

As the mysterious cruise ship disappearance of a young honeymooner grabbed headlines this summer, the ongoing media circus masked a disturbing trend.

In the past five years a dozen other people have set sail, never to return. **BY JAY CHESHES**

The



Vanishing

F

OR JIMMY SCAVONE THE TRIP WAS a graduation present, toasting four years of college and a proud, framed BA. For George Smith it was a raucous hard-drinking honeymoon. Chris Caldwell was celebrating an engagement to the fun-loving woman who was to become his third bride. Annette Mizener, whose mother had won a vacation, set sail with family and friends. Amy Bradley was tagging along with her family, too; her father had earned the free tickets for being an insurance sales whiz. Hue Pham and Hue Tram, a Vietnamese couple in their 70s, were on board for Mother's Day with their grown daughter and her husband, sharing the fruits of retirement on their first — and last — cruise.

Though most of them had never been on a cruise before, by all accounts they were enjoying their respective journeys. There are pictures to prove it. Scavone spent the first afternoon

Search continues for missing man

By Hoa Nguyen
Staff Writer

The Glenville family of the man feared to have fallen off a cruise ship during his honeymoon in Turkey is still waiting to hear from international authorities investigating his disappearance, according to the office of Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn.

"We're doing all we can to help the family communicate with federal agencies and our personnel in Turkey and Greece. My heart goes out to the Smith family," Shays said in a written statement.

The family, which did not respond to requests for comment, reached out to Shays, although it asked that the congressman refrain from releasing further information, his spokesman said.

Smith IV, 26, of Glenville and his wife were reported missing from the Brilliance of the Seas.



Smith

Western Middle School he was remembered by principal Don Strangely involved in both interscholastic sports. "You have a great memory kids with

just out of Miami exploring the sparkling white ship with his best friend. Smith and his bride got into the spirit with poolside cocktails and a hammed-up on-camera embrace. Tossing back Zimas like water, Caldwell eased into the first vacation he'd had in about four years. Mizener won big at bingo. Bradley and her brother found a Mardi Gras party, where they were showered with beads. The Hues sought a perch on the deck for views of the sunset and the black ocean below.

For these seven passengers the enormous floating hotel offered many distractions. There were five daily meals, including the fabled midnight buffet. There were multiple pools, a gym, a spa, video arcades, and a shuffleboard deck. They might have taken a turn at the rock-climbing wall, a plunge down the water slide, or indulged in a credit card binge at one of the ships' tony shops. These travelers tended to be freewheeling types, making new friends on the disco floor over too many shots. Many eventually found their way to the casino, where they would be captured on camera dabbling in slots, doubling down at blackjack, or cashing in at roulette. For some the gambling room surveillance tapes would be the last physical record of their existence.

They were seven passengers on six ships. Although they would never meet — would never even know of one another — they would be drawn together by one unfortunate twist of fate: They all vanished at sea.

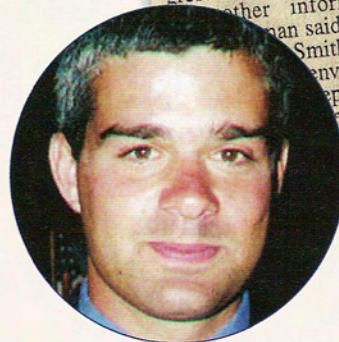
By and large, their disappearances registered barely any attention. But the mysterious case of George Smith, the 26-year-old from Connecticut who vanished this summer while cruising the Mediterranean, ignited a media storm. The tabloid news gabfest grew like a second head out of the summer's other made-for-TV mystery: Natalie Holloway's disappearance in Aruba. The same on-air windbags — lawyers, PIs, former cops, and federal agents — chimed in on both cases, tossing conjecture into a void of information.

Despite the intense scrutiny his disappearance generated, we may never know what happened to Smith on the night of July 5, when he drunkenly stumbled into the ether. Or, for that matter, what happened to Jimmy Scavone six years earlier, or to Chris Caldwell, after he was last spotted a few hours before dawn, or to Annette Mizener, who, after some rowdy karaoke, failed to materialize for 10 p.m. bingo. And no one

knows what became of Amy Bradley, the peppy young Southerner last seen hanging out with onboard musicians, or the Hues, who had survived among the diaspora of boat people after the fall of Saigon, only to be swallowed by a cruise ship after dinner one night.

The cruise industry has been bruised over the last few years, with onboard outbreaks of influenza and Norwalk virus, and hefty fines for polluting the oceans, but that has done nothing to slow the astonishing surge in its business. Even as they commission new billion-dollar vessels, the biggest lines continue to make astronomical profits. Cruising, once off-limits to all but the very rich, is today as much a part of our recreational way of life as the Epcot Center and Chuck E. Cheese's.

