



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Safety Recommendation

SP-20
Log M-312

Date: March 28, 1986

In reply refer to: M-86-27 through -29

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Commandant
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Washington, D.C. 20093

On March 9, 1985, the U.S. charter fishing vessel GULF QUEEN was rammed by the U.S. crewboat M/V ALAN MCCALL in the Gulf of Mexico, about 55 miles southeast of Cameron, Louisiana. The GULF QUEEN, with 20 persons aboard, was anchored in water about 75 feet in depth while members of the fishing party fished. The visibility was approximately 1/4 nautical mile in the fog. The ALAN MCCALL, a 110-foot crewboat, while en route to an oil production platform, was traveling at a speed of about 18 knots when it struck the port side of the wood-hulled GULF QUEEN near its stern. Three persons from the GULF QUEEN were thrown into the water. Two persons were rescued; the third person is missing and presumed dead. The GULF QUEEN flooded and sank. The GULF QUEEN's survivors were taken aboard the ALAN MCCALL and brought ashore.^{1/}

Despite his lack of formal radar training, the operator of the ALAN MCCALL navigated his vessel on the day of the accident at a speed of 18 knots or more, solely dependent on radar as a method of maintaining a proper lookout. The deckhand testified that he had left the wheelhouse several times, which indicates his performance as a lookout remains questionable. This manner of operation exhibited a complete disregard for the limited visibility that prevailed. His belief that operating a crewboat at 18 to 20 knots in limited visibility is normal procedure in the offshore industry should not be viewed as sufficient reason for his apparent failure to comply with the International Navigation Rules and Regulations. The operator apparently overlooked the possibility that other vessels could be in the vicinity and might not present as strong an image on his radarscope as that of a drilling rig or a production platform. In changing the range of the radar to 12 miles shortly before the accident, he stated that when he switched back to the 6-mile range, it was necessary to "fine tune" the radarscope again. It is possible that he failed to tune it correctly to bring out the fainter images. In the absence of other images, his "fine tuning" technique may have been inadequate. With few or no waves of a significant size present, the GULF QUEEN would not have been lost in any sea return. It is the opinion of the Safety Board that the USCG licensed operator of the ALAN MCCALL lacked adequate knowledge of the operation and limitations of radar.

^{1/} For more detailed information read Marine Accident Report—"Collision between the Fishing Vessel GULF QUEEN and the crewboat M/V ALAN MCCALL in the Gulf of Mexico, March 9, 1985" (NTSB/MAR-86/04).

Although the operator of the ALAN MCCALL was licensed by the Coast Guard to operate passenger-carrying vessels of not more than 100 gross tons, no radar observer endorsement is required to operate such vessels even though they are radar equipped. Compliance with Rule 7(b) of both the Inland and International Navigation Rules ("Proper use shall be made of radar equipment if fitted. . .") implicitly requires that a skilled person be on board so that radar equipment can be operated properly as an aid to navigation and as a collision avoidance device. If the law requires proper use of shipboard radar, then it is reasonable to require that licensed personnel have the training necessary for its proper use.

Although an official of Cameron Boat Rentals, Inc. reviewed the qualifications and generally checked the boat handling capabilities of each new prospective boat operator, the method of checking an operator's familiarity with radar operation was not consistent and left some doubt as to whether each of the boat operators fully understood radar and its limitations. Without any company standards for radar training and testing, which an endorsement by the Coast Guard on a boat operator's license would signify, the operator's skill in radar operation and interpretation remains questionable. Since the operator of the ALAN MCCALL was not qualified as a radar observer, his radar proficiency was in doubt. In addition, to ensure the ability to comply with Navigation Rule 6 concerning safe speed by vessels with operational radar, a radar observer endorsement should be required for all operators of passenger carrying vessels under 300 gross tons certificated for offshore operation when such vessels are radar equipped, to show that the operator has the necessary radar training.

The Safety Board has repeatedly addressed the issue of inadequate radar qualifications for operators of small passenger vessels that are radar equipped. As a result of a collision between a crewboat and a tankship in the Gulf of Mexico ^{2/} in which two persons lost their lives, the Safety Board made several recommendations to the Coast Guard regarding crewboat operations. One recommendation in particular addressed the subject of radar qualifications and read as follows:

Require that the operator of every radar-equipped vessel carrying more than six passengers for hire and engaged in the offshore oil industry be qualified as a "radar observer."

