

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

AI-4
Log M-187

ISSUED: March 17, 1982

Forwarded to:

Mr. Mark S. Fowler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-82-10 and -11

Shortly after 1800 c.s.t., on December 27, 1980, the U.S. tankship PISCES and the Greek bulk carrier TRADE MASTER collided about mile 124 above Head of Passes (AHP) in the lower Mississippi River. As a result of the collision, the bow of the PISCES and the starboard side of the TRADE MASTER were damaged extensively. No one was injured, but damage to the vessels was estimated at \$6.3 million. The TRADE MASTER also suffered a loss to its cargo of bauxite valued at approximately \$500,000.

The pilot of the PISCES desired to change an established meeting agreement with the pilot of the TRADE MASTER when the vessels were about one-half mile apart. The Safety Board believes that attempting to change a meeting agreement with a vessel at this distance away is not inherently an unsafe or improper act. This act, the Safety Board believes, must be viewed within the context of the circumstances, including the prevailing conditions on the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency. Had the conditions been conducive to efficient radio communications, the Safety Board believes that the misunderstanding between the pilots could have been avoided. However, as evidenced by the testimony of the pilots and the operator of the TERRI LYNN, the conditions that prevailed on the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency were far from satisfactory, and the availability of this valuable adjunct to safe navigation was suspect. The testimony of the pilot of the PISCES indicated that he did not receive the repeated transmissions of the TRADE MASTER's pilot calling for a starboard to starboard meeting, and the testimony of the pilot of the TRADE MASTER indicated that he only received bits and pieces of the transmissions made by the PISCES' pilot. Therefore, it is clear that the prevailing conditions on the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency hampered the efficient and timely communications between the pilots. The Safety Board concludes that the prevailing conditions on the bridge-to-bridge frequency on the night of the accident hampered the safe navigation of these vessels and contributed to the cause of the accident.

1/ For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Collision of the U.S. Tankship PISCES with the Greek Bulk Carrier TRADE MASTER, Mile 124 Lower Mississippi River, December 27, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-82-2).

Both the U.S. Coast Guard and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have responsibilities regarding the proper use of radiotelephones aboard vessels. The FCC authorizes the use of frequencies, regularly inspects the radio installations aboard vessels to make sure that they meet FCC requirements, issues radiotelephone operator licenses, and enforces regulations dealing with abusive use of the radio. The Coast Guard, under the provisions of section 8(b) of The Vessel Bridge-to-Bridge Radiotelephone Act is required to prescribe regulations for the enforcement of the Act, and can assess penalties for use of the bridge-to-bridge frequency for any purpose other than communicating navigational information.

The enforcement of proper use of the vessel bridge-to-bridge regulations presents formidable problems to the FCC and the Coast Guard. According to information received from the New Orleans FCC field office, the problem is a combination of a lack of user appreciation for the importance of strictly adhering to established radio procedures and a lack of FCC resources to comply with its mandate to combat abusive use of the frequency. Currently, no one is assigned in the New Orleans FCC field office to monitor bridge-to-bridge transmissions. Additionally, FCC personnel in New Orleans said that they do not have the mobile equipment to track down radio abuses by moving vessels anywhere within the intricate system of waterways in the lower Mississippi River.

The regulations concerning maximum allowable transmitter power for shipboard radio installations are explicit. Vessel bridge-to-bridge transmissions under normal conditions are supposed to be limited to not more than 1 watt, and under no circumstances are transmissions of greater than 10 watts allowed. In basic conflict with this 10-watt maximum requirement is the fact that transmitters capable of transmitting up to 25 watts are authorized aboard vessels. The Safety Board recognizes that there might be a need for vessels to have the capability to transmit at 25 watts on other frequencies. However, we believe that a power limiting device should be required on vessel radios to prevent transmissions at greater than 10 watts on the bridge-to-bridge frequency. Therefore, the Safety Board believes that the FCC should amend 47 CFR Part 83 to require such a limiting device and should make inspection of this device a part of its annual inspection of shipboard radio installations.

The enforcement activities of the FCC relative to abusive use of the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency in the New Orleans area are, for all practical purposes, nonexistent. The FCC is not regularly monitoring the frequency to detect profane transmissions, overpowered transmissions, or unauthorized transmissions, such as the playing of music and the unannounced keying of microphones. Rather, because of a lack of manpower and resources, the FCC is dependent upon the Coast Guard to detect and process violations in the lower Mississippi River.

Since both the Coast Guard and the FCC have limited resources to combat abusive use of the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency, an effective enforcement program might be instituted if the two agencies improved the coordination of their available resources. Such a program, even if short-term in nature, could greatly alleviate the problems prevailing on the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency in the lower Mississippi River.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Federal Communications Commission:

Amend 47 CFR 83 to require installation of power-limiting devices on radios broadcasting over the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency in the lower Mississippi River. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-82-10)

Establish a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Coast Guard to coordinate the use of available resources in a concerted effort to effectively enforce the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulations in the lower Mississippi River. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-82-11)

BURNETT, Acting Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Burnett". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

By: Jim Burnett
Acting Chairman

