

M-109

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: March 20, 1980

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Forwarded to:

Admiral John B. Hayes  
Commandant  
U.S. Coast Guard  
Washington, D.C. 20593

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-80-9 through M-80-13

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At 0640 c.s.t., on November 9, 1978, the Greek bulk carrier M/V IRENE S. LEMOS and the Panamanian bulk carrier M/V MARITIME JUSTICE collided in the lower Mississippi River at mile 78.3 AHP, about 15 statute miles below New Orleans, Louisiana. Because of the dense fog, the visibility at the time of the collision was less than 400 feet. The vessels struck nearly head-on, damaging the bows of both vessels. There were no deaths or injuries. Cost of repairs to the two vessels was estimated at \$4 million. 1/

Fog on the lower Mississippi River is common from November to March each year. Sometimes the fog is very dense and lasts for days, thereby preventing any vessel movements. On the day of the accident, the fog was patchy and varied in density and duration; it would suddenly appear on a stretch of the river and suddenly disappear. At the time of the collision, both ships were experiencing near zero visibility, but 5 minutes later the fog lifted. Although traffic continued to move on the Mississippi River during the dense fog, some vessels had anchored and had waited for the fog to lift.

Since the master of the MARITIME JUSTICE went to his cabin to rest about 0130, the mate on watch, representing the master, was in charge of the vessel. However, the mate relied completely on the pilot for the safe navigation of the vessel. The mate did not sound fog signals, post a lookout, or call the master as required by the master's standing orders because the pilot did not order him to do so. The mate should have called the master so that the master, who had ultimate responsibility, could have made decisions concerning operating in the dense fog. The mate testified that he could not overrule the pilot's decision while the pilot was aboard. The mate and the pilot did not discuss the proposed port-to-port meeting with the IRENE S. LEMOS at Shingle Point. The mate did not question the pilot on what other vessels the MARITIME JUSTICE would meet or where they would pass the vessels. The mate should have kept himself aware of the locations of other vessels, especially in the dense fog conditions, and discussed with the pilot (1) whether the MARITIME JUSTICE should slow or anchor because of the dense fog and (2) where other vessels could be passed safely.

1/ For more detailed information read, "Marine Accident Report--Collision of Greek Bulk Carrier M/V IRENE S. LEMOS and Panamanian Bulk Carrier M/V MARITIME JUSTICE, Lower Mississippi River, Near New Orleans, Louisiana, November 9, 1978" (NTSB-MAR-80-4).

The master of the IRENE S. LEMOS was on the bridge and did question the pilot of the IRENE S. LEMOS concerning the passing of the MARITIME JUSTICE at Shingle Point shortly before the accident. However, the master did not request the pilot to keep him informed of the information the pilot received over the radiotelephone regarding the vessels the IRENE S. LEMOS would meet or what passing agreements were made. When the master questioned the pilot concerning the MARITIME JUSTICE, the pilot had already agreed to the meeting in English Turn Bend. The master did not further question the judgment of the pilot and did not assume any control of the vessel until seconds before the collision when he rang up full astern.

The pilots aboard the MARITIME JUSTICE and IRENE S. LEMOS did not know if maneuvering data was posted on their respective bridges nor did they consult with the master concerning the maneuvering characteristics of the respective vessels. The masters of the vessels did not inform the pilots of the maneuvering characteristics of the vessels in accordance with 33 CFR 164.11(k).

The Mississippi River has a number of sharp bends, similar to Shingle Point, which require careful navigation to execute the turns properly. Radar enables the pilot to continue navigating in dense fog but it does not give the pilot immediate information on vessel aspect and heading changes of vessels he encountered. The Safety Board believes that restrictions on the continued operation of vessels on difficult portions of the lower Mississippi River under dense fog conditions need to be examined. Furthermore, the Safety Board believes that the institution of one-way traffic patterns in bends during conditions of reduced visibility would reduce the risk of collision.

The New Orleans Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) only provides weather information if specifically requested by the participating vessel. On the day of the accident, a downbound vessel which was participating in VTS and left New Orleans just ahead of the IRENE S. LEMOS was not informed of the dense fog conditions on the lower Mississippi River although the vessel traffic center (VTC) operators were aware that fog conditions existed downriver from New Orleans. The Safety Board believes that the New Orleans VTS could provide a valuable service to vessels by routinely broadcasting significant weather conditions.

