

The Independent Fact Group

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Subject: The missing part of the MV Estonia Car Deck

Type: Statement

By: The Independent Fact Group

www.factgroup.uk

Status: Official

Date: 2025-01-01

Version: English edition



Now, 30 years after the sinking of the passenger ferry MV Estonia, we enter a new phase in uncovering the truth about why and how the ship could sink so quickly. Countless attempts have been made over the years to discredit critical voices, revealing documents, and investigations conducted within the established maritime safety expertise.

During this 30 years, extensive criticism of the official accident report has failed to compel the responsible authorities to conduct a new and fully independent investigation that thoroughly examines and analyzes alternative scenarios. With this as the backdrop, we now enter a new era where such an investigation - or alternatively, the salvage of the entire vessel - becomes the focus of renewed efforts. Within the maritime industry, there are alternative actors, states, and organizations capable of initiating such alternatives.

History

During the three decades since the sinking of MV Estonia, several independent groups and experts have conducted investigations to understand the causes behind the disaster. Here are some of these efforts:

The German Expert Group (GGE):

This group was formed in early February 1995 by Jos. L. Meyer GmbH, the shipyard that built MV Estonia. GGE conducted a comprehensive investigation and published a report questioning the official explanation of the accident. They suggested there were significant damages to the ship's hull and bottom plating, which could have contributed to the rapid sinking.

The Independent Fact Group (IFG):

IFG was established in early 1999 with the aim of clarifying the many uncertainties surrounding the sinking of MV Estonia in a structured and scientific way. They conducted their own analyses and investigations to challenge and complement the official reports.

Private Expeditions and Diving Investigations:

Over the years, several private expeditions have been conducted to examine the wreck of MV Estonia.

In August 2000, German journalist and filmmaker Jutta Rabe and American businessman Gregg Bemis led a private diving expedition to the wreck of the MV Estonia. Their objective was to investigate alternative theories about the ship's sinking, particularly the possibility of an onboard explosion.

The expedition faced significant challenges, including equipment malfunctions and adverse weather conditions. Despite these obstacles, the team managed to conduct dives and collected metal samples from the wreck, which they believed indicated evidence of an explosion.

Their activities were controversial, as the wreck site had been designated a maritime grave, and diving there was prohibited by international agreements. Swedish authorities issued arrest warrants for Rabe and Bemis, citing violations of laws protecting the sanctity of the site.

The findings from their expedition were met with skepticism by official bodies but contributed to ongoing debates and calls for further investigation into the true cause of the Estonia disaster.

In 2020, Swedish documentary filmmaker Henrik Evertsson led an investigation into the 1994 sinking of the MV Estonia ferry. Utilizing underwater remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), his team discovered a previously undocumented four-meter-high and 1.2-meter-wide hole on the starboard side of the ship's hull.

This significant finding challenged the official explanation, which attributed the disaster solely to a failed bow visor. The revelation prompted renewed discussions and calls for further investigation into the true cause of the tragedy.

However, Evertsson's methods were controversial. Conducting those actions at the wreck site violated the sanctity of the designated maritime grave, leading to legal repercussions. In September 2022, Evertsson and his colleague Linus Andersson were found guilty of disturbing the site and were fined for their actions.

Despite the legal challenges, Evertsson's work brought new attention to the MV Estonia disaster, highlighting the need for continued investigation into the circumstances surrounding the sinking.

In September 2021, an Estonian-financed expert group, led by former prosecutor and maritime law expert Margus Kurm, conducted dives at the wreck of MV Estonia. This expedition aimed to investigate unanswered questions about the disaster and explore previously undiscovered damage to the ship. The findings included significant hull damage, which reignited debates about the causes of the rapid sinking.

Kurm's legal background and experience in high-profile cases brought credibility to the investigation, and the team worked closely with international experts to ensure thorough documentation and analysis. This marked a significant step forward in addressing the lingering questions surrounding the tragedy.

These efforts have deepened the understanding of the disaster and challenged official conclusions, leading to continued debate and further research into the sinking of MV Estonia.

Beginning in 2020 The Swedish Accident Investigation Authority (SHK) and the Estonian Safety Investigation Bureau (OJK) have, in recent years, conducted supplementary investigations into the sinking of MV Estonia. These investigations have aimed, in part, to reinforce the conclusions of the official 1997 report by the Joint Accident Investigation Commission (JAIC), which attributed the disaster to the failure of the bow visor and its ramp, leading to flooding of the car deck.

