

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

BEVERLY JAMES LOWE, : CONSOLIDATED UNDER
: MDL 875
Plaintiff, **FILED:** : Transferred from the
: Northern District of
v. **JUN 25 2012 :** California
MICHAEL E. KUNZ, Clerk (Case No. 08-04461)
By _____ Dep. Clerk
GENERAL ELECTRIC COMPANY, : E.D. PA CIVIL ACTION NO.
ET AL., : 2:09-64063-ER
Defendants. :

O R D E R

AND NOW, this **21st** day of **June, 2012**, it is hereby
ORDERED that the Motion for Summary Judgment of Defendant
Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding, Inc. (Doc. No. 25) is **DENIED**.¹

¹ This case was transferred in March of 2009 from the United States District Court for the Northern District of California to the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania as part of MDL-875.

Plaintiff, Admiral Beverly James Lowe ("Plaintiff" or "Admiral Lowe"), alleges that he was exposed to asbestos while serving in the Navy during the period 1961 to 1963. Defendant Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding, Inc. ("Northrop Grumman") built ships. The alleged exposure pertinent to Defendant Northrop Grumman occurred during Plaintiff's work aboard the following submarine:

- USS Robert E. Lee

Plaintiff asserts that he developed asbestosis as a result of asbestos exposure. He was deposed in 2009.

Plaintiff brought claims against various defendants. Defendant Northrop Grumman has moved for summary judgment, arguing that (1) it is immune from liability by way of the government contractor defense, and (2) it is entitled to summary judgment on grounds of the sophisticated user defense. The parties assert that California law applies.

I. Legal Standard

A. Summary Judgment Standard

Summary judgment is appropriate if there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a). "A motion for summary judgment will not be defeated by 'the mere existence' of some disputed facts, but will be denied when there is a genuine issue of material fact." Am. Eagle Outfitters v. Lyle & Scott Ltd., 584 F.3d 575, 581 (3d Cir. 2009) (quoting Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S. 242, 247-248 (1986)). A fact is "material" if proof of its existence or non-existence might affect the outcome of the litigation, and a dispute is "genuine" if "the evidence is such that a reasonable jury could return a verdict for the nonmoving party." Anderson, 477 U.S. at 248.

In undertaking this analysis, the court views the facts in the light most favorable to the non-moving party. "After making all reasonable inferences in the nonmoving party's favor, there is a genuine issue of material fact if a reasonable jury could find for the nonmoving party." Pignataro v. Port Auth. of N.Y. & N.J., 593 F.3d 265, 268 (3d Cir. 2010) (citing Reliance Ins. Co. v. Moessner, 121 F.3d 895, 900 (3d Cir. 1997)). While the moving party bears the initial burden of showing the absence of a genuine issue of material fact, meeting this obligation shifts the burden to the non-moving party who must "set forth specific facts showing that there is a genuine issue for trial." Anderson, 477 U.S. at 250.

B. The Applicable Law

1. Government Contractor Defense (Federal Law)

Defendant's motion for summary judgment on the basis of the government contractor defense is governed by federal law. In matters of federal law, the MDL transferee court applies the law of the circuit where it sits, which in this case is the law of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Various Plaintiffs v. Various Defendants ("Oil Field Cases"), 673 F. Supp. 2d 358, 362-63 (E.D. Pa. 2009) (Robreno, J.).

2. State Law Issues (Maritime versus State Law)

The parties assert that California substantive law is applicable. However, where a case sounds in admiralty,

application of a state's law (including a choice of law analysis under its choice of law rules) would be inappropriate. Gibbs ex rel. Gibbs v. Carnival Cruise Lines, 314 F.3d 125, 131-32 (3d Cir. 2002). Therefore, if the Court determines that maritime law is applicable, the analysis ends there and the Court is to apply maritime law. See id.

Whether maritime law is applicable is a threshold dispute that is a question of federal law, see U.S. Const. Art. III, § 2; 28 U.S.C. § 1333(1), and is therefore governed by the law of the circuit in which this MDL court sits. See Various Plaintiffs v. Various Defendants ("Oil Field Cases"), 673 F. Supp. 2d 358, 362 (E.D. Pa. 2009) (Robreno, J.). This court has previously set forth guidance on this issue. See Conner v. Alfa Laval, Inc., 799 F. Supp. 2d 455 (E.D. Pa. 2011) (Robreno, J.).