Every year some 10 million passengers, mostly Americans, book passage on the world's four major cruise lines. In the last



five years more than a dozen have not come home — at least six in the last year alone. To the cruise industry the numbers are a statistical blip, but to the people who have lost close family members, they add up to a troubling — and baffling — trend.

"When somebody, the FBI, tells you your son just fell overboard, you believe it," says Jean Scavone, Jimmy's grieving mother. "But then you start seeing all these other people, all these other cases, and you think, This doesn't make much sense."

On June 29, 2005, George Allen Smith IV — an all-American kid from Connecticut — and his new wife set sail from Barcelona on a 12-day honeymoon cruise. The couple had booked a prime stateroom valued at \$10,000 on the Brilliance of the Seas, part of the Royal Caribbean line. The ship — whose amenities included a golf simulator and a lounge with self-leveling pool tables — landed at some spectacular

ports of call: the Tuscan coast, the French Riviera, the Greek isle of Mykonos.

Smith, a former high school linebacker from Greenwich, and his 25-year-old wife Jennifer Hagel, an athletic blonde from the small town of Cromwell, Connecticut, had been married in late June under a white tent at the Castle Hill Inn in Newport, Rhode Island. Framed by an ivy-covered canopy overlooking Narragansett Bay, the couple exchanged vows and a cliff-top embrace.

On July 4, 2005, several days after Hagel's ex-cop father had given her away, the newlyweds lounged on deck as the Brilliance of the Seas cut east through the Mediterranean toward Turkey. The Smiths marked the holiday, say shipmates, by getting notably sloshed.

That night after dinner the couple visited the casino. George, apparently on a winning streak, shared his good fortune by offering up rounds of drinks to fellow gamblers, including four guys he'd befriended

Previous page: Paul A. Scuders/Corbis; Top left: Courtesy Greenwich Time; Top Right: Courtesy of A Current Affair; Left to Right: Courtesy of the National Center for Missing Adults (2); Pham Family (2); Shannon Nowlan



Love overboard George Smith and Jennifer Hagel were on their honeymoon when Smith disappeared. That night, Smith apparently had a big win at the casino and was overheard partying with others in his cabin.

There was talk of young love gone bad, of grand theft, of three Russian guys ravishing Jen and dumping George into the sea.

a couch in the disco. Others claimed that the Smiths' fight escalated into a kick to the groin. Some have painted a more genial scene of a husband playfully urging his wife to join him for drinks. According to some witnesses George bragged at the table about 50 grand stashed in his stateroom.

One account had Jen leaving the bar at around 3 a.m., not with George but with the casino manager. Half an hour later Askin and the three Russian passengers helped George — so drunk he barely could stand — stagger back to his cabin. When Jen wasn't there the five new friends hit the Jacuzzi and solarium, hoping to find her. But when she didn't turn up, the gang returned to his cabin. Neighboring passengers later reported hearing laughter, good-byes, and considerable banging. A vacationing cop in the cabin next door noted what sounded like "people cheering, like a drinking contest-type thing," then an argument on the

rest of their party there — Simeone's mother, his sister, and her boyfriend Jesse Brissette (who shared Jimmy and Jeff's cabin), and friends of the family — they posed for pictures under what remained of the late afternoon sun.

At dinner that evening in the Universe dining room, Scavone, a notoriously picky eater, opted for the chicken. His spirits were high as he talked of his future — grad school at NYU for urban planning — and of his summer job teaching tennis at a country club near Danbury. After dinner Jimmy, Jeff, and Jesse returned to their cabin to rest up for their big first night on the ship.

Scavone and his friends were preppy New Englanders. Jimmy, prematurely gray like his father and with a wide, doughy face, wore a Hilfiger shirt and a tennis racket charm around his neck. That night the three guys hit the Millionaire's Club Casino on the Promenade deck sometime after 10. Simeone's mother and her boyfriend bought the first round of beers. "We had some drinks, played some slots, blackjack," recalls Simeone. "We met guys, girls. You meet all sorts of people."

By midnight the guys were in the Point After disco chatting up a pair of sisters under the glow of 500 TVs. Scavone, soon enough, was feeling no pain. He had brought \$500 on board, and though cash was useless — drinks were charged to the same "sign and sale" card used to swipe open cabin doors — he carried the big wad in his wallet. "I'm running to the bathroom," he said at one point. "Don't get lost," Brissette joked. Scavone waved and slipped through the throng. Neither his family nor friends would ever see him again.

