

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: October 18, 1979

Forwarded to:

Admiral T. B. Hayward
Chief of Naval Operations
Department of the Navy
Washington, D. C. 20350

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-79-102

On April 15, 1976, the mobile offshore drilling unit, OCEAN EXPRESS, capsized and sank in the Gulf of Mexico with the subsequent loss of 13 lives. The National Transportation Safety Board's analysis of the accident established that one of the contributing factors to the cause of the accident was the inaccuracy of the weather forecasts issued by the National Weather Service.

Accurate weather forecasts and the timely issuance of localized marine weather warnings are almost totally dependent upon observations of existing weather conditions. At the time of the accident involving the OCEAN EXPRESS, there were very few ship weather reports from the Gulf of Mexico from which a forecaster could derive an accurate picture of existing weather conditions in the area. Subsequent investigation revealed that the U.S.S. LEXINGTON was at sea in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico and had been taking weather observations at the time of the accident. Due to a Navy policy of transmitting ship weather reports in such a way that the ship's name or location is not disclosed, the LEXINGTON's observations were not immediately available to forecast personnel of the National Weather Service or the civilian marine community.

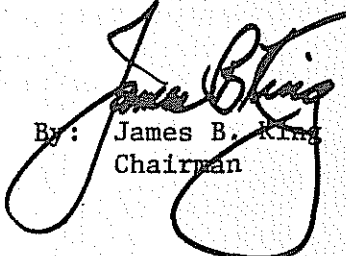
We believe that the weather forecasts and marine weather warnings issued before the OCEAN EXPRESS capsized would have been significantly improved had the observations of the LEXINGTON been available for use by the National Weather Service for the benefit of the civilian marine community. This, in turn, leads us to the conclusion that the accuracy of marine weather forecasts for U.S. Coastal waters and marine safety would be significantly improved if the observations of severe weather from Navy ships operating in these waters were made available to the National Weather Service in a timely manner.

The Safety Board is concerned with the safety of lives and property of the increasing number of U.S. citizens working in the energy and fishing industries in coastal and offshore waters, as well as those using the areas for recreation. The Safety Board believes that, in view of the potential savings of life, it is in the national interest for the public to have timely access to weather reports from Navy ships experiencing heavy weather while operating within the 200-mile economic zone.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Chief of Naval Operations:

Authorize the unclassified transmission of weather observations to the National Weather Service from U.S. Navy vessels operating within the U.S. Economic Zone adjacent to the contiguous continental United States when the observed wind speed equals or exceeds 33 knots or when the combined sea height equals or exceeds 12 feet. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-102)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in this recommendation.


By: James B. King
Chairman