Darlak v. Columbus-America Discovery Group, CA4, 59 F.3d 20, 7/7/95

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In Rem Actions

IN PERSONAM ACTION ON SALVAGE CLAIM BARRED BY IN REM LIABILITY DECISION

Once in rem liability is established in an admiralty action, it is res judicata and binding on all parties; attempts to convert salvage claims to in personam actions are barred.

(Darlak v. Columbus-America Discovery Group, CA4, 59 F.3d 20, 7/7/95)

[NOTE FROM EDITOR: The following is provided as a companion to the case, supra. It is illustrative of the position taken by the “Intervenors” in that case.]

Jack F. Grimm and Harry G. John (Grimm and John) commissioned an expedition to perform a sonar survey of a section of ocean floor thought to be the location of the S.S. Central America, which had sunk in 1857. Grimm had designated Joseph W. Darlak (Darlak), who spent six months researching the Central America’s position, as his representative on the expedition. On February 26, 1984, the expedition departed from Norfolk, Virginia, aboard the research vessel, Robert W. Conrad. The group included Darlak and a team of oceanographers from Columbia University. The survey revealed a target close to where the Central America was later discovered by Columbus-America Discovery Group (Columbus-America) in 1988.

After locating the Central America, Columbus-America entered into an agreement with Grimm and John stating that he had developed the position information used during the Conrad expedition, and that in consideration of his not intervening in the proceeding, Darlak would not be prejudiced in any future action regarding his claim to the salvage of the Central America. Darlak also agreed to provide records for Grimm and John in their action.

Darlak later independently filed an action in the Southern District of New York against Columbia University, Columbus-America Discovery Group, Inc. and its president, Thomas G. Thompson (Thompson), when he learned of the decision in district court adverse to the claim of Grimm and John. The case was transferred to the Eastern District of Virginia, whereupon Darlak disregarded his agreement with Grimm and John and moved to intervene in the in rem action. Columbus-America and Thompson were granted summary judgment on the motion and Darlak appealed.

The court recognized that there was validity in the argument against Darlak’s making a separate claim from that of Grimm and John, because he had no cognizable proprietary interest in the information he provided to the Conrad expedition for two reasons. First, Darlak’s claim was derivative in nature, since he was acting as an agent of Grimm in supplying the information. Second, the position information Darlak provided to the expedition was already public knowledge. Although the court agreed with Darlak that both points involved issues of fact, it affirmed summary judgment because Darlak had failed to assert his claim during the in rem proceeding.

The court noted that in rem actions were designed to decide the rights to “specific property as against all of the world, and judgments in such cases are binding to the same extent.” Darlak, 59 F.3d at 22 (citing Black’s Law Dictionary 713 (5th ed. 1979)). In rem actions in admiralty receive the same treatment as general in rem actions. “The whole world, it is said, are parties in an admiralty cause; and, therefore, the whole world is bound by the decision.” Thorsteinson v. M/V Drangur, 891 F.2d 1547, 1553 (11th Cir. 1990) (quoting The Mary, 3 U.S. (9 Cranch) 126, 144 (1815)).

Darlak’s claim to a percentage of the salvage was based on the assertion that Columbus-America used his proprietary information to locate the Central America. Were the assertion true, Darlak could have recovered a portion of the salvage res. The claim should have been asserted during the liability phase of the in rem action, the court said, and thus the completion of the in rem liability phase had a res judicata effect on Darlak’s claim. (The court acknowledged that Darlak had ample notice of the in rem action.) The result was that the in personam action was barred.

Darlak failed in his attempt to convert his potential in rem claim into an in personam action, because he twice decided to avoid intervening and “[was] not entitled to a bite of a different apple merely because he could not taste the first one.” Darlak, 59 F.3d at 23.

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