

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: July 14, 1981

Forwarded to:

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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-66 and -67

At some time on October 25 or 26, 1980, the 523-foot-long U. S. freighter SS POET disappeared in the North Atlantic Ocean about 500 nautical miles east of Delaware Bay. No distress signal was heard from the POET, and no trace of the ship or its 34-person crew has been found. The estimated loss for the ship and its cargo was \$4,250,000. 1/

The Safety Board believes that the air search conducted by the U. S. Coast Guard from November 8 to 17 was extensive and exhaustive considering the limited information about the position of the POET and the lack of a distress signal. The search covered the entire estimated trackline of the POET from Cape Henlopen to the Straits of Gibraltar. If the POET still had been afloat during that period, it probably would have been detected. The total area searched was 297,400 square miles--an area approximately the total area of all the eastern United States from Maine to South Carolina, including New York and Pennsylvania. The detailed search area was concentrated along the first 72 hours of the POET's estimated trackline. Any lifeboat, liferaft, or significant concentration of debris should have been detected in the detailed search area but, because of the search pattern needed to cover so vast an area, anything smaller would have been difficult to detect. Although crewmembers may have survived for 2 weeks in a lifeboat or liferaft if the conditions were favorable, a person would survive for less than a day in the water in October in the North Atlantic. Therefore, the possibility of finding any survivors or debris smaller than a liferaft by November 17 was very small. There still exists the probability of finding some debris from the POET. However, when the Coast Guard made its initial decision on November 13 to consider suspending the search if nothing was found, the possibility of finding survivors was extremely small.

The Safety Board believes that had the air search commenced sooner, the probability of finding survivors or debris would have been greater. When the Coast Guard was notified on November 3 that the POET had not been heard from since October 24, it already may have been too late to rescue any survivors if the POET

1/ For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Disappearance of U. S. Freighter SS POET in North Atlantic Ocean about October 25, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-6).

sank about October 25. However, a search and rescue expert testified before the U. S. House of Representatives Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee on April 9, 1981, that the Coast Guard should have completed its communication checks and begun planning for an air search within 24 hours. Although over 90 percent of unreported and overdue vessels are located through communication checks, the Coast Guard should have made plans for an active search while it was completing its communication checks on November 3, 4, and 5. When Lloyds of London informed the Coast Guard on November 5 that it had no record of the POET passing Gibraltar, the location the ship should have reached by November 3 if it had steamed at 15 knots, the Coast Guard should have then commenced an air search. By November 5, 12 days had passed since the POET had last been heard from. If the POET had suffered a casualty, it was important that the Coast Guard act quickly. The only new information the Coast Guard had on November 7 that it did not have on November 5 was that the POET had an excellent past record for reporting every 48 hours to USMER 2/ and that it was likely that the POET had passed through a storm on October 25 or 26.

The Safety Board believes that the owner should have contacted the Coast Guard sooner. The owner stated that the master of the POET was to report his position every 48 hours; however, the alternate master stated that the company policy was to report every Monday and Thursday. Although both POET masters had reported about every 48 hours to USMER and AMVER 3/ on previous voyages, the Safety Board believes the company policy was to report to the owner every Monday and Thursday. Neither the alternate master nor regular chief engineer had ever seen the owner's operating manual where the policy of reporting every 48 hours was stated. Based on the Monday and Thursday reporting schedule, the first report to the owner should have been made on Monday, October 27, the second Thursday, October 30, and the third, Monday, November 3. The owner probably was not concerned about not receiving the October 27 message because the POET had departed only 3 days earlier. When the owner did not receive a reply to his message of October 30 on the next regular reporting day, Thursday, October 30, the owner sent a second message on October 31 requesting a reply and then an urgent message on November 1. When the owner did not receive a message from the POET by the third regular reporting day, Monday, November 3, he then called the Coast Guard. At any time between October 27 and November 3, the owner should have checked with AMVER or USMER to determine if the master was sending messages every 48 hours to these organizations. Based on a negative response from either organization and the owner's knowledge that a severe storm moved up the east coast of the United States on October 25 and 26, the owner should have alerted the Coast Guard on October 31, when no message was received from the POET, that the POET may have experienced a casualty. Although the Coast Guard receives thousands of unreported or overdue reports a year, a Coast Guard representative testified that very few ships the size of the POET are reported overdue or unreported. The fact that the POET was not reporting every 48 hours and had not been heard from for 10 days should have been of immediate concern to the Coast Guard and preparations should have been made at that time for an active search.

The fact that the alternate master and permanent chief engineer had never seen the owner's operating manual indicates that the POET's master may not have been aware of the weather routing services available to him. This information was contained in the

2/ U. S. Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System operated by the U. S. Maritime Administration.

3/ An international Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue System operated by the U. S. Coast Guard.

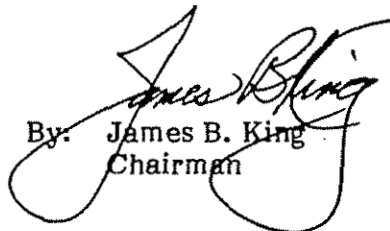
owner's operating manual. The Safety Board believes that it is important that weather routing services be used to minimize the exposure of ships to severe weather. The owner and operator of the POET should insure that the masters of their other ships are aware of the available weather routing services by insuring that operating manuals are aboard their ships.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Hawaiian Eugenia Corporation and International Ship Management and Agency Services:

Instruct the masters of all its ships of the company policy that the master is to report the ship's position every 48 hours. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-66)

Provide the masters of all its ships with a copy of its standard operating manual and instruct them in the availability of the company's weather routing services. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-67)

DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations. KING, Chairman, did not participate.


By: James B. King
Chairman