



## NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Washington, D.C. 20594

### Safety Recommendation

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Date: JAN 17 1995

In Reply Refer To: M-94-52

Mr. Tom Millwee  
State Coordinator  
Division of Emergency Management  
Texas Department of Public Safety  
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About 2000 on October 9, 1993, an explosion occurred on board the 660-foot-long U.S. tankship OMI CHARGER, which was anchored near Galveston, Texas. A welder, who was making repairs to stop a small leak in the bulkhead between the port ballast and No. 5 port cargo tanks, burned through the bulkhead, initiating an explosion in the No. 5 port cargo tank, which the ship's crew had not properly gas-freed. The welder and the firewatch, both of whom were inside the ballast tank, and the vessel's pumpman, who was working on deck near the No. 5 port cargo tank, were killed by the explosion. The vessel, valued at \$12 million, was declared a constructive total loss.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after the explosion, the third mate on watch broadcast a distress signal, and more than 12 vessels near the mouth of the Houston Ship Channel came to the aid of the OMI CHARGER. While the rapid response resulted in timely evacuation of the tankship's crew, the volunteers' initial efforts to extinguish the fire on the OMI CHARGER were not totally effective. Attempts to control the blaze were not successful until the ocean tug TALLAHASSEE BAY arrived on site and its master, who was trained in marine fire fighting procedures and who was familiar with tank vessels, assumed command of the effort.

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<sup>1</sup>For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report—*Explosion and Fire On Board the U.S. Tankship OMI CHARGER at Galveston, Texas, October 9, 1993* (NTSB/MAR-94/04).

The success of volunteer responders in fighting the fire was due largely to the fact that the OMI CHARGER was in ballast (empty). Had the explosions occurred aboard the tankship when it was loaded with product and on its outbound run from Texas City, Texas, local fire fighting resources would have been overwhelmed; officials would have been required to mount a rapid, multijurisdictional response, coordinated under one command, to extinguish the fire during extensive pollution mitigation activities. The Safety Board is concerned that no such multijurisdictional organization exists in the Galveston Bay Area of the Houston Ship Channel and that no one has been designated to assume command of such an effort. Moreover, even though the Port of Houston has fire boats, they are not authorized to proceed below Morgan's Point in the upper Galveston Bay, and the OMI CHARGER was not within their jurisdiction.

Vessel salvage and fire fighting are professions that require a high degree of expertise; inexperienced responders might inadvertently allow a preventable channel blockage to occur. Interruption of marine traffic on the Houston Ship Channel to the Ports of Houston, Texas City, and Galveston would have enormous economic impact. In this accident, members of the shipping industry, excluding the operators of the OMI CHARGER, suffered losses totaling \$8 to 10 million due to marine traffic stoppage and delays in the channel; the subsequent losses to local commercial and industrial organizations have not been estimated.

The Safety Board believes that the Texas Department of Public Safety (Division of Emergency Management), which is mandated to "adopt standards and requirements for local and interjurisdictional emergency management plans," should cooperate with the Coast Guard, which is responsible for navigation safety in the waterways of the United States, in developing a fire fighting contingency plan for the Galveston Bay area that ensures rapid response with adequate fire fighting resources to a major shipboard fire. This plan should clearly delineate lines of authority and responsibility for fighting a shipboard fire and mandate that a written agreement be formulated among fire fighting authorities.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Texas Department of Public Safety, Office of Emergency Management:

Develop, in coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard, a fire fighting contingency plan for the Galveston Bay area that ensures a rapid response with adequate fire fighting resources to a major shipboard fire. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-94-52)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations M-94-46 through -48 to the U. S. Coast Guard; M-94-49 and -50 to the OMI Bulk Management Company, and M-94-51 to the National Fire Protection Association. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 382-6860.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is interested in any action taken as a result of its safety recommendations.

Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation M-94-52 in your reply.

Chairman HALL and Members LAUBER and HAMMERSCHMIDT concurred in this recommendation.

By:   
Jim Hall  
Chairman