



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D. C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: December 21, 1992

In Reply Refer To: M-92-58

Mr. Sean C. O'Keefe
Acting Secretary
Department of Navy
Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

About 0205¹ on April 21, 1991, in the Chesapeake Bay, off Cove Point, Maryland, the U.S. Naval Academy sailing vessel AMERICAN PROMISE and Barge E-2, which was being pushed ahead of the tug SUN COAST, collided. The sailing vessel had 12 crewmembers on board, the tug had 5 crewmembers, and the barge was unmanned. No serious injuries resulted from this accident. The sailing vessel sank, but was salvaged. The AMERICAN PROMISE sustained more than \$800,000 damage and the Barge E-2 sustained about \$10,000 damage. The SUN COAST was not damaged.²

As a result of its investigation of this accident, the Safety Board identified several safety issues, including the adequacy of the crews' collision avoidance actions, adequacy of look-outs aboard the SUN COAST, adequacy of radiotelephone communications procedures by the crew of the AMERICAN PROMISE, and effectiveness of the sailing vessel's radar reflector.

The SUN COAST was required to be equipped with a radiotelephone and comply with the provisions of the "Vessel Bridge-to-Bridge Radiotelephone Act" (the Act). The Act required that the SUN COAST be able to communicate on radiotelephone channel 13 in most parts of the United States, including the Chesapeake Bay. The SUN COAST was also required to monitor channel 16, the frequency for distress, safety, and calling. However, when the SUN COAST's relief master tried to contact the vessel detected on his radarscope (the AMERICAN PROMISE) using VHF-FM radiotelephone 16 and 13, he was unsuccessful.

¹All times are local based on a 24-hour clock.

²For more detailed information read Marine Accident/Incident Summary Report--Collision of the U.S. Sailing Vessel AMERICAN PROMISE and the U.S. Freight Barge E-2 being pushed ahead of the U.S. Tug SUN COAST Off Cove Point, Chesapeake Bay, April 21, 1991 (NTSB/MAR-92/01/SUM).

Aboard the AMERICAN PROMISE, the watch captain had adjusted the radiotelephone to channel 12 in the mistaken belief from her past experience that the approaching tug would be monitoring that channel. The AMERICAN PROMISE, which had the radio equipment to monitor VHF-FM channels 16 and 13, was operating in compliance with all the Naval Academy's communication instructions during the training exercise.

The communication instructions for the AMERICAN PROMISE required that the vessel guard radiotelephone channel 82A³ as the primary frequency at all times during the overnight sailing trip, and 4145.0 KHz as the secondary frequency. The Assistant Officer In Charge testified that the radiotelephone had a scanning capability, but he did not know how the scanning feature functioned and did not use it during the trip.

The U.S. Navy communications doctrine⁴ specifies that "A continuous guard will be maintained on 156.65 MHz (VHF-FM channel 13) on vessels subject to the Act while operating inside the boundary lines of the United States." However, the AMERICAN PROMISE was not of a size or type included under the Act.⁵ The doctrine further states, "There is presently no requirement for U.S. Navy vessels to guard VHF radiotelephone (R/T) channels in international waters.⁶ However, a continuous guard on channel 16 (156.80 MHz) is highly recommended for establishing communications."

According to the U.S. Naval Academy Sailing Master, the academy communications curriculum for the Command and Seamanship Training Squadron (CSTS) includes the use of VHF radiotelephones, use of channels 12, 13, 16, 22, and 82A, and procedures to be used for intership communications.

Although U.S. Navy communications doctrine highly recommends that channel 16 be used to establish communications in international waters, the policy does not require that channel 16 be monitored in either international or domestic waters. Had the AMERICAN PROMISE monitored channel 16, or had the watch captain adjusted the radiotelephone to channel 16 rather than 12, communications could have been established with the SUN COAST, either directly or with assistance from the Coast Guard. The Safety Board concludes that had the AMERICAN PROMISE's crew monitored and used VHF-FM channel 16, they could have established timely communications with the SUN COAST's operator and exchanged information necessary to avoid the collision.

³Channel 82A, as assigned by the FCC, is intended for "U.S. Government Only."

⁴Basic Operational Communication Doctrine (U), NWP 4(Rev.B).

⁵No FCC rule requires that sailing vessels the size of the AMERICAN PROMISE be equipped with a marine radiotelephone. But, if such vessels are voluntarily so equipped, the FCC requires that the vessels must monitor VHF-FM radiotelephone channel 16 at all times that their radio station is in operation.

⁶Title 47, Section 352 exempts vessels owned and operated by the U.S. Government from radio equipment and operator requirements.

Prior Recommendations.--As a result of its investigation of the collision between the USS RICHARD L. PAGE and the fishing vessel CHICKADEE,⁷ on June 1, 1988, the Safety Board issued the following Safety Recommendation to the U.S. Navy:

M-88-37

Require that U.S. Navy vessels monitor VHF/FM radio channel 16 in international waters.

On September 20, 1988, the U.S. Navy responded that the Safety Board's findings and recommendations "have been forwarded to the commanding officer, Surface Warfare Officers School for review." As a result, the Safety Board classified Safety Recommendation M-88-37 as "Open--Awaiting Response."

On October 27, 1989, the Safety Board asked the U.S. Navy to provide information concerning what action had been taken or was being considered in regard to Safety Recommendation M-88-37. On February 13, 1990, the U.S. Navy responded that it "suggests, but does not require, that ships operating in international waters monitor VHF-FM radio channel 16. Under normal practice, this would be done in circumstances similar to those in this incident." On June 18, 1990, the Safety Board replied to the U.S. Navy:

The Safety Board continues to believe that monitoring VHF/FM channel 16 in international waters should be a requirement and, therefore, classifies Safety Recommendation M-88-37 as Closed--Unacceptable Action.

As a result of its investigation of the collision between the AMERICAN PROMISE and Barge E-2, the Safety Board concludes that in addition to a need for U.S. Navy vessels to monitor VHF-FM channel 16 in international waters, vessels operated by the U.S. Navy in inland waters also need to monitor channel 16 if they have VHF-FM radiotelephone equipment.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Secretary of the Navy:

Require that naval vessels having VHF-FM radiotelephone equipment on board monitor VHF-FM channel 16 while underway. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-92-58)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations M-92-59 through -61 to the U.S. Naval Academy; M-92-62 and -63 to the Robert Dann Company; and M-92-64 to the American Waterway Operators.

⁷Marine Accident Report--"Collision between the USS RICHARD L. PAGE and the U.S. Fishing Vessel CHICKADEE in the Atlantic Ocean on April 21, 1987"(NTSB/MAR-88/04).

VOGT, Chairman, COUGHLIN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER, HART, and HAMMERSCHMIDT, Members, concurred in this recommendation.



By: Carl W. Vogt
Chairman