

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

AI-4
Log M-198

ISSUED: March 17, 1982

Forwarded to:

Mr. Anthony L. Kucera
President
The American Waterways
Operators, Inc.
1600 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22209

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-82-13

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).

The vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency was designated by the 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.

Since January 1973 when the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulations went into effect, the Safety Board has investigated eight marine collisions (including this accident) between vessels on the lower Mississippi River whereby the failure to establish effective bridge-to-bridge communications was a causal factor. Three of the accidents, 2/ as well as this accident, cited abuse of the bridge-to-bridge frequency; these four accidents resulted in the loss of 16 lives, personal injury to 100 persons, and property damage estimated to be in excess of \$12 million. The Safety Board believes that vessel operators in the lower Mississippi River must be made aware of the potential for great loss of life and personal injury, as well as costly property damage that is present when vessel bridge-to-bridge communication is not reliable. Since it is not practical for the Safety Board to issue an individual letter of recommendation to each and every company and pilot that operates vessels on the lower Mississippi River, the Safety Board believes that marine trade organizations and pilots associations which serve the maritime interests of the region should remind vessel operators and pilots of the importance of good radio discipline and strict adherence to the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulations, and should encourage them to cooperate with Federal agencies responsible for the enforcement of these regulations.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the American Waterways Operators, Inc.:

2/ Marine Accident Report—"SS KEYTRADER and SS BAUNE Collision in the Mississippi River on 18 January 1974 with Loss of Life" (USCG/NTSB-MAR-77-1); 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).

Reiterate to your members the importance of good radio discipline and strict adherence to the vessel bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone regulations and encourage them to cooperate with Federal regulatory agencies responsible for the enforcement of these regulations. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-82-13)

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 and title.

By: Jim Burnett
Acting Chairman

