have no plan for the passengers as the breakdown continued. “If we’re still here tomorrow,” he said, “an electrical technician will come out in the morning. Sometime in the morning.”

At that, passengers began organizing to help themselves. They made calls to Alaska Seaplanes for charter flights out, but the delays had squandered the window for flying that day. They called, but did not reach, Allen Marine, which might have sent a boat, had they been pressed. Calls went out to State Senators, radio stations, family members, anyone who might help free them from that boat. But without power to charge their phones, one phone after another died, and people began to make grim jokes about descending into silence and disappearing forever. The little dog died.

It was 10:30 at night. The passengers settled in to sleep, wary about tomorrow. In shorts and summer shirts, they slumped in chairs, as the temperature in the forward lounge dropped twenty degrees. That’s when they heard from the elusive captain. “Good evening, I am in a long conversation wrangling with the Coast Guard. The ship is ready to go, but I have not got permission to go.” Crews dimmed the lights and pulled down the blackout blinds. The ferry arrived at Auke Bay, near Juneau, at 4:40 AM.