

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 6, 1979

Forwarded to:
Admiral John B. Hayes
Commandant
U.S. Coast Guard
Washington, D.C. 20590

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)
M-79-32 through -37

On October 20, 1976, the SS FROSTA, a Norwegian tanker en route to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, from Rotterdam, the Netherlands, collided with the Luling-Destrehan ferry M/V GEORGE PRINCE at mile 120.8 AHP on the Mississippi River. The ferry capsized in about 10 seconds and all 5 crewmembers and 71 passengers were killed. Only 18 passengers survived; 1 passenger is missing and presumed dead. The entire ferry deck cargo of 34 vehicles was cast overboard. The FROSTA was slightly damaged. 1/

The GEORGE PRINCE had left its east bank ferry landing, which was obscured to upbound river vessel traffic by a grain-loading pier and a large bulk carrier, to make a cross-river run which normally took about 3 minutes. The boatmaster failed to give the proper whistle signal to comply with the Western Rivers Rules of the Road when the ferry departed, was unresponsive to radio communications and ship's whistle signals originated by the pilot of the FROSTA, and did not post a proper lookout.

Several regular passengers testified that it was not unusual for boatmasters to maneuver the ferries close to vessels moving in the river channel before yielding and crossing astern of such vessels. Therefore, the boatmaster's failure to change course in this instance did not alarm the passengers until a collision was imminent. An emergency alarm was not sounded on the ferry. Passengers were panicked into action by the FROSTA's danger signal and its towering hull as it bore down on the ferry. No instructions were posted to inform passengers of what to do in an emergency. Because of the short run and rapid turnaround of the ferries, no instructions were given to passengers either on board or before boarding on the use of personal flotation devices.

1/ For more information, read "Marine Casualty Report--Ferry M/V GEORGE PRINCE (U.S.) Collision with the Tanker SS FROSTA (Norwegian), on the Mississippi River, Luling/Destrehan, Louisiana, October 20, 1976" (NTSB-MAR-79-4).

The low freeboard of the GEORGE PRINCE put the vehicle deck quickly awash upon impact. Many passengers were pinned momentarily between vehicles shifting on the waterwashed, slippery deck as they attempted to reach lifejacket stowage boxes or escape the point of collision. No lifejackets were available in the ferry passenger accommodations so it was necessary for passengers to obtain lifejackets from stowage boxes located at the extreme outboard corners of the vehicle deck. Small covers on the boxes prevented quick access to lifejackets, and some lifejackets were still stuck in the boxes after the GEORGE PRINCE was salvaged.

The improper observance of the letter or intent of the Western Rivers Rules of the Road, arbitrary local maneuvering customs regarding the right-of-way of vessels at the Luling-Destrehan ferry crossing, and ambiguities in the rules concerning passing agreement signals and maneuvering all set the stage for this accident to occur. There is a need to make the rules more explicit so as to eliminate speculation or last moment interpretation when using them.

Testimony revealed that the speeds of channel vessels past this ferry crossing are considered excessive and the generated waves frequently interfere with vehicle loading. It appears that ferry crossings need to be more clearly identified on charts and that pilots should be required to use greater caution at crossings.

Although the GEORGE PRINCE did not have a lookout, several passengers attempted by various means to draw the boatmaster's attention to the approaching FROSTA. The boatmaster's lack of response may have been affected by his location in the pilothouse where the windows and doors were closed. Whether a proper lookout on the ferry would have been any more effective remains unknown. The early release of the bow lookout on the FROSTA did not contribute to this accident, but the Safety Board concludes that because of the heavy traffic on the Mississippi River, bow lookouts should be maintained, particularly on large vessels having the conning position aft or at a significant distance from the bow.

Several ferry boatmasters stated that it was normal practice for them to yield to channel-bound vessels, regardless of the Rules of the Road provision concerning right-of-way. To avoid speculation concerning their maneuvering, ferries should be required to remain at or close to their berths until channel traffic is clear before proceeding across. Channel-bound vessels then could determine more precisely if a change in ferry vessel attitude toward crossing is potentially dangerous and requires prompt evasive action.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the U.S. Coast Guard:

Require passenger-ferry operators to issue written instructions to masters and crews concerning passenger safety in the event of a collision. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-32)

Require passenger-ferry operators providing short-trip services, wherein time precludes adequate indoctrination of passengers on board about the location and use of personal flotation devices and safety equipment, to post appropriate information at ferry terminals for passengers to read before boarding. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-33)

Require pilots to ring "stand-by" on main engines or otherwise alert the engineroom when approaching cross-traffic lanes where emergency engine maneuvers may be required on U.S. navigable waterways. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-34)

Include in the next revision of the Western Rivers Rules of the Road:

- A. A requirement that crossing ferries keep clear of channel-bound traffic and avoid any maneuver toward such traffic which may be misinterpreted;
- B. Requirements for immediate responses, using consistent language, in all rules involving the exchange of signals to reach maneuvering agreements;
- C. Interpretive rulings relative to "proper look-out," clarifying lookout location, times of posting, and acceptable communications with the conning officer, as applicable to self-propelled vessels and towing vessels when towing;
- D. An appropriate cautionary note concerning the closing of pilothouse windows and doors, and the effect on maintaining a proper lookout.

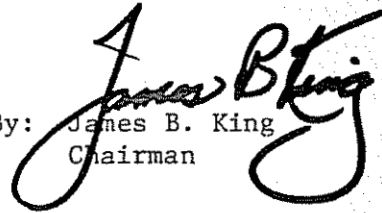
(Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-35)

Coordinate action with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Corps of Engineers, Department of the Army to use greater graphic emphasis in illustrating ferry crossings on charts, and include the use of text "CAUTION--FERRY CROSSING" or similar warning to alert channel-bound vessels of such crossings. (Class III, Longer Term Action) (M-79-36)

Study the feasibility of using nonskid decking, grating, or other vehicle restraints to minimize vehicle skidding or shifting on ferry decks in the event of a collision. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-37)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS and HOGUE, Members concurred in the above recommendations.

By: James B. King
Chairman

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. King". The signature is written over the typed name and title.