Despite new evidence brought forward by independent groups and private expeditions - such as hull damage discovered by Henrik Evertsson's team and the findings from Margus Kurm's 2021 investigation - SHK and OJK have repeatedly sought to discredit alternative sinking scenarios. These agencies have emphasized structural weaknesses, maintenance issues, and improper loading practices as contributing factors while avoiding conclusive explanations for certain damage to the ship.

However, both agencies have admitted that MV Estonia was not seaworthy on its final voyage. They cited design flaws, non-compliance with international safety standards, and deficiencies in emergency preparedness. This aligns with findings published by the Independent Fact Group (IFG) as early as 1999, which concluded that the vessel was structurally compromised and unfit for operation under the prevailing conditions.

While these revelations lend some weight to alternative narratives, SHK and OJK have refrained from revising the core conclusion of the JAIC report. This approach has drawn criticism from independent experts and victims' families, who argue that the supplementary investigations prioritize upholding the original findings over a transparent and thorough examination of all evidence.

This Report

The missing part of the MV Estonia Car Deck

In films by SHK in July 2021, the large visibility on the car deck is clearly visible. Estonia is lying with a list of 132 degrees with the starboard side in the bottom sediment. The ship is almost upside down, which means that the camera is filming from below relative to the ship's normal position. What is up in the picture is the spaces on deck 1. The hole is located around frame 88, and what you see at the top of the photograph are parts of cabin deck 1.

The ship's fender is placed at exactly the same height as the plate that forms the driving surface on the car deck. Below this line, you can see the car deck. However, the video films show that you can see into the car deck because the car deck itself is missing inside the hole.

The following picture 1 is a closeup from the video.



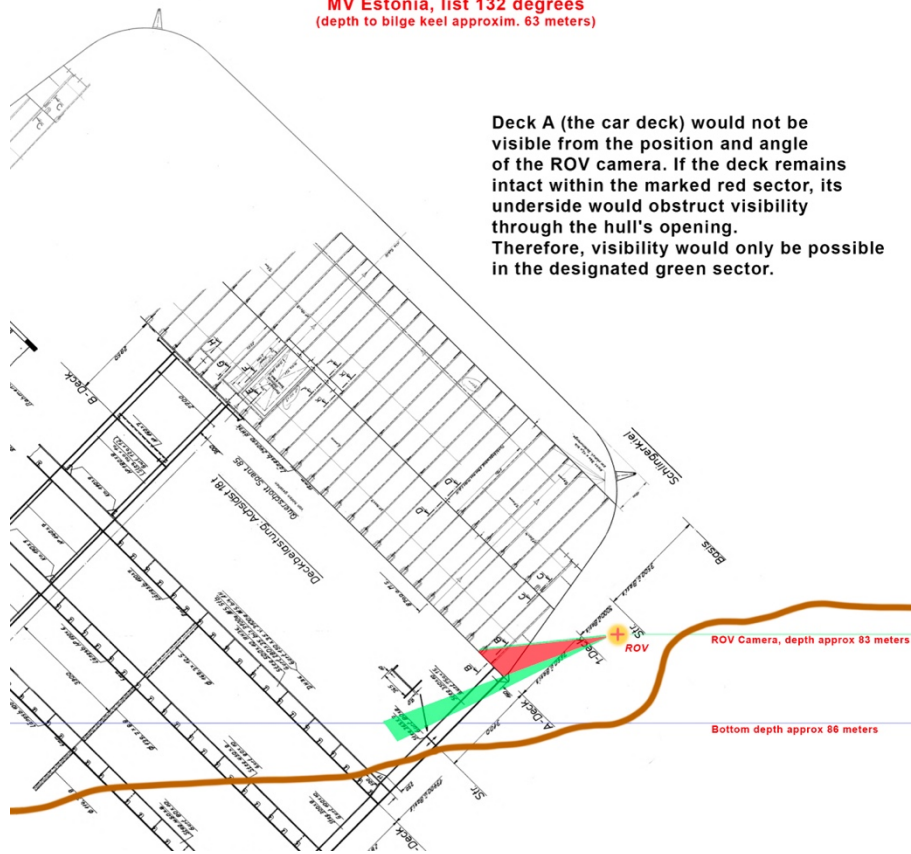
Picture 1. A closeup from the video where the underside of a lorry is visible.

