

M-160

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: July 14, 1981

Forwarded to:  
Mr. Robert C. Smith  
President  
Radio Officers Union of the  
United Telegraph Workers Union  
30 Montgomery Street  
Jersey City, New Jersey 07302

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-68

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. <sup>1/</sup>

The POET had all required radio equipment plus a single-sideband radiotelephone. The required equipment included a main transmitter, a high-frequency transmitter, an emergency transmitter, a lifeboat radio, and an Emergency Position Indicating Radiobeacon (EPIRB). It is unlikely that all of the POET's radio equipment would have failed to operate simultaneously. If the ship's power failed, the POET had batteries for the emergency transmitter, the lifeboat radio could have been hand-cranked, and the EPIRB could have been activated by placing it in saltwater or by using the manual switch. If the radio equipment was struck by lightning, the emergency transmitter still should have functioned since it had its own antenna and was a separate unit. The RCA service representative testified that the POET's radio equipment was in good condition and all equipment functioned when the POET departed Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The 1974 Safety of Life At Seas (SOLAS) Convention requires that all ships over 1,600 gross tons, while at sea, carry at least one radio operator, and for at least 8 hours per day he or she must guard the radiotelegraph distress frequency except when transmitting or receiving messages. At all other times, the auto alarm must be used to guard 500 kHz. The convention also requires silent periods between 15 to 18 minutes and 45 to 48 minutes after the hour when regular transmission on 500 kHz is prohibited. The POET passed through an area of the North Atlantic Ocean where there is considerable ship traffic. USMER <sup>2/</sup> information showed that 10 U. S. ships transmitted USMER messages from the general vicinity of the POET's trackline between 1610 G.m.t. on October 25 and 1900 G.m.t. on October 28.

<sup>1/</sup> 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).

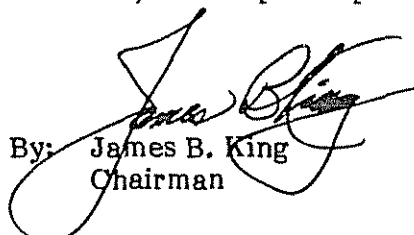
<sup>2/</sup> U. S. Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System operated by the U. S. Maritime Administration.

The Safety Board believes there are several possible reasons why there was no distress signal heard from the POET. First, the POET may have sunk so quickly that the radio operator was not able to send a distress signal or the distress signal was of such short duration that no one heard the signal. The representative of the Radio Officers Union stated that it should have taken from 30 to 40 seconds for the radio operator to send a distress signal. The automatic signal keyer could have been activated to continue to send the distress signal even if the radio operator had to abandon ship. Second, no ship may have been within listening range when the POET sent its distress signal or the distress signal could have been sent during a nonsilent period and was not heard over other transmissions. Third, the radio operator may have first tried unsuccessfully to raise another ship or shore station and the ship sank before he could activate the automatic signal keyer. The radio operator was relatively inexperienced; this was his first ship and only his second voyage as a licensed radio operator. The RCA service representative testified that the radio operator was not familiar with fine-tuning the POET's radio equipment. The radio operator's transmission of USMER reports on the previous voyage from Port Said, Egypt, to Philadelphia was erratic compared to the USMER messages transmitted by other radio operators on the POET. If the POET had experienced trouble during the storm on October 25 and 26, the radio operator may not have been successful in transmitting any distress signal before the ship sank. Fourth, no EPIRB signal was heard because either the EPIRB did not function or there were no aircraft over the area in which the POET sank during the 48 hours that the EPIRB would have broadcast.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Radio Officers Union of the United Telegraph Workers Union:

Before a radio officer can be employed aboard a particular ship, require that the officer have current experience with the type of radio equipment aboard the ship. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-68)

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

  
By: James B. King  
Chairman