

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

AI-4
Log M-188

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Forwarded to:
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Council
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1730 Burbank Drive
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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-82-12

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 about \$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 an established 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 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).

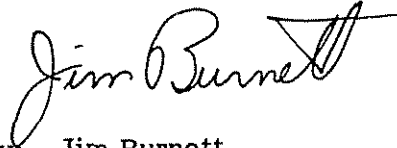
The vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency was designated by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) for the exclusive purpose of transmitting information necessary for the safe navigation of vessels. In the lower Mississippi River, abuse of this purpose is commonplace. Extraneous transmission in the form of conversational "chit chat," profanity, the transmission of music, and unannounced keying of microphones is an everyday occurrence on a frequency that is supposed to be devoted to the transmission of vital navigational information. Many users in the Mississippi River appear to lack an appreciation for the importance of having a clear navigational frequency. The current problems on the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency in the lower Mississippi River will not be solved until the users of the frequency realize the importance of effective bridge-to-bridge communications and appreciate the potentially disastrous results of abusing the frequency. The Mississippi River between its mouth and Baton Rouge is one of the busiest sections of navigable water in the country. Large numbers of freighters, tankers, and bulk carriers in coastwise and foreign trade enter the river annually. Once the vessels are in the river, they encounter a seemingly endless flow of barge and towboat traffic, not only moving up and down the river, but back and forth across the river in extensive spotting and fleeting operations. Many of these vessels are moving chemicals or other hazardous substances. If vessels are hampered in communicating their navigational intentions to other vessels that they meet in the river, and as a result, a collision occurs, the outcome could be catastrophic.

The enforcement activities of the FCC and the Coast Guard in New Orleans relative to the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulations have not been effective in reducing the improper use of the radiotelephone on the lower Mississippi River. Unfortunately, the problems that have arisen to compromise the effective use of the radiotelephone as a valuable tool in collision avoidance cannot be solved merely by the issuance of regulations. For this reason, the agencies involved and the marine community in New Orleans should work together to improve the conditions in vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone communications in the lower Mississippi River. To this end, the New Orleans Port Safety Council appears to be an ideal organization through which such cooperative effort could be effective. The Safety Board believes that a special task force should be formed within the framework of the New Orleans Port Safety Council to outline a course of action to be taken by private companies to alleviate the problem on the bridge-to-bridge frequency in the lower Mississippi River and the support to be given them by Federal agencies. Companies that operate vessels on the lower Mississippi River must recognize that the time has come in which they must take actions to minimize the prevailing abuse of the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency, such as providing vessel operating personnel with instructions for proper radio use, insisting that proper radio procedures are followed aboard company vessels, and cooperating with enforcement agencies by reporting known habitual abusers and by using moral suasion to convince other companies that have casual attitudes concerning radio abuse that they should reassess these attitudes.

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

Form a special task force comprised of representatives of the New Orleans marine industry in consultation with the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Coast Guard to outline a course of action to reduce abuses of the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency in the New Orleans area. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-82-12)

BURNETT, Acting Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members,
concurred in this recommendation.

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

