



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D. C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Log R-409C

Date: October 24, 1988

In reply refer to: R-88-65

Mr. Kenneth Krick
President
General American Transportation Corporation
120 South Riverside Plaza
Chicago, Illinois 60606-3943

On September 8, 1987, a New Orleans Terminal (NOT) crew moved six tank cars of butadiene from the NOT's Oliver Yard in New Orleans, Louisiana, and at 7:35 p.m. placed them on track 3 of the CSX Transportation's (CSXT) Terminal Junction Interchange Yard (interchange yard) for delivery to the CSXT. About 1:50 a.m. on September 9, 1987, butadiene leaking from the bottom manway of a tank car was ignited and the resulting flames rising about 100 feet into the air engulfed both bridge spans of Interstate 10. The fire receded to the leaking tank car where it burned beneath the tank car until 1:55 p.m. on September 10, 1987. During the emergency, more than 200 city blocks were evacuated affecting 800 to 1,000 residents.¹

The bottom manway cars were built and approved by the Association of American Railroads (AAR) at a time when a record number of tank cars were being built and when the regulatory responsibility for railroad safety was being transferred by the U.S. Congress from the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to the Department of Transportation.² Because of the large number of new applications for tank car construction, repair, and modification, the AAR Tank Car Committee (TCC) permitted car builders to undertake construction before AAR approval with the understanding that should it require changes to the application, the affected tank cars would be modified to incorporate these changes. Consequently, in 1966, the North American Tank Car Corporation (NATX) began building the NATX 34000 series tank cars before the final engineering drawings were approved by the TCC. In November 1966, NATX submitted the final design drawings with revisions to the manway design to the AAR. When the cars were ready to enter service, NATX

¹For more detailed information, read Hazardous Materials/Railroad Accident Report--Butadiene Release and Fire from GATX 55996 at the CSX Terminal Junction Interchange, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 8, 1987 (NTSB/HZM-88/01).

²In April 1967, the ICC relinquished its oversight authority for tank car safety to the DOT. This oversight authority included the delegations to the AAR as the approval authority for tank car design, construction, or alteration.

submitted the certificate of construction attesting that the tank car met the AAR-approved drawings. However, this action was taken without checking the cars against the drawings. Later, when these cars were sold (in 1979 and again in 1986), the purchasers required the sellers to furnish only the certificate of construction in accordance with Rule 88 of the AAR *Office Manual of the Interchange Rules*. No purchaser had all of the approved design drawings, and therefore, they were unable to ensure that the cars had a proper certificate of construction or that the certificate matched the actual construction of the car. As a result, the fact that the NATX bottom manway tank cars did not comply with the AAR-approved drawings was not discovered during its more than 20 years of service because each subsequent owner, including General American Transportation Corporation had relied first on the builder's certification and then on the previous owner to provide a proper tank car.

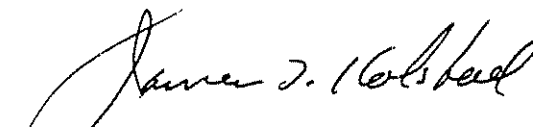
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the General American Transportation Corporation:

Require that all design drawings approved by the Association of American Railroads Tank Car Committee be obtained on all tank cars that are purchased and/or are provided for transporting hazardous materials and that the tank car conforms to the approved drawings and to applicable Federal regulations. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-88-65)

Also as a result of its investigation, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations I-88-3 and -4 and R-88-55 to the city of New Orleans, R-88-56 and -57 to the Norfolk Southern, I-88-5 to the New Orleans Public Service, Inc., R-88-58 through -64 to the Federal Railroad Administration, R-88-66 and -67 to the Mitsui & Company (USA) Inc., R-88-68 to the GATX Terminals Corporation, I-88-6 to the Research and Special Programs Administration, R-88-69 to the National League of Cities, and R-88-70 to the National Governors' Association.

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 action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation R-88-65 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Acting Chairman, and BURNETT, NALL, and DICKINSON, Members, concurred in this recommendation. LAUBER, Member, did not participate.


By: James L. Kolstad
Acting Chairman