

Log # M412A



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: SEP - 4 1997

In Reply Refer To: M-97-60 and -61

Mr. J. Ron Brinson
President and Chief Executive Officer
Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans
Post Office Box 60046
New Orleans, Louisiana 70160

About 2:11 p.m. on December 14, 1996, the Liberian freighter *M/V Bright Field* was headed downbound on the lower Mississippi River. As the ship passed under the Greater New Orleans Highway Bridge, engine problems occurred, and the vessel lost steering control and struck the Poydras Street Wharf. Several buildings on the wharf were damaged, and the vessel narrowly missed colliding with a moored gaming vessel that had passengers and crew on board. No fatalities occurred, but 4 individuals were seriously injured and some 58 persons sustained minor injuries as a result of the accident.

As the *Bright Field* headed toward the Poydras Street Wharf, its pilot radioed the U.S. Coast Guard Governor Nicholls traffic light operator to request that the operator alert the cruise ships and gaming and excursion vessels near the area, as well as the Riverwalk Marketplace, to the impending collision. Subsequently, the pilot aboard the *Bright Field* sounded the vessel's whistle repeatedly to warn the Poydras Street Wharf patrons. Less than 3 minutes elapsed between the call to the Coast Guard traffic light operator and the accident.

The crewmembers aboard the cruise ship *M/V Enchanted Isle*, which was docked at the Julia Street Wharf, stated that they did not hear the traffic light operator's announcement but heard the *Bright Field*'s whistle, which alerted them to the emergency. The first mate of the gaming vessel, the *M/V Queen of New Orleans*, which was docked at the Poydras Street Wharf, overheard the *Bright Field* pilot's call to the traffic light operator and immediately began emergency evacuation of the *Queen of New Orleans*. The traffic light operator radioed the captain of an excursion vessel, the *M/V Creole Queen*, which was leaving the Canal Street Wharf dock at the time with passengers and crew on board. The captain returned the vessel to the dock and immediately began an emergency evacuation.

The Poydras Street Wharf and the adjacent Julia Street and Canal Street Wharves include several commercial properties: the One River Place condominium building; the Riverwalk Marketplace, a mall of 100 stores and restaurants, which receives approximately 1,350 visitors per day; the 1,600-room New Orleans Hilton Riverside Hotel; 2 cruise ship passenger terminals; docks for a gaming vessel and an excursion vessel; large open walkways; and a plaza area. These facilities are within the zone of the Captain of the Port of New Orleans, an area in which, according to Coast Guard records, more than 300 incidents of vessel power loss, irregularity, or steering casualty were reported in 1995 and 1996.

According to the results of Safety Board surveys, marketplace patrons and employees were unaware of the meaning of the warning whistles from the *Bright Field*, believing them to signify normal river traffic. Fortunately, several Harbor Police officers recognized the warning whistles and tried to clear the area. Meanwhile, some marketplace patrons and staff members noticed the *Bright Field* heading toward them, and large numbers began to run away. Many individuals sustained injuries during the chaotic evacuation. The Harbor Police moved most of the crowd away from the area where the *Bright Field* struck; however, because they had had no advance notice, many visitors did not know what was happening, and they did not have the opportunity to obtain information from mall employees or security officers.

As a result of the *Bright Field* accident, a memorandum of understanding was developed between the Coast Guard Captain of the Port of New Orleans and the Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans. Under this agreement, which was implemented on March 11, 1997, the River Front Alert Network was established to warn the riverfront properties between the Toulouse Street Wharf and the Orange Street Wharf, including the Algiers Landing Restaurant, when a vessel on the river experiences an abnormality or irregularity. Upon receiving a vessel call, the Coast Guard Governor Nicholls traffic light operator is to alert the Port of New Orleans Harbor Police dispatcher by radio. When this system is activated, the traffic light operator will provide a short announcement describing the situation, and the dispatcher will repeat the message. Each riverfront property, including, but not limited to, the Delta Queen Cruise Terminal, the Riverwalk Marketplace, the New Orleans Hilton Riverside Hotel, the One River Place condominium building, the Aquarium of the Americas, and the Algiers Landing Restaurant, is responsible for monitoring this marine band radio so that it can assess the situation and take the appropriate emergency response.

The Safety Board recognizes that this River Front Alert Network is an important first step for providing timely emergency notification to the riverfront areas. As shown by this accident, however, the amount of time between the initial call to the Coast Guard traffic light operator and the accident may be very limited. The Board of Commissioners' delegation of responsibility to each commercial property to make its own judgment about the appropriate emergency response could result in unnecessary risk. If each property makes its own judgment, each must go through its own procedural chain of command before declaring an evacuation necessary, a process that might consume excessive time. Further, if one property determines not to evacuate, while an adjacent property implements an evacuation, time-consuming confusion could result. Such

problems could reduce the time available to alert and evacuate individuals, time that may be essential for a successful and safe evacuation.

The Safety Board believes that a more direct notification procedure would improve emergency response timeliness. The broadcast of an emergency evacuation announcement by the Harbor Police dispatcher, using a public address system linked to riverfront properties, would provide opportunity for more timely and efficient evacuation in the event of an impending collision or other emergency. The Safety Board believes that, since the Board of Commissioners is responsible for implementing the accident prevention and safety systems for the Port of New Orleans, the Board of Commissioners should be responsible for initiating an evacuation throughout the riverfront properties identified in the River Front Alert Network that may be endangered by an approaching vessel.

In addition, the Board of Commissioners has indicated to the Safety Board that vessels that dock or moor in this area do not monitor the River Front Alert Network radio. The *Queen of New Orleans*, the cruise ships, and the excursion vessels are required to monitor their marine band radios and keep a bridge watch when at dock but are not required to participate in the River Front Alert Network. According to an *Enchanted Isle* crewmember on bridge watch and the traffic light operator, both of whom were on duty during the accident, the marine radio channel monitored by the cruise ships did not broadcast the warning call from the *Bright Field* to the traffic light operator. Therefore, even though the cruise ships monitored the marine band radio and maintained bridge watches, they did not receive advance notice of the impending collision. Consequently, the Safety Board believes that to provide all properties of the riverfront area the maximum amount of time to evacuate their patrons and passengers in case of emergency, all vessels that dock or moor within the area covered by the River Front Alert Network should participate in the River Front Alert Network.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans:

Develop, as part of the River Front Alert Network, an emergency evacuation announcement for broadcast by the Harbor Police dispatcher using a public address system linked to riverfront properties that provides for timely and efficient evacuation in the event of an impending collision or other emergency. (M-97-60)

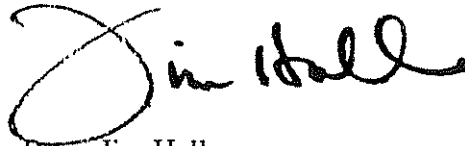
Require all vessels that dock or moor in the area encompassed by the River Front Alert Network to monitor the River Front Alert Network radio for any emergency alert broadcast to provide maximum advance notice of an emergency. (M-97-61)

The Safety Board also issued Safety Recommendations M-97-58 and -59 to the U.S. Coast Guard and M-97-62 and -63 to New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc.

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 recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations M-97-60 and -61 in your reply. If you have any questions, you may call (202) 314-6450.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in these recommendations.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Hall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

By: Jim Hall
Chairman