In order for maritime law to apply, a plaintiff's exposure underlying a products liability claim must meet both a locality test and a connection test. Id. at 463-66 (discussing Jerome B. Grubart, Inc. v. Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Co., 513 U.S. 527, 534 (1995)). The locality test requires that the tort occur on navigable waters or, for injuries suffered on land, that the injury be caused by a vessel on navigable waters. Id. In assessing whether work was on "navigable waters" (i.e., was sea-based) it is important to note that work performed aboard a ship that is docked at the shipyard is sea-based work, performed on navigable waters. See Sisson v. Ruby, 497 U.S. 358 (1990). This Court has previously clarified that this includes work aboard a ship that is in "dry dock." See Deuber v. Asbestos Corp. Ltd., No. 10-78931, 2011 WL 6415339, at *1 n.1 (E.D. Pa. Dec. 2, 2011) (Robreno, J.) (applying maritime law to ship in "dry dock" for overhaul). By contrast, work performed in other areas of the shipyard or on a dock, (such as work performed at a machine shop in the shipyard, for example, as was the case with the Willis plaintiff discussed in Conner) is land-based work. The connection test requires that the incident could have "'a potentially disruptive impact on maritime commerce,'" and that "'the general character' of the 'activity giving rise to the incident' shows a 'substantial relationship to traditional maritime activity.'" Grubart, 513 U.S. at 534 (citing Sisson, 497 U.S. at 364, 365, and n.2).

Locality Test

If a service member in the Navy performed some work at shipyards (on land) or docks (on land) as opposed to

onboard a ship on navigable waters (which includes a ship docked at the shipyard, and includes those in "dry dock"), "the locality test is satisfied as long as some portion of the asbestos exposure occurred on a vessel on navigable waters." Conner, 799 F. Supp. 2d at 466; Deuber, 2011 WL 6415339, at *1 n.1. If, however, the worker never sustained asbestos exposure onboard a vessel on navigable waters, then the locality test is not met and state law applies.

Connection Test

When a worker whose claims meet the locality test was primarily sea-based during the asbestos exposure, those claims will meet the connection test necessary for the application of maritime law. Conner, 799 F. Supp. 2d at 467-69. But if the worker's exposure was primarily land-based, then, even if the claims could meet the locality test, they do not meet the connection test and state law (rather than maritime law) applies. Id.

It is undisputed that the alleged exposure pertinent to Northrop Grumman occurred aboard ships (specifically, a barge and various submarines). Therefore, this exposure was during sea-based work. See Conner, 799 F. Supp. 2d 455. Accordingly, maritime law is applicable to Plaintiff's claims against Northrop Grumman. See id. at 462-63.

C. Government Contractor Defense

To satisfy the government contractor defense, a defendant must show that (1) the United States approved reasonably precise specifications for the product at issue; (2) the equipment conformed to those specifications; and (3) it warned the United States about the dangers in the use of the equipment that were known to it but not to the United States. Boyle v. United Technologies Corp., 487 U.S. 500, 512 (1988). As to the first and second prongs, in a failure to warn context, it is not enough for defendant to show that a certain product design conflicts with state law requiring warnings. In re Joint E. & S.D.N.Y. Asbestos Litig., 897 F.2d 626, 630 (2d Cir. 1990). Rather, the defendant must show that the government "issued reasonably precise specifications covering warnings-specifications that reflect a considered judgment about the

warnings at issue." Hagen v. Benjamin Foster Co., 739 F. Supp. 2d 770, 783 (E.D. Pa. 2010) (Robreno, J.) (citing Holdren v. Buffalo Pumps, Inc., 614 F. Supp. 2d 129, 143 (D. Mass. 2009))). Government approval of warnings must "transcend rubber stamping" to allow a defendant to be shielded from state law liability. 739 F. Supp. 2d at 783. This Court has previously cited to the case of Beaver Valley Power Co. v. Nat'l Engineering & Contracting Co., 883 F.2d 1210, 1216 (3d Cir. 1989), for the proposition that the third prong of the government contractor defense may be established by showing that the government "knew as much or more than the defendant contractor about the hazards" of the product. See, e.g., Willis v. BW IP Int'l, Inc., 811 F. Supp. 2d 1146 (E.D. Pa. Aug. 29, 2011) (Robreno, J.); Dalton v. 3M Co., No. 10-64604, 2011 WL 5881011, at *1 n.1 (E.D. Pa. Aug. 2, 2011) (Robreno, J.). Although this case is persuasive, as it was decided by the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, it is not controlling law in this case because it applied Pennsylvania law. Additionally, although it was decided subsequent to Boyle, the Third Circuit neither relied upon, nor cited to, Boyle in its opinion.

D. Government Contractor Defense at Summary Judgment Stage

This Court has noted that, at the summary judgment stage, a defendant asserting the government contractor defense has the burden of showing the absence of a genuine dispute as to any material fact regarding whether it is entitled to the government contractor defense. Compare Willis, 811 F. Supp. 2d at 1157 (addressing defendant's burden at the summary judgment stage), with Hagen, 739 F. Supp. 2d 770 (addressing defendant's burden when Plaintiff has moved to remand). In Willis, the MDL Court found that defendants had not proven the absence of a genuine dispute as to any material fact as to prong one of the Boyle test since plaintiff had submitted affidavits controverting defendants' affidavits as to whether the Navy issued reasonably precise specifications as to warnings which were to be placed on defendants' products. The MDL Court distinguished Willis from Faddish v. General Electric Co., No. 09-70626, 2010 WL 4146108 at *8-9 (E.D. Pa. Oct. 20, 2010) (Robreno, J.), where the plaintiffs did not produce any evidence of their own to contradict defendants' proofs. Ordinarily, because of the standard applied at the summary judgment stage, defendants are not entitled to summary judgment pursuant to the government contractor defense.