In films by SHK and OJK, it is clear that a significant part of the car deck plating is missing inside the ship close to the hole in the hull. This fact has not been explained or even discussed.

The Independent Fact Group asks for an explanation. The significance of the missing part of the car deck can hardly be explained by sole damage from the outside, as we understand.

In picture 2, we have made visible an overview of the ship, hole, and ROV position during the documentation of the damage.

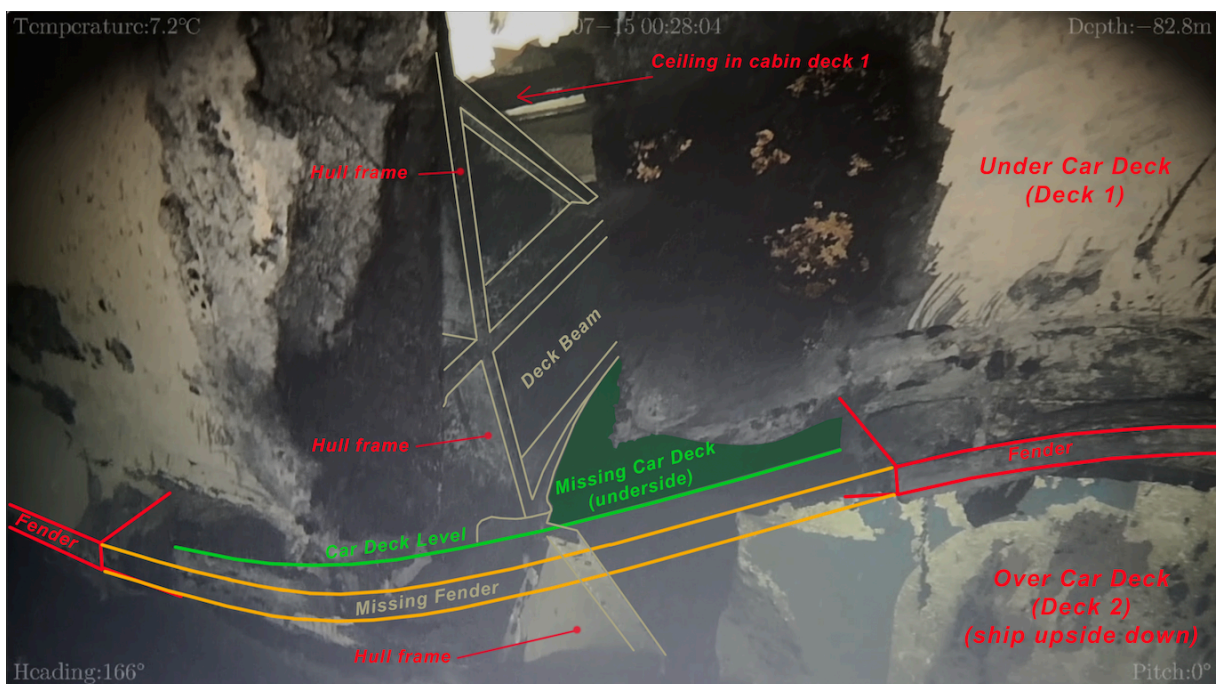
MV Estonia, list 132 degrees
 (depth to bilge keel approx. 63 meters)



Picture 2. An overview of the ship, hole, and ROV position.

The missing car deck also formed an integral part of the supporting beams that lay like a net under the car deck. The transverse beams were 380 mm high and had a material thickness of 8 mm. In between were longitudinal beams, 240 mm high and 10 mm thick. The plate on the car deck was 12 mm.

It seems remarkable that a significant part of this structure is missing inside the hole in the hull, which can be seen to the left in the picture.



Picture 3. The full view of the photo from the ROV video outlined with guidelines for understanding.



Picture 4. The full view of the photo from the ROV video without guidelines.



Picture 5. The full view of the photo from the ROV zooming in close to the hole.

What caused the car deck and structure, including the fender, to disappear?

If MV Estonia had been seaworthy many of the more than 850 persons who lost their lives would have had a chance to survive no matter what caused the sinking.