



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: July 8, 1986

In reply refer to: M-86-44

Mr. Patrick R. Tyson
Assistant Secretary of Labor for
Occupational Safety and Health Administration
Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20210

About 2330, on May 20, 1985, the posted drilling barge TONKAWA capsized and sank while under tow in Bayou Chene, approximately 6 1/4 miles southeast of Morgan City, Louisiana. The drilling barge had been underway for about 11 hours prior to the capsizing. There were 22 persons aboard the TONKAWA at the time of capsizing; 11 persons survived the casualty and 11 persons lost their lives. The drilling barge capsized in approximately 26 feet of water and came to rest on its starboard side, about 135° from its normal upright position. ^{1/}

The TONKAWA, operated by the Temple Drilling Company (Temple) of Houston, Texas, had completed drilling an 11,290-foot well for the Shell Oil Company and was "rigging down" or preparing to get underway. The rig was typical of the drilling barges used in shallow water operations, ballasted to lay firmly on the bottom of the bayou.

The TONKAWA was an uninspected vessel and was not subject to any U.S. Coast Guard regulations other than the safety equipment regulations for uninspected vessels. It was classed, however, by the ABS and had an annual survey for class in April 1985, approximately one month before the accident. The barge was only partially deballasted and therefore did not float free. By 1200, jetting of the ballast was complete except for some water left intentionally in the No. 4 port and starboard ballast tanks to give the barge a trim aft. At 1215, the rig broke free of the site and the journey commenced.

When the flotilla entered Bayou Penchant, the operator of the tug COMANCHE (the second vessel in the flotilla) alerted the crew of the TONKAWA about a port list by radio. He testified that he did not know to whom he spoke but asked that the list be corrected. He estimated the time to be about 1950. The person aboard the TONKAWA replied that nothing could be done until they reached deeper water and that they couldn't "put water in it at this time in shallow water." Approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours before the flotilla entered Bayou Chene, the COMANCHE's operator received a call from the TONKAWA requesting their position and the time the flotilla would get to Bayou Chene. The caller did not identify himself nor did the tug operator recognize the voice. The party aboard the TONKAWA was informed that they would enter Bayou Chene between 2300 and 2330 that evening.

^{1/} For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Capsizing and Sinking of the Drilling Barge TONKAWA in Bayou Chene near Morgan City, Louisiana, May 20, 1985" (NTSB/MAR-86/07).

After the flotilla straightened out in Bayou Chene, the relief operator of the CHOCTAW, pushing at the stern of the TONKAWA, noticed a small starboard list on the barge. He informed the operator of the COMANCHE of the list and both agreed that it was a normal list when coming out of shallow water into deeper water. The COMANCHE's operator instructed him "to keep an eye on it and inform him if it [gets] any worse." After about a minute or less, the CHOCTAW's relief operator radioed back to the COMANCHE and informed the operator that the "rig was listing a little bit more." The COMANCHE's operator then contacted the TONKAWA by radio and informed the driller (who was monitoring the portable radio) of the list. The driller replied that he would get someone to check it out and correct the problem. By this time, the list had increased even more. The operator of the COMANCHE said to the operator of the SIOUX (and was overheard by the relief operator of the CHOCTAW), "Let's break off and push her to the bank." At 2325, before the tugs were able to let go, the TONKAWA rolled to starboard and capsized.

At the time of the casualty, 22 persons were aboard the TONKAWA including the toolpusher, who was in charge. Seventeen were employees of Temple, four were employees of a subcontractor, Universal Catering Service, which provided hotel and catering services, and one, the operator of the crewboat RONCO 109, who happened to be aboard when the drilling barge capsized, was the employee of Best Boat Rentals.

Records from the Terrebonne Parish Coroner's Office in Houma, Louisiana indicate that all 11 victims of the accident died from drowning. One injured person suffered a fractured leg and another, a fractured hip.