E. Sophisticated User Defense Under Maritime Law

This Court has previously held that it will not grant summary judgment on grounds of the sophisticated user defense when maritime law applies because maritime law has not recognized this defense in situations involving an intermediary, such as the Navy. Prange v. Alfa Laval, Inc., No. 09-91848, 2011 WL 4912828, at *1 (E.D. Pa. July 22, 2011) (Robreno, J.).

II. Defendant Northrop Grumman's Motion for Summary Judgment

A. Defendant's Arguments

Government Contractor Defense

Northrop Grumman asserts the government contractor defense, arguing that it is immune from liability in this case, and therefore entitled to summary judgment, because the Navy exercised discretion and approved reasonably precise specifications for the products at issue, Defendants provided warnings that conformed to the Navy's approved warnings, and the Navy knew about the hazards of asbestos. In asserting this defense, Northrop Grumman relies upon the declaration of Retired U.S. Navy Captain Wesley Charles Hewitt.

Sophisticated User Defense

Northrop Grumman asserts that it is entitled to summary judgment on the basis of the sophisticated user defense because the Navy was a sophisticated user, possessing the most advanced information regarding asbestos hazards. In asserting this defense, it relies upon Johnson v. American Standard, Inc., 43 Cal.4th 56, 65 (2008). Although it does not specifically cite to this evidence with regard to this argument, Defendant is presumably relying again upon the declaration of Captain Hewitt, who asserts that the Navy had state-of-the-art knowledge of asbestos hazards (and knew about asbestos hazards by at least the early 1950s).

B. Plaintiff's Arguments

Government Contractor Defense

Plaintiff argues that summary judgment in favor of Defendant on grounds of the government contractor defense is not

warranted because there are genuine issues of material fact regarding its availability to Defendant. Plaintiff contends that Defendant has (1) not produced its contract with the government or otherwise proven that it was a government contractor, (2) not demonstrated that the product at issue was "military equipment," and (3) not demonstrated a genuine significant conflict between state tort law and fulfilling its contractual federal obligations (i.e., that its contractual duties were "precisely contrary" to its duties under state tort law). Furthermore, Plaintiff asserts that the government contractor defense is not warranted because (4) SEANAV Instruction 6260.005 makes clear that the Navy encouraged Defendant to warn, (5) military specifications merely "rubber stamped" whatever warnings Defendant elected to use (or not use) and do not reflect a considered judgment by the Navy, (6) there is no military specification that precluded warning about asbestos hazards, and (7) Defendant cannot demonstrate what the Navy knew about the hazards of asbestos relative to the knowledge of Defendant, nor that the Navy knew more than it did at the time of the alleged exposure.

To contradict the evidence relied upon by Defendant, Plaintiff cites to (a) MIL-M-15071D, and (b) SEANAV Instruction 6260.005, each of which Plaintiff contends indicates that the Navy not only permitted but expressly required warnings.

Plaintiff has also submitted objections to Defendant's evidence pertaining to the government contractor defense (expert affidavit of Captain Hewitt).

Sophisticated User Defense

Plaintiff asserts that Northrop Grumman is not entitled to summary judgment on grounds of the sophisticated user defense because, (1) Northrop Grumman has not adduced evidence that Plaintiff was a sophisticated user, and (2) Northrop Grumman is really arguing for a "sophisticated intermediary defense" (which is not recognized by California law), since Plaintiff merely worked on Navy ships as a (presumably) unsophisticated worker.

C. Analysis

Admissibility of Evidence

As a preliminary matter, the Court notes that it has considered each party's objections, and has determined that there is no basis for striking any of the evidence.

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AND IT IS SO ORDERED.


EDUARDO C. ROBRENO, J.

Government Contractor Defense

Plaintiff has pointed to evidence that contradicts (or at least appears to be inconsistent with) Northrop Grumman's evidence as to whether the Navy did or did not reflect considered judgment over whether warnings could be included with asbestos-containing products. Specifically, Plaintiff has pointed to (a) MIL-M-15071D, and (b) SEANAV Instruction 6260.005, each of which Plaintiff contends indicates that the Navy not only permitted but expressly required warning. This is sufficient to raise genuine issues of material fact as to whether the first and second prongs of the Boyle test are satisfied with respect to Northrop Grumman. See Willis, 811 F. Supp. 2d 1146. Accordingly, summary judgment on grounds of the government contractor defense is not warranted.

Sophisticated User Defense

This Court has previously held that it will not grant summary judgment on grounds of the sophisticated user defense when maritime law applies because maritime law has not recognized this defense in situations involving an intermediary, such as the Navy. Prange, 2011 WL 4912828, at *1. Because the Court has determined that maritime law applies to Plaintiff's claims against Defendant Northrop Grumman, and because this case involves a situation with an intermediary (i.e., the Navy), Defendant's motion for summary judgment on grounds of the sophisticated user defense is denied. Id.