

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: January 8, 1980

Forwarded to:

Admiral John B. Hayes
Commandant
U.S. Coast Guard
Washington, D.C. 20590

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-80-1 through -3

About 0428 e.s.t on January 18, 1978, the M/B SIDS sank in the Atlantic Ocean about 2 nmi offshore from Absecon Inlet, Atlantic City, New Jersey. The SIDS' steering system had failed, and the vessel was being towed to the Atlantic City harbor by a Coast Guard 41-ft utility boat. When a large wave broke over the utility boat's starboard side, the utility boat rolled about 45° to port and the crewmen were thrown to the deck. When the crewmen recovered, the SIDS was no longer in sight and the towline was slack. Both persons on board the SIDS died. The SIDS washed up on the Atlantic City beach several hours later. 1/

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the accident was the capsizing of the M/B SIDS because of the severe flooding and overturning moment caused by a large wave which broke over the vessel's starboard side. Contributing to the accident were a steering system failure of undetermined cause and the crew's decision to depart Atlantic City during adverse weather.

Coast Guard Group Cape May received the SIDS' distress call about 1530 on January 17, 1978. The Operations Duty Officer determined that the closest available rescue vessel was at Great Egg Harbor, and he requested that Group Atlantic City, which has command over the Great Egg Harbor Station, handle the case. The Coast Guard 44-ft motor lifeboat (MLB) 44302 was underway from that station at 1557 and arrived on scene about 1730.

1/ For more detailed information, read "Marine Accident Report--Sinking of the M/B SIDS in the Atlantic Ocean near Absecon Inlet, Atlantic City, New Jersey, January 18, 1978" (NTSB-MAR-80-2).

Shortly after it had been secured to the SIDS, the towline became fouled in MLB44302's starboard propeller. When attempts to free the towline failed, the crew tried to pass a second line to the SIDS so that the towline could be cut from the propeller and rerigged. These attempts also failed, and MLB44333 from Atlantic City Station was sent to take the SIDS in tow. MLB44333 arrived on scene about 2100. Because that vessel's towline also became fouled in a propeller, the vessels were still near Corson Inlet about 2300. This was about 5 1/2 hours after MLB44302 had arrived on scene. After the towline was cleared from MLB44333's propeller, the tow proceeded without problems toward Absecon Inlet, and the first attempt was made to enter that inlet about 0130 on January 18, 1978. If MLB44302 had been able to take the SIDS in tow and proceed toward Absecon Inlet without incident, they would have arrived about 2000. The towline became fouled in MLB44333's propellers twice when the vessels were anchored offshore from Absecon Inlet, and UTB41335, a 41-ft utility boat, took the SIDS in tow. Thus, a towline became fouled in propellers four times during this search and rescue mission. Although the Coast Guard responded with an additional rescue vessel each time when it was determined that the towline probably could not be removed from the propeller on scene, the towlines' fouling in the propellers of the Coast Guard 44-ft motor lifeboats significantly prolonged the time that the crews of all of the vessels were exposed to adverse weather conditions. The Safety Board believes that the Coast Guard should act to reduce the frequency of towlines' fouling in the propellers of 44-ft motor lifeboats.

After the coxswain of UTB41335 reported that he had lost the tow, he immediately began to search for the vessel and survivors. However, darkness and the rough seas made it difficult to locate persons in the water. Persons in the cold water would have become helpless quickly because of hypothermia, unless they were wearing exposure suits. To insure their survival, they would have had to be located within the first few minutes of entering the water.

The possibility exists that the SIDS' crew might have been trapped in the vessel for some time. However, if they were free of the SIDS, the chances of locating them would have been significantly improved if they had been wearing personal flotation devices (PFD) with approved PFD lights. Life preservers on most commercial vessels soon must be equipped with PFD lights. The Safety Board concludes that PFD lights should be available also for the crews of non-commercial vessels in distress at night,

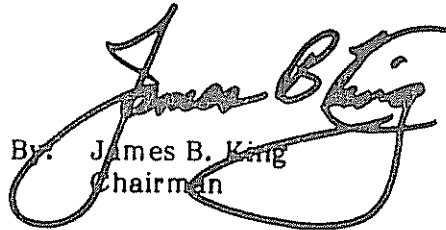
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the U.S. Coast Guard:

Implement a means to reduce the frequency of towlines' fouling in the propellers of Coast Guard 44-ft motor lifeboats. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-1)

Equip each Coast Guard search and rescue vessel used at night with PFD lights which are packaged suitably for passing to persons on vessels in distress at night. Require that the PFD lights be passed to those persons unless approved PFD lights are available on the vessel in distress. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-2)

Require onscene Coast Guard rescue personnel to insist that persons on board vessels being rescued at night use the PFD lights. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-3)

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


By: James B. King
Chairman