Although the TONKAWA was equipped with a sufficient number of lifejackets for all persons aboard, including work vests, none of the persons nor bodies recovered was wearing any type of personal flotation device. An official of Temple testified that fire and abandon ship drills were normally held at weekly intervals and safety meetings at the beginning of each shift. Temple's safety director visited the drilling rig twice a month to conduct a safety equipment inspection. Except for the toolpusher's inspection, no other safety inspections were made by any State or Federal regulatory agencies. The uninspected drilling barge had no manning requirements and did not have any lifeboatmen among its assigned personnel. Any safety procedures implemented and requirements established were entirely at the discretion of Temple. The Company's safety director testified that it is company policy that any employee working on the barge deck of the rig must wear a lifejacket (work vest).

A Memorandum of Understanding between the Coast Guard and OSHA was signed in March 1983 wherein OSHA formally recognized the Coast Guard's responsibility for the occupational safety and health of employees aboard inspected vessels. Since OSHA does not exercise its authority on inspected vessels, the question of the agency's responsibility and authority over uninspected drilling barges remains unresolved. This matter was brought up during the Safety Board's investigation of the capsizing of the lift boat AMAY S in October, 1984 and a recommendation was made to OSHA to:

Establish and enforce safety regulations which set forth lifesaving and firefighting equipment requirements to protect industrial workers employed on uninspected self-elevating lift boats that operate solely in state-controlled waters. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-85-116)

A response was received from OSHA dated March 7, 1986, which stated:

After receiving those recommendations regarding the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) regulatory responsibility in this matter, we contacted the U.S. Coast Guard with whom we share that responsibility for establishing and enforcing maritime safety regulations. The opinion of the U.S. Coast Guard is that it is their intention to classify self-elevating lift boats, such as the AMAY S, as inspected vessels. Since the Coast Guard has exclusive responsibility for safety aboard "inspected" vessels, OSHA would be precluded from promulgating parallel rules.

Should the Coast Guard, for some reason, not address safety and health issues aboard these types of vessels, then OSHA would explore the promulgation of such regulations.

Uninspected drilling barges like the TONKAWA, of which there are about 100, are uniquely designed vessels providing not only a work platform, but living quarters for the rig workers. Although the workers are working in a marine environment, they are not trained as seamen and do not necessarily approach their work environment with a seaman's attitude. The intent of Congress in enacting legislation such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act was to protect the worker in the workplace. The inshore drilling industry should not be overlooked by OSHA in its responsibility to protect the worker.


The Coast Guard does not inspect inshore drilling barges like the TONKAWA, nor do any specific Federal regulations govern the working conditions of personnel aboard these uninspected vessels. The only Federal safety regulations applicable to such vessels are contained in 46 CFR Parts 24 through 26, which set forth the minimum number of lifejackets, life buoys, and portable fire extinguishers that the vessel must carry. Since the Coast Guard does not regulate posted drilling barges under the general vessel statutes in state waters, the Safety Board believes that OSHA should exercise its authority to provide and enforce safety regulations for these vessels. In its reply of March 7, 1986 to Safety Board recommendation M-85-116, OSHA stated that: "Should the Coast Guard for some reason, not address safety and health issues aboard these types of vessels (lift boats), then OSHA would explore the promulgation of such regulations." The implication is clear in their statement that similar uninspected vessels, such as the TONKAWA, would lie within OSHA's jurisdiction. For this reason, the Safety Board urges OSHA to establish safety regulations for workers aboard uninspected coastal drilling barges to avoid the consequences of accidents such as occurred on the TONKAWA.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration:

Establish and enforce safety regulations to provide industrial workers aboard non-U.S. Coast Guard inspected drilling barges with a safe work environment. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-86-44)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "...to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation M-86-44 in your reply.

GOLDMAN, Acting Chairman, and BURNETT, LAUBER, and NALL, Members, concurred in this recommendation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Burnett for". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name of the signatory.

By: Patricia A. Goldman
Acting Chairman