

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

AI-4
Log M-186

ISSUED: March 17, 1982

Forwarded to:

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

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-82-9

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 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.

In the lower Mississippi River, the Coast Guard operates vessels and aircraft which are equipped with radio direction finding equipment. However, Coast Guard officials pointed out that these craft are extremely expensive to operate and are necessary to perform other missions, such as search and rescue operations, oil pollution patrols, and offshore law enforcement, which take precedence over their use for enforcement of radio communication regulations.

As a result of two separate collisions in the lower Mississippi River, 2/ the Safety Board recommended that the Coast Guard establish an enforcement program to reduce improper use of the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone channel in the lower Mississippi River. As a result of these recommendations, the Coast Guard has taken action to monitor the bridge-to-bridge frequency in New Orleans for enforcement purposes. The Coast Guard Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) Center in New Orleans monitors and records all transmissions which are broadcast within the New Orleans VTS area. Each VTS sector operator monitors two frequencies, channel 67 (bridge-to-bridge) and his particular VTS sector channel. If the operator becomes aware of abuse on the bridge-to-bridge channel, he will transmit an order to desist. If the perpetrator of the abuse can be identified, then the violation files are checked to determine whether he is a repeat offender. If he is not a repeat offender, a written letter of warning is issued; if he is found to be a repeat offender, a report of violation is submitted to the 8th Coast Guard District Office for transmittal to the FCC so that action can be taken to penalize the offender.

From information received from the New Orleans VTS Center, the Coast Guard documented 144 violations on channel 67 in calendar year 1980. From these 144 instances, the Coast Guard issued 28 warning letters, but filed no reports of violation. (It should be noted that the New Orleans VTS was shut down for 10 days in July 1980 and that this caused a certain amount of operational turmoil which affected operations for months afterward.) During the first 10 months of calendar year 1981, the Coast Guard documented 78 violations on channel 67. From these 78 instances the Coast Guard issued 2 warning letters and 12 reports of violation. As of November 1981 when the Safety Board received this information, seven additional reports of violation were in the process of being filed.

Despite the Coast Guard's enforcement effort, the Commanding Officer of the New Orleans VTS characterized the situation prevailing on the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency in New Orleans by saying that it "borders on intolerable." He further stated that the Coast Guard is doing all that it can do to enforce the vessel bridge-to-bridge regulations with the manpower that is currently available for this purpose.

2/ Marine Accident Report-"Spanish Motor Tankship RIBAFORADA Ramming of Barge MB-5, Three Wharves, and Cargo Ship M/V TIARET, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 4, 1977" (NTSB-MAR-79-15) and Marine Accident Report-"Collision of U.S. Mississippi River Steamer NATCHEZ and U.S. Tankship SS EXXON BALTIMORE, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 29, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-5).

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.

Although the Coast Guard is taking some action to enforce the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulations, its action appears minimally effective in alleviating the problem. Currently, the Coast Guard relies upon the VTS sector operator, whose primary responsibility is to communicate with vessels participating in the New Orleans VTS System, to monitor also the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency for abuse. It would be unrealistic to believe that by dividing his attention between these two tasks a VTS operator would be able to do more than identify the most flagrant and persistent offender. This is reflected by the relatively low number of documented violations reported by the New Orleans VTS for calendar year 1980 and the first 10 months of 1981. The Coast Guard's problems related to its multiple responsibilities and its limited resources were highlighted recently in a report^{3/} prepared by the Coast Guard Subcommittee of the House of Representatives Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee. The report stated that, "The central thesis of this report is that Coast Guard resources are not currently sufficient in quality or quantity to cope with the variety of responsibilities placed upon the agency by law." This statement, the report continued, is based in part, on a series of recent studies which made assessments of the Coast Guard's performance. One such study, a 1980 report by the General Accounting Office, concluded that, "The Coast Guard's responsibilities have increased without a commensurate growth in its resources—cutters and personnel. . . . As a result of its limited budget, the Coast Guard has generally not been able to carry out many of its responsibilities." The Coast Guard in New Orleans cannot commit many of its resources to the elimination of radio abuse on the Mississippi River because the resources have been designated for more critical mission requirements. However, the everyday conditions on the vessel bridge-to-bridge frequency have degenerated to the extent that the safe navigation of vessels on the lower Mississippi River is seriously hampered. The Safety Board believes that the Coast Guard could improve its enforcement capability of the radiotelephone regulations if it were in a position to assign more personnel to vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulation enforcement activities.

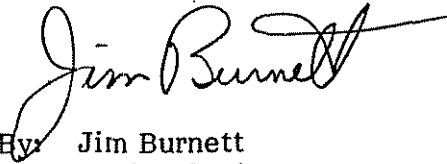
Since both the Coast Guard and the FCC have limited resources to combat abusive use of the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency, an effective enforcement program might be instituted if the two agencies improved the coordination of their available resources. Such a program, even if short-term 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 U.S. Coast Guard:

^{3/} "Semi-Paratus: The United States Coast Guard, 1981."

Establish a memorandum of understanding with the Federal Communications Commission 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-82-9)

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


By: Jim Burnett
Acting Chairman