

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 17, 1979

Forwarded to:

Mr. Arthur Lopez
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Survival Systems Division
5159 Baltimore Drive
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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-79-50

About 1100 c.s.t. on April 14, 1976, the self-elevating mobile offshore drilling unit OCEAN EXPRESS departed a drilling site near the Texas coast in the Gulf of Mexico under tow for a new drilling site about 33 nmi northeast. The OCEAN EXPRESS arrived at the new site about 2330, but was not set in place because of adverse seas. Three tugs held the OCEAN EXPRESS in position awaiting better weather, but the seas continued to increase. About 1530 on April 15, one tug became partially disabled because of a reduction gear failure. At 1930, another tug's towline broke. With only one effective tug remaining, the OCEAN EXPRESS turned broadside to the wind and seas, drifted, grounded, capsized, and sank about 2115. The vessel was valued at \$20 million. 1/

The bargemover was rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter. The crew abandoned the OCEAN EXPRESS in the unit's survival capsules. The 14 persons in one capsule were rescued without incident. The other capsule capsized with 20 persons inside; 7 persons escaped and 13 persons drowned.

Although Whittaker recommended that the capsule not be towed, lifeboats and liferafts are often towed during rescues, especially when heavy seas make personnel transfer dangerous. It should have been anticipated that survival capsules also would be towed, especially since a towing test was required for Coast Guard approval. Although survival capsules have been towed successfully, their towing limitations are not known. The capsule's towing characteristics should be determined, and proper towing equipment should be fitted on the capsule. Lifeboats and other small rescue craft are often secured to larger assisting vessels when transferring personnel. The personnel transfer operation traditionally has been one of the most dangerous parts of a rescue, so particular efforts should be made to reduce the risks. Accessible mooring fittings and proper fendering would reduce the possibilities of injury.

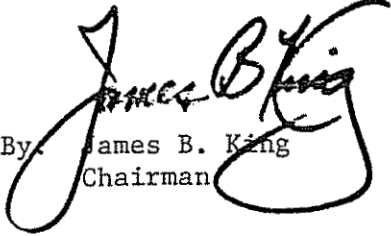
1/ For more detailed information read "Marine Accident Report - Capsizing and Sinking of the Self-Elevating Mobile Offshore Drilling Unit OCEAN EXPRESS near Port O'Connor, Texas, April 15, 1976" (NISB-MAR-79-5).

Even though it would have been easier to escape from a capsized lifeboat, the survival capsules were the best available equipment for use by inexperienced industrial personnel. In consideration of those users, Whittaker's training program should include guidance for towing, securing alongside another vessel, and emergency escapes.

As a result of its analysis of this accident, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that Whittaker Corporation:

Revise its survival capsule training program to include guidance on towing, securing alongside another vessel, and emergency escape from the capsule. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-50)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS and HOGUE, Members, concurred in the above recommendation.

By: 
James B. King
Chairman