With most offshore disappearances, the victim's family isn't immediately notified that something has gone awry. Scavone's parents would learn that their son had vanished some 16 hours after he strolled out of the disco. It was July 5, 1999, a Monday evening. A coast guard search had already begun. Jean Scavone, recovering from knee surgery, was on the porch when her husband John received the call from the ship. "What are you talking about, they can't find Jimmy?" she said when John delivered the news. "He's on a cruise."

Once the gravity of the situation had sunk in, Jimmy's mother called the New Haven field office of the FBI, which put its San Juan counter- **Continued on page 96**



Lost at sea From left, Amy Bradley, Jimmy Scavone, Hue Tram, Hue Pham, and Chris Caldwell: all missing. With major gaps in onboard surveillance, there's no telling what happens at sea. Although most cruise lines report serious crimes involving Americans to the FBI — rapes, assaults, murders, and disappearances — they are under no legal obligation to do so if they happen outside U.S. territorial waters.

during the cruise: Josh Askin, a 20-year-old competitive snowboarder and student from San Diego, and three young Russian guys from Brooklyn, who had already gained a reputation onboard for being roughnecks. Though little is known about the Russian men, one passenger later told a *Dateline* reporter that the three had picked fights and stolen liquor from the ship's bars. After the Casino Royale closed at 2:30, the Smiths and their companions joined an exodus of all-nighters up the glass elevators to the revolving Starquest disco.

What happened next can be inferred only from a blur of conflicting accounts. Several passengers reported a spat in the bar between George and his bride, she stumbling out on her own, colliding with walls, he pounding shots of absinthe at a table with his new group of friends. Askin says one of the ship's casino managers made a pass at Jennifer; he later testified that he saw Jennifer and the manager sitting together on

balcony, followed later by furniture moving and a "horrific thud," like "a couch hitting concrete." By daybreak, apart from a puddle of blood discovered on a metal awning two decks below his ninth-floor cabin, there was no sign of George Allen Smith.

Six years earlier, almost to the day, another young man from Connecticut disappeared just as mysteriously. On the afternoon of July 4, 1999, Jimmy Scavone embarked on a cruise on Carnival's "fun ship" *Destiny*, the largest of its kind when it was built in 1998 — 3,300 passengers, 16 decks, 100,000 tons of glass and steel. On the Sunday it set sail from Miami there were fireworks over Biscayne Bay. By then the *Destiny* was well on its way, doing 20 knots south en route to San Juan. As the monstrous vessel left the city behind, 22-year-old Scavone and his buddy Jeff Simeone threw their gear into their cabin and immediately headed for the pool. Catching up with the

Continued from page 85 part on the case. Agents were waiting to board when the ship pulled into port the following day.

While cruise ships are technically governed by the laws of the countries whose flags they fly, they are more like self-policing city-states than adjuncts of any nation. Most vessels are registered under flags of convenience: Panama, the Bahamas, Liberia, locales chosen for their minimal regulation and taxation. Though most cruise lines report serious crimes involving Americans to the FBI — rapes, assaults, murders, and

lions on security each year, on some ships the force consists of little more than a single retired law enforcement officer overseeing a small battalion of poorly trained guards. They are hardly equipped, or inclined, to tackle the biggest problem on board: drunken passengers hurting themselves, and one another.

The party atmosphere is especially pronounced on Carnival's 21 "fun ships," the most boisterous on the high seas. "The clients that come to us from Carnival, they're a totally different fraternity," says

Walker, one of a handful of lawyers who specialize in cruise ship lawsuits. "They're the tank top, Bud Light crowd." Having snapped up smaller competitors like

Princess (the original "Love Boat"), the more upscale Holland America, and the Cunard line (operator of the Queen Mary and QEII), Carnival is also the world's largest line; in 2004 it hosted 6.3 million fun-seekers. Of the \$9.7 billion in revenue its parent company made that year, \$2 billion was generated by onboard sales, the vast majority of that from alcohol. "There's no cutoff point," claims Choc Harris, former Carnival security chief and a frequent expert witness in personal injury suits against the company. "In the United States you can't serve an intoxicated person. On cruise ships that doesn't apply." (A Carnival spokesperson, however, insists it's company policy to stop serving passengers who are inebriated and dismisses Harris as a witness for hire.)

In the three years he worked for Carnival, Harris — now a constable in Midland, Texas — lured drunken passengers from lifeboats and from the lip of the ship, was assaulted by a naked Somali, and got caught in a brawl involving 60 people. But he never had a passenger disappear. When someone does vanish at sea, suicide or a drunken accident is the most likely explanation — and the one most frequently offered by the cruise lines.