In its response, the Coast Guard stated that an operator cannot be required to be qualified to operate certain equipment if that equipment is not required to be on the vessel, therefore, there is no justification for establishing a mandatory radar observer qualification. As an alternative, to address the concern that personnel are unfamiliar with the proper operation of equipment being carried voluntarily, the Coast Guard has proposed that the following wording be incorporated into the licensing regulations (46 CFR Part 10):

46 CFR 10.01 Purpose of Regulations:

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^{2/} For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Collision of Liberian Tankship M/V STOLT VIKING and U.S. Crewboat CANDY BAR in Gulf of Mexico, January 7, 1978" (NTSB-MAR-78-9).

(b) With few exceptions, these regulations do not specify or restrict licenses to particular types of service such as tankships, freight vessels or passenger vessels. However, it is incumbent for every licensed individual to become familiar with all unique characteristics of each vessel served upon as soon as possible after reporting aboard for duty. As appropriate for a deck or engineer license, this includes but is not limited to maneuvering characteristics of the vessel; proper operation of the installed navigation equipment; firefighting and lifesaving equipment; stability and loading characteristics; and main propulsion and auxiliary machinery.

Although the Coast Guard has proposed an alternative solution to a similar recommendation made by the Safety Board in 1978, the Board still believes that USCG licensed operators of crewboats and other small passenger carrying vessels should have a radar observer endorsement certifying that they have received the proper training in its operation. In spite of the Coast Guard contention that operators of small passenger vessels should not be required to be qualified to operate radar because such equipment is not required to be aboard the vessels, most small passenger vessels today are voluntarily radar equipped and their safe operation includes the use of radar.

When the operator of the GULF QUEEN anchored in the fog without sounding the required sound signals, he compromised the safety of his passengers, whose protection should have been his primary consideration. Furthermore, he failed to sound signals when he first noticed the contact on radar at 1130, approximately 10 minutes before the accident, contrary to his erroneous interpretation that the Navigation Rules required sounding fog signals only when other vessels were around. Although it may have been doubtful whether any sound signal from the GULF QUEEN could have been heard at any significant distance over the sound of the engines on the ALAN MCCALL, nevertheless, the USCG licensed operator of the fishing vessel, with more than 30 years experience, ignored the rules and failed to sound proper signals when other vessels were in his vicinity. The USCG, in its various information publications, including the local Notices to Mariners, should stress the importance of sounding proper signals during periods of limited visibility, pointing out the hazards that exist from the preponderance of high speed traffic in the area near offshore structures.

Although it was not causal to the accident, the misinterpretation by the operator/owner of the GULF QUEEN of the manning requirement in the vessel's Certificate of Inspection, which required him to have two ocean operators aboard when the operating time exceeded 12 hours in any 24-hour period, was perhaps due to the vague language in the Eighth Coast Guard District's Marine Safety Letter 1-80. He believed he was required to have only one operator if his actual underway time did not exceed 12 hours. When the Eighth Coast Guard District rescinded the letter changing their policy, it is not known if the fishing vessel operator/owner was aware of the change. It is likely that other ocean operators who operated vessels with similar provisions in their Certificates of Inspection could also be unaware of this change. The Coast Guard should have made a reasonable effort to notify the people affected. To avoid the risks due to inadequate manning, the local OCMI's should remind the owners of such inspected vessels of the district's policy regarding the interpretation of the manning requirements.

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

Require that ocean operators of all inspected radar equipped, mechanically propelled passenger vessels under 300 gross tons be qualified as radar observers. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-86-27)

Publish in the various U.S. Coast Guard information publications, including local Notices to Mariners, a reminder to the operators of small vessels that operate offshore in the Gulf of Mexico of the importance of sounding proper signals while underway or at anchor during periods of limited visibility because of the numerous high speed vessels servicing the offshore structures. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-86-28)

Direct the Officers-in-Charge of Marine Inspection to interpret to the owners of the operators of small passenger vessels, the provisions of the manning requirements on their Certificates of Inspection. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-86-29)

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER, Member, concurred in these recommendations.

By:  Jim Burnett
Chairman