Currently, VTS on the lower Mississippi River has a low level of effectiveness because of the lack of surveillance, lack of participation, inaccurate positions provided by users, user deviation from reported operations, and users not maintaining a radio watch on the designated frequencies. Without surveillance and a high rate of participation to increase the reliability of information, the New Orleans VTS does not provide any more information as to conditions in the immediate vicinity than the pilots themselves can obtain from passing vessels. Without some form of surveillance, the VTS is only as accurate as the information entered into the system from radiotelephone reports from participating vessels.

About 30 minutes before the collision, the pilot of the MARITIME JUSTICE was advised by another pilot that there were two downbound vessels, the EASTERN MERIT and the IRENE S. LEMOS, above Shingle Point and that there was dense fog at Shingle Point. However, the pilot of the MARITIME JUSTICE had no radiotelephone communication with the pilot of the IRENE S. LEMOS until the pilot of the IRENE S. LEMOS contacted him 9 minutes before the collision. The Safety Board believes that it is unlikely that the pilot of the MARITIME JUSTICE would have acted differently had he obtained similar information through participation in VTS.

The authority to control traffic on the Mississippi River rests with the Captain of the Port (COTP) of New Orleans. The VTC acts in cooperation with the COTP, but the VTC does not make recommendations to the COTP as to when traffic should be controlled. For the VTC to improve safe navigation on the Mississippi River under fog conditions, the Safety Board believes that the VTC must have more accurate information of vessel movements through some type of surveillance system and that there is a need for improved procedures between the COTP and the VTC to insure prompt action to control traffic movements on the lower Mississippi River during conditions of limited visibility. When dense fog exists on all or part of the Mississippi River, the VTC should inform all vessels that the dense fog conditions exist. For these measures to be effective, there must be mandatory participation in the VTS by all vessels subject to the Bridge-to-Bridge Radiotelephone Act.

On May 22, 1974, as a result of its investigation of the SS AFRICAN NEPTUNE collision with the Sidney Lanier Bridge at Brunswick, Georgia, on November 7, 1972, 2/ the Safety Board issued the following safety recommendation to the U.S. Coast Guard:

Require that every master of an oceangoing vessel inform himself of the pilot's plan to maneuver his ship in or out of a harbor and that the master determine, with the pilot's assistance, the critical aspects of the maneuver, including the pilot's plan for emergencies. The master should then be required to instruct his crew to insure that high-risk tasks receive priority. (M-74-15)

This recommendation is classified as open by the Safety Board.

On November 10, 1977, as a result of its investigation of the SS EDGAR M. QUEENY collision with the S/T CORINTHOS at Marcus Hook Channel, Pennsylvania, on January 31, 1975, 3/ the Safety Board issued the following safety recommendation to the U.S. Coast Guard:

Amend 33 CFR 164.11(k) to require that masters and pilots discuss beforehand and agree to the essential features and relevant checkpoints of maneuvers expected to be undertaken. (M-77-33)

This recommendation is classified as open by the Safety Board.

As a result of this accident, the National Transportation Safety Board reiterates safety recommendations M-74-15 and M-77-33 and further recommends that the Coast Guard:

Determine which bends on the lower Mississippi River present difficult navigational problems and should be limited to one-way traffic during conditions of reduced visibility, and promulgate appropriate restrictions. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-9)

2/ For more detailed information read, "SS AFRICAN NEPTUNE Collision with the Sidney Lanier Bridge, Brunswick, Georgia, November 7, 1972" (USCG/NTSB-MAR-74-4).

3/ For more detailed information read, "SS EDGAR M. QUEENY Collision with the S/T CORINTHOS, Marcus Hook Channel, Pennsylvania, January 31, 1975" (USCG/NTSB-MAR-77-2).

Require the New Orleans Vessel Traffic Center to inform participating vessels routinely of important weather information, such as dense fog, and withdraw the current instructions which require vessels to request such information specifically. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-10)

Accelerate rulemaking, Docket No. 75-112, to make participation in the New Orleans Vessel Traffic Service mandatory. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-11)

Develop and implement a plan of action for the Captain of the Port of New Orleans and the New Orleans Vessel Traffic Center that will insure prompt action to control traffic movements on the lower Mississippi River during conditions of limited visibility. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-12)

Re-evaluate the proposed level of vessel traffic service (VTS) on the lower Mississippi River, and determine if an extended surveillance system is needed to overcome the severe limitations of the present VTS to provide useful, accurate information to participants. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-80-13)

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

By:  James B. King  
Chairman