Though cruise ships have historically placed the blame for drunken mishaps on passengers themselves, a recent ruling in Florida could spur a flood of lawsuits. An appeals court — hearing the case of a recovering alcoholic who fell off the wagon, down a flight of stairs, and into a coma — ruled for the first time that cruise lines could be held liable for serving too much

to drink. Absent a body or much evidence, however, proving negligence remains a considerable challenge.

At Carnival, where at least five passengers have disappeared since July 2004, company spokeswoman Jennifer de la Cruz was insisting as late as last winter that these situations are "very rare, very unusual," and says the company has "no tolerance for criminal activity on its ships." In July she told an AP reporter that "generally, the people put themselves at risk."

According to most accounts, alcohol may indeed have contributed to Jimmy Scavone's disappearance. After he left his friends at the disco, there were numerous sightings of an inebriated young man that matched a souvenir shot of Scavone posted after the search had begun. Was that him careening down a hallway, banging on doors? Had he been propped on the floor near an elevator, attacking a post-midnight snack? Or had he been at another bar, as one bartender insisted, so smashed he couldn't understand why they didn't take cash? The only thing the FBI, or anyone else, knows is that he is gone. "We just figured he'd met somebody," says Jeff Simeone, his childhood friend. "Until we started paging him for breakfast and he didn't turn up."

George Smith, like Scavone, had had plenty to drink the night he went missing. When his new bride awoke the following morning she had no inkling that anything was wrong. She kept a scheduled appointment at the ship's spa, then returned expecting, presumably, to find George back in bed. What she found instead was an empty cabin and a ship full of people buzzing about perceived foul play. Bloodstains had already been discovered on an awning and on the side of the vessel. By the time they docked in Kusadasi, Turkey, security had already contacted the local authorities.

Josh Askin and his parents, who had booked the cruise to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary, had gotten to know both Smiths during their week on the ship; they'd even spent time as a group on land at one port of call. On the morning of Smith's disappearance the Askins were preparing to disembark for a full day ashore when they were stopped on the gangplank. Josh was taken to guest services, where he saw Jennifer — still in the dress she'd been wearing the night before — looking distraught. According to one source,

"She was with another man," a San Diego student said of George Smith's bride. "I'm not letting her go to jail."

mysterious vanishings — they are under no legal obligation to do so when they occur outside U.S. territorial waters.

On the high seas the captain is king. He oversees a large and often poorly paid international staff, recruited, say critics, without much background vetting. "They don't have record-keeping systems in many of the countries these guys come from," says Mike Eriksen, a Palm Beach lawyer who has brought some 25 cases against the cruise lines. "We're talking about places like Costa Rica, Guatemala.... You can be a bandito half your life and have no record of it. It's inevitable you'll get some badasses on these ships."

With significant onboard holes in camera surveillance, there's often no telling what happens at sea. There have been knife fights, drug smuggling, and numerous rapes — both crew-on-passenger and crew-on-crew. According to former cruise ship security personnel, when an incident occurs the first people notified are often lawyers, not cops. In anticipation of legal action, the company's risk management team will dispatch attorneys to conduct their own privileged inquiry. Critics claim that problematic crew members are sent home before law enforcement — or opposing counsel — can get them to talk.

"We had one client who was given a date rape drug by a bartender and taken into the bathroom," Miami attorney Jim Walker says. "We filed a lawsuit, the crew member was fired and shipped back to his home country. A few months later he was back serving drinks on another cruise line."

While the major cruise lines spend mil-

Jennifer asked Josh what had happened to George, saying that she had blacked out and couldn't remember anything after she'd left the casino. Josh was sitting beside her when cruise authorities told her the disturbing news: "We think your husband is dead."

Later Josh and Jen were escorted to a local police station, where they were separated and interrogated. Josh's parents were at his side during the questioning and captured his testimony on a handheld video camera they had sneaked into the proceedings. "You took George to the room: He was very drunk?" a female inspector asked Josh. "Yeah, but you're missing a lot," he answered enigmatically. "Were George and Jennifer having a fight?" the interrogator continued. "No, they were happy," Josh answered. He was asked about the bride. "She has no idea what happened," he said. "She was with another man: the casino manager, Lloyd." He added later, "You need to get him in here. I'm not letting her go to jail. I'm not letting her go to jail."

On the videotape the Turkish translator tells the authorities that Josh believes money was behind George's disappearance, and that the casino manager had known of the cash stowed in Smith's cabin. After investigating for a day, during which traces of blood were found in the Smiths' stateroom, the Turkish authorities allowed the ship to sail on. Jen returned home to the States, while the ship headed west for the second half of the cruise. The FBI took the investigation in hand.

