

M-157

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: July 14, 1981

Forwarded to:

Admiral John B. Hayes
Commandant
U. S. Coast Guard
Washington, D.C. 20593

Mr. Samuel B. Nemirow
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Washington, D. C. 20230

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-62 and -63

At some time on October 25 or 26, 1980, the 523-foot-long U. S. freighter SS POET disappeared in the North Atlantic Ocean about 500 nautical miles east of Delaware Bay. No distress signal was heard from the POET, and no trace of the ship or its 34-person crew has been found. The estimated loss for the ship and its cargo was \$4,250,000. 1/

The Safety Board believes that there is a need for improvement and consolidation of the Coast Guard's AMVER 2/ system and the USMER 3/ system operated by the U. S. Maritime Administration (MARAD) of the U. S. Department of Commerce for U. S.-flag vessels. This accident highlights several problems that are common to both systems and a duplication of effort in part by both agencies and the U. S. Navy. The Safety Board recognizes that the two systems were developed for different purposes. AMVER is a voluntary system for search and rescue and USMER is a mandatory system for mobilization of the U. S. merchant fleet. However, both systems compile the same information for U. S. ships and enter the same information in two separate computers. Neither the Navy nor the Coast Guard determines if the MARAD-required position data on U. S. ships is being submitted regularly. MARAD, which does not directly use the data, checks every 3 months and writes letters to owners if their ships are not complying with the mandatory USMER reporting requirements. The Safety Board believes that the Coast Guard, MARAD, and the Navy should try to consolidate the compilation of position data on U. S. ships so that only one agency needs to store the information.

1/ For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Disappearance of U. S. Freighter SS POET in North Atlantic Ocean about October 25, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-6).

2/ An international Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue System.

3/ U. S. Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System.

The disappearance of the POET also shows a need for the AMVER system to be modified so that the Coast Guard is alerted when U. S.-flag ships are not reporting as required. An unreported ship would not necessarily mean that a distress situation exists, but would alert the Coast Guard to a possible problem. The Coast Guard could then make inquiries to the owner and other sources regarding the vessel. If such a system had been in effect in October 1980, the Coast Guard and the owner would have been alerted days sooner of the POET's failure to report and the search for the POET may have begun many days sooner.

For AMVER to be more effective, mandatory reporting should be required for U. S. vessels on both foreign and domestic voyages. In March 1971, the TEXACO OKLAHOMA sank 120 miles northeast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, while en route from Port Arthur, Texas, to Boston, Massachusetts. ^{4/} The crew was unable to send a distress signal, and the Coast Guard was not notified of the accident until 1 1/2 days later when the ship did not arrive at its destination on schedule. Similarly, in November 1966, the DANIEL J. MORRELL sank in Lake Huron. ^{5/} No distress signal was received, and the Coast Guard was not notified for 1 1/2 days. In February 1963, the MARINE SULFUR QUEEN sank somewhere between Beaumont, Texas, and Norfolk, Virginia. ^{6/} No distress signal was received, and the ship was not reported overdue for 3 days after sinking. The POET, TEXACO OKLAHOMA, DANIEL J. MORRELL, and MARINE SULFUR QUEEN accidents show a need for a mandatory reporting system for U. S. vessels. The Safety Board believes that the Coast Guard and MARAD should develop a mandatory reporting system for U. S. vessels on foreign and domestic voyages consistent with the existing AMVER system. The Safety Board does not believe that a mandatory reporting system for U. S. vessels, with an alerting feature for when a ship fails to report, would be incompatible with the voluntary and private aspects of AMVER.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the U. S. Coast Guard and the U. S. Maritime Administration:

Consolidate the compilation of position data on U. S. ships so that it is not necessary for similar information to be coded and stored on separate computers and for two information systems to be accessed during an emergency situation. (Class III, Longer-Term Action) (M-81-62)

Extend the requirement that all U. S.-flag merchant vessels of 1,000 gross registered tons or more engaged on foreign voyages submit departure, arrival, and 48-hour position reports on domestic voyages. If the necessary legislative authority does not exist, seek such authority. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-63)

DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations. KING, Chairman, did not participate.


By: James B. King
Chairman

^{4/} Marine Casualty Report--"Structural Failure and Sinking of the TEXACO OKLAHOMA off Cape Hatteras on March 27, 1971, with loss of 31 lives."

^{5/} Marine Board of Investigation--"SS DANIEL J. MORRELL Sinking with Loss of Life, Lake Huron, November 29, 1966."

^{6/} Marine Board of Investigation--"Disappearance of the SS MARINE SULFUR QUEEN at sea on or about 4 February 1963 with presumed loss of all persons on board."