

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 17, 1979

Forwarded to:
Mr. David H. Klinges
Vice President
Shipbuilding Division
Bethlehem Steel Corporation
Executive Office
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 18016

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-79-48

About 1100 c.s.t. on April 14, 1976, the self-elevating mobile offshore drilling unit OCEAN EXPRESS departed a drilling site near the Texas coast in the Gulf of Mexico under tow for a new drilling site about 33 nmi northeast. The OCEAN EXPRESS arrived at the new site about 2330, but was not set in place because of adverse seas. Three tugs held the OCEAN EXPRESS in position awaiting better weather, but the seas continued to increase. About 1530 on April 15, one tug became partially disabled because of a reduction gear failure. At 1930, another tug's towline broke. With only one effective tug remaining, the OCEAN EXPRESS turned broadside to the wind and seas, drifted, grounded, capsized, and sank about 2115. The vessel was valued at \$20 million. 1/

The bargemover was rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter. The crew abandoned the OCEAN EXPRESS in the unit's survival capsules. The 14 persons in one capsule were rescued without incident. The other capsule capsized with 20 persons inside; 7 persons escaped and 13 persons drowned.

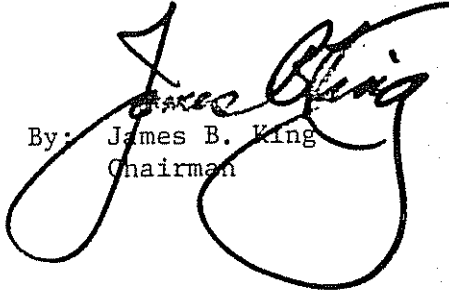
The OCEAN EXPRESS was equipped with two towing padeyes in the superstructure recesses forward on the main deck and two sets of mooring bitts aft. Boarding seas thwarted the attempt to retrieve the broken towline forward and rig a new line to it. Loose deck cargo and boarding seas prevented safe access to the bitts aft. After failing to secure a line to a crane foundation on the upper deck and with no line-throwing equipment or coordinated plan of action, the attempts to reconnect the GULF VIKING were abandoned. If the towing padeyes had been more accessible, the GULF VIKING probably could have been reconnected, and the capsizing might have been prevented.

1/ For more detailed information read "Marine Accident Report - Capsizing and Sinking of the Self-Elevating Mobile Offshore Drilling Unit OCEAN EXPRESS near Port O'Connor, Texas, April 15, 1976" (NISB-MAR-79-5).

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that Bethlehem Steel Corporation:

Equip its future self-elevating mobile offshore drilling units with towing fittings accessible in heavy weather.
(Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-48)

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


By: James B. King
Chairman