In the weeks that followed nobody talked to the press — neither the bride nor her family, neither Smith's grieving parents nor most of his friends. Still, like the Scott Peterson trial and the Terry Schiavo fiasco, Smith's disappearance gripped a certain type of TV news junkie, despite the fact that few details were known about the young man or his new wife. Their skeletal bios offer little insight into how or why he might have gone missing.

Despite the name, George Allen Smith IV is not a Greenwich aristocrat, though his family has been in the town for at least three generations. His great-grandfather played Major League baseball through the 1920s for the Philadelphia Phillies and New York Giants. George IV was also a jock; he played football at Greenwich High School, but quit the team after his junior year. He was an average athlete, an average student, a clean-cut good

guy. "He had a dry sense of humor," recalls his football coach Bob Darula. "He was a nice kid, fairly popular, fairly likable."

Smith's senior yearbook inscription mentions no girlfriends or buddies. It begins with a quote from Nietzsche — "All men are great in their dreams" — and concludes with a shout-out to "Mom, Dad, and Bree," his sister. Smith went to Babson, a mid-dling college not far from home best known for its business programs. After graduation he moved to Boston, to a high-rise in the Fenway, and landed a job in marketing research. Somewhere along the way he met a high-energy blonde named Jennifer Hagel.

In Cromwell, a bedroom community midway between Hartford and New Haven, Jen Hagel was a girl you didn't forget. Her mother ran a thriving real estate company; her father, for years a local cop, had segued into the more lucrative field of construction. Jen too was an overachiever. In high school she joined the art club and Spanish club, which took her with classmates to Spain. She was a serious athlete, a stand-out on the golf and basketball teams, and captain of the varsity soccer squad. Senior year her half-page entry in the yearbook offered an inspirational quote from *Top Gun*: "To be the best of the best means you make mistakes and then go on." There are also plenty of insider asides to her large group of friends ("JT — Got snacks?"). For college Jen settled on the University of Rhode Island, a notorious party school a short drive from the site where she would wed, but later transferred to Trinity College in Hartford so that she could move back home to Cromwell.

After the honeymoon George and Jen Smith had planned to settle in Greenwich, where George's father owned a small, successful liquor store. George Sr. had planned to retire, leaving the shop to his son. While the FBI investigation continued — the bureau has kept a tight lid on the case — the father returned daily to work, and waited, with the rest of the country, for something to break.

Though George may have conceivably tumbled drunk off his own balcony, the far more sinister scenario is that he was pushed. One TV report said crew members had told police about escorting George to his cabin. There was talk on the air of young love gone bad, of grand theft (was there really ever 50 grand in the room?), of the three Rus-

sian guys ravishing Jen and then dumping George in the sea.

According to one source, on the night of George's disappearance the casino manager (the one Josh Askin cast suspicion on) returned to his cabin — alone — at around 3:15 a.m.; at 3:20 a custodian from the disco helped an inebriated Jen — some say in a wheelchair — to her deck, where she said she could make it to her room on her own. There is no accounting for her whereabouts, however, between that encounter and her spa appointment nearly five hours later.

To date, there have been no cracks in the case. Despite the bloodstains and at least a few suspects — rare in these cases — Smith's presumed death will likely remain a mystery, perhaps even to his own widow.

The rest of the victims' families are also without answers. Amy Bradley's parents still hold on to hope, some seven years after their daughter disappeared near Curaçao off a Royal Caribbean ship. Like Scavone and Smith she'd been up late carousing. The Bradleys are convinced Amy was kidnapped, then shuttled to shore when the ship pulled into port in the morning. For two years, they retained the services of a professional bounty hunter, who made several reported sightings of Amy in Curaçao, and even sent the Bradleys surveillance photographs of her being held in captivity. But these reports and photos were later discovered to be a hoax, and the grieving parents still have no closure in the case.

Chris Caldwell, a twice-divorced Virginia Beach DJ, had also been drinking when he vanished from a Carnival cruise last year in July. No indication has ever emerged of where, when, or how he might have gone over the side. As for Annette Mizener, of Waukesha, Wisconsin, who went missing from Carnival's Pride last December, suicide seemed at first the most likely conclusion, until another traveler reported finding her handbag, torn and discarded, near a surveillance camera obscured by a flyer. The tantalizing clue, however, has opened no doors.

And to this day, no leads have emerged in perhaps the oddest case of all: the Hues, the elderly couple who had left Saigon in a flotilla 30 years earlier to start a new life abroad. Cruising last May on Carnival's Destiny, they disappeared after dinner, leaving behind only Tram's shoes and handbag, side by side on the third deck of the ship. ❧