March 24, 1989, Valez, the newest tanker for Exxon Oil Company wrecked ashore on Bleigh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska. The wreck caused the hull of the ship to burst open spilling over 11 million gallons of crude oil into the bay, which was 25 miles from the dock the tanker had left from. This oil spill is known as one of the worst spills in American history and it killed thousands of mammals and marine life.

The president of Exxon, Frank Larossi blamed “human error” on the ships wreck because the tanker was fully checked and the engine and other parts seemed to be running properly. (Anchorage Daily News) Looking further into the situation Captain Joseph Hazelwood who has been working for Exxon for 20 years had two previous accounts of DWI’s on his record that Exxon knew about. The only warning Joseph ever received was from his supervisor saying, “If you have a problem, take care of it.” (Dallas Morning News) In 1985 Joseph checked himself into a rehab facility and reported his state to Exxon. A year later he started drinking again and November before the oil spill his New York licenses was revoked for another drinking and driving incident. Joseph Hazelwood also had told the company that he had drank alcohol on the company’s ship and he did not receive any form of punishment. Exxon had a lack in judgment to fire Hazelwood for his first offense with the company and other not to monitor or watch him after he was out of rehab. Exxon’s lack of responsibility, Joe’s weakness to alcohol and an over worked third mate led to one of America’s worst oil spill.

Right after the spill Exxon and the coast guard had begun to clean up the spill but damage was done and hundreds of law suits were filed with Exxon and Joseph Hazelwood’s name. Exxon days later had fired Joe Hazelwood and waiting for his charge he fled Alaska to Long Island, New York. He was charged for operating a ship while under the influence, reckless endangerment and negligent discharge of oil. In Long Island he hired his own attorney to help lower his jail sentence and bond. Unfortunately the jury in New York raised the sentence compared to Alaska and soon he had two separate warrants for his arrest one in Alaska and another in New York. About a week later Hazelwood surrendered in Suffolk County at his attorney’s office. At first his bail was set for $500,000 the Suffolk County Supreme Court Judge Kenneth Rohl raised his bail because he wanted to make sure Hazelwood knew the seriousness of his crimes and to make sure he paid for it (Houston Chronicle). If the jury voted guilty he would receive 2 ¼ years in prison and a $10,000 fine. During the trails the public viewed Hazelwood as a “skid-row bum” according to his attorney Michael Chalos (Dallas Morning News). At the beginning of the first major trail the jury focused on Exxon’s involvement with Hazelwood and for being irresponsible to the situation before the spill. In this case Hazelwood started pointing fingers at Chief Mate Greg Cousins who was in charge of steering the vessel and was almost two miles off of the destination the captain had told him to go.

Joe Hazelwood and Exxon had over 150 criminal cases against them and it took over 5 years to finish all the cases. Joe Hazelwood was let go with $50,000 fine, 1,000 hours of community service to the Alaskan beaches and for breaking coast guard regulations with alcohol his shipping license was revoked for 9 months.

Hazelwood was received this lightened sentence because the jury believed that it was Exxon’s responsibility for their employees and to make sure they are healthy to work. The same goes for Greg Cousins because he had worked long hours those past few days and was not accompanied on the bridge so he was not charged with any crimes.