



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D. C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Log M-341

Date: June 2, 1988

In reply refer to : M-88-39 and -40

Honorable James H. Burnley
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
Washington, D.C. 20590

The Coast Guard's announced scheduled decommissioning of the New York Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) because of budget constraints is of concern to the National Transportation Safety Board. The Coast Guard's VTS operations provide valuable safety protection to the traveling public. Besides the New York VTS, the Coast Guard currently provides some level of VTS protection in Houston, Texas; San Francisco, California; Puget Sound, Washington; and Valdez, Alaska. The Coast Guard has announced that staff reductions are planned for the Valdez VTS.

The Safety Board has consistently sought to ensure the viability of the VTS in New York Harbor, especially because of the 80,000 persons carried daily by the ferry system in the harbor. In 1981, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendation M-81-82 to the Coast Guard concerning the establishment of a fully operational VTS in New York Harbor after an oceangoing vessel collided with a Staten Island ferry with more than 2,400 passengers aboard. The New York VTS was not fully operational at the time. As a result of the Board's recommendation, the VTS was expanded to a voluntary, harborwide system with the ferries, other harbor craft, and oceangoing vessels participating in the VTS. The Coast Guard considers the monitoring of the ferry routes in the upper bay of such importance that during low visibility, an additional VTS radar operator is assigned solely to that task.

In 1987, following the investigation of a collision in the lower bay between two commuter ferries, 1/ the Safety Board recommended that commuter ferries also participate in the New York VTS. Moreover, New York City established a requirement that ferry operators granted permits to use city-owned piers must agree to participate in the New York VTS.

1/ Marine Accident Report--"Collision of the Commuter Ferries JACK W and JAMEY DOWNEY, Lower New York Bay, June 22, 1987" (NTSB/MAR-88/02).

In a March 11, 1988, letter to the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation, Merchant Marine Fisheries Committee, the Safety Board discussed how emergency actions prompted by an alert New York VTS watch averted the collision of a Staten Island ferry, with 3,200 passengers aboard, and a Greek freighter on April 29, 1986. VTS records indicate numerous instances in which collisions and groundings were averted due to the promptness of the VTS personnel.

Among the accidents presently under investigation by the Safety Board is a collision between a loaded tank vessel and an anchored bulk carrier in New York Harbor. On February 15, 1988, a 611-foot bulk carrier anchored in the south end of Federal anchorage 23A north of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge near Staten Island in Upper New York Bay, New York. About 1 hour later, the 811-foot tankship M/V MAERSK NEPTUNE, loaded with a cargo of unleaded gasoline, arrived at the pilot station at Sandy Hook, New Jersey. A New Jersey/Sandy Hook pilot boarded the vessel with orders to anchor the vessel in the Staten Island anchorage. The anchored position of the bulk carrier was not included in the anchorage information obtained from the VTS.

The pilot reported to the VTS over VHF-FM channel 14 that he intended to anchor the vessel in anchorage 23B. As the vessel neared the anchorage, the pilot again informed the VTS of his intentions. The VTS acknowledged the transmission and passed on the latest vessel traffic movement information for the area. The current anchorage information was available on channel 12, but the pilot of the MAERSK NEPTUNE did not avail himself of the service and continued to rely on the earlier information he had brought onboard.

The visibility north of the bridge was less than 1/4 mile, and at times the visibility was reduced to 300 yards. Believing that anchorage 23B was clear, the pilot anticipated that he would stop and anchor in the north end of anchorage 23B. Instead, he sighted the recently arrived bulk carrier in the north end of anchorage 23B. The MAERSK NEPTUNE's engine was stopped and placed on full astern and emergency full astern. Before all headway was removed, however, the MAERSK NEPTUNE collided with the bulk carrier.

The VTS radar operator had observed the MAERSK NEPTUNE on radar as it approached the bridge, but due to blind spots in the coverage on his radarscope, he did not see the vessel again until it appeared inside the swing circle of the bulk carrier, probably at the time of collision. The blind spot was caused by a shadowing effect of the Brooklyn shoreline and vessels in the Bay Ridge Anchorage that blocked the line of sight of the VTS radar located on Governor's Island. As a result, the VTS was not able to warn the MAERSK NEPTUNE of the collision danger because of the location of its radar antenna.

The Coast Guard recently closed the New Orleans, Louisiana, VTS where the Safety Board has long been concerned about the sufficiency of VTS operations. As a result of its investigation of a serious accident in the Lower Mississippi River in 1978, 2/ the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendation M-80-13 to the Coast Guard to reevaluate the proposed level of VTS on the Lower Mississippi River and determine if an extended surveillance system was needed to overcome the severe limitations of

2/ Marine Accident Report--"Collision of M/V IRENE S. LEMOS and M/V MARITIME JUSTICE near New Orleans, Louisiana, November 9, 1978" (NTSB/MAR-80/04).

the then-current VTS to provide useful, accurate information to participants. In 1986, Congress approved funding to complete an appropriate VTS surveillance system for the Lower Mississippi River, including improved short-range radars, closed-circuit television, and a VHF-FM communications link. This upgrading of the equipment was never accomplished before the New Orleans VTS was closed. The expenditure of funds is being held in abeyance.

While the Safety Board's investigation of the MAERSK NEPTUNE accident is continuing, the circumstances of the accident indicate the continued need for a VTS that is equipped to provide vessels with accurate and timely information about vessel movements and anchorages and to monitor vessel movements on radar. The Safety Board's ongoing efforts to support VTS operations and their contribution to vessel safety have been greatly reduced with the closing of the New Orleans VTS. The safety of the traveling public will be further compromised if the New York VTS is decommissioned. The Safety Board urges the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) to rescind the orders that closed the New Orleans VTS, that are decommissioning the New York VTS, and that are reducing staff levels of the Valdez VTS. Further, the Safety Board encourages the DOT to eliminate blind spots in the radar coverage of the New York VTS by installing new radar sites and to complete the upgrading of the equipment in the New Orleans VTS using the allocated funds.

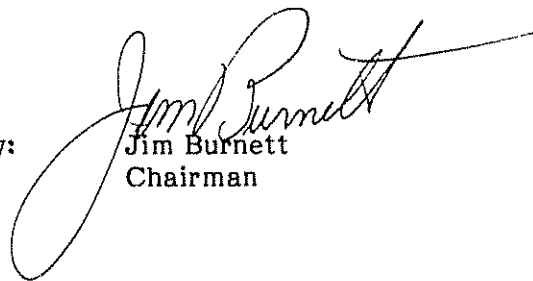
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the U.S. Department of Transportation:

Maintain the services currently provided by the New York, New York, and Valdez, Alaska, Vessel Traffic Services (VTS), and not only to reestablish the services originally provided by the New Orleans VTS but also to upgrade the equipment using the allocated funds. (Class I, Urgent Action) (M-88-39)

Eliminate blind spots in radar coverage in the New York Vessel Traffic Service by installing new radar sites. (Class I, Urgent Action) (M-88-40)

BURNETT, Chairman, KOLSTAD, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER and NALL, Members, concurred in these recommendations.

By:



Jim Burnett
Chairman