

11-153 AI-4

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 22, 1981

Forwarded to:

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

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-32 and -33

At about 1634 c.s.t., on March 29, 1980, the U. S. Mississippi River sternwheel passenger vessel NATCHEZ with 413 passengers on board collided with the U. S. tankship EXXON BALTIMORE under the Greater New Orleans Bridge at New Orleans, Louisiana. The collision damaged the bow of the NATCHEZ considerably. The EXXON BALTIMORE was holed below and above the waterline on the portside in the port deep tank, located immediately forward of the vessel's cargo tanks. The EXXON BALTIMORE's port deep tank was flooded, which adversely affected the vessel's handling characteristics; there was no fire or pollution. Although no one was killed, two crewmembers and several passengers on the NATCHEZ suffered injuries. Damage to the two vessels was estimated at \$600,000. ^{1/}

The accident occurred when the pilot of the NATCHEZ attempted to cross the bow of the EXXON BALTIMORE in order to execute a starboard-to-starboard meeting with the EXXON BALTIMORE when the vessels were well to port of each other. Contributing to the accident was the failure of the pilot of the NATCHEZ to establish a meeting agreement either by whistle signals or by bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone communications before altering course to effect a starboard-to-starboard meeting.

The Coast Guard operates a VTS on the lower Mississippi River from the entrance of the river to Devils Swamp light, about 7 miles above Baton Rouge. The VTC located in New Orleans receives movement reports from vessels volunteering to participate in the VTS. The data from the movement reports are entered into a computer which generates the dead reckoning position for the vessel. The projected positions generated by the computer are adjusted as vessels report their passing of certain established checkpoints along the river. When a vessel contacts the VTC on VHF radio, information on traffic projected to be in the vessel's area is recalled from the computer and provided to the vessel. The Coast Guard cautions mariners that the accuracy of reports provided by the VTC is dependent on the accuracy of reports received.

^{1/} For more detailed information read Marine Accident Report--"Collision of U. S. Mississippi River Steamer NATCHEZ and U. S. Tankship SS EXXON BALTIMORE, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 29, 1980."

MAR-81-5

During high river stage, deep draft vessels proceeding around Algiers Point are controlled by red and green traffic lights. Shallow draft vessels, including cruise vessels such as the NATCHEZ, are not controlled by the lights. The light near Governor Nicholls Avenue controls upbound traffic at Algiers Point; the other located at Gretna controls downbound traffic. These lights operate as a part of the VTS when the river reaches 8 feet on the Carrollton Street gage on a rising stage and until it falls below 9 feet on a falling stage. The lights are operated by towermen who stand watches in the towers overlooking the river. Vessel operators can communicate with the traffic light operators on channel 67 VHF, the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency, to obtain information on traffic conditions. The traffic control lights were operating at the time of the accident.

The pilot of the EXXON BALTIMORE was unable to communicate on channel 67 with the towerman operating the Governor Nicholls traffic light because of keying by some unknown station. Therefore, he used channel 11 to contact the VTC, which called the towerman by telephone to obtain information on traffic conditions.

Two witnesses to the accident referred to the unavailability of channel 67 because unknown stations had left microphones open near radios and televisions, which continuously saturated the radio channel with extraneous transmissions. In addition, high-powered transmitters were also being used.

The towerman at the Gretna traffic light observed the NATCHEZ as it approached and passed his position. Having received information from the towerman at the Governor Nicholls traffic light that the EXXON BALTIMORE was proceeding upriver, the towerman at the Gretna traffic light attempted to relay the information to the NATCHEZ on channel 67; the NATCHEZ did not answer. When he attempted to call again, some unknown station was keying an open microphone on channel 67, which prevented communication on the bridge-to-bridge frequency. According to the towerman at the Gretna traffic light, such keying had occurred at various times throughout the day.

The NATCHEZ did not report its course reversal to the VTC, and the VTC, therefore, did not know the location of the NATCHEZ. The VTC attempted to call the NATCHEZ to ascertain its position, but did not succeed since the NATCHEZ was not monitoring channel 11, the vessel traffic service frequency. If the NATCHEZ had participated fully in the VTS by reporting its course reversal, the NATCHEZ would have received information on traffic conditions and would have been informed that the EXXON BALTIMORE was upbound. Similarly, if the NATCHEZ had been required to contact the towerman at the Gretna traffic light to obtain permission to pass the red light, it would have again received information on traffic conditions and the fact that the EXXON BALTIMORE was upbound. Advance knowledge that the NATCHEZ would be meeting this large tankship may have caused the pilot and master to consider bringing the NATCHEZ over to the east bank earlier in order to be positioned for a starboard-to-starboard meeting. In addition, if keying by an unknown station had not interfered with the towerman's attempt to communicate with the NATCHEZ, the NATCHEZ, as soon as it passed the Gretna traffic light, would probably have known that the EXXON BALTIMORE was upbound.

Bridge-to-bridge communication is important in establishing safe passing arrangements between approaching vessels. Any abuse, such as keying or high-powered transmissions, which reduces the availability of the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency is an unsafe condition.

As a result of its investigation of an accident in New Orleans, Louisiana, on December 4, 1977, ^{2/} the Safety Board recommended that the U. S. Coast Guard establish a monitoring, an enforcement, and a public information program to reduce improper use of the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency on the lower Mississippi River.

On September 4, 1980, the Coast Guard responded that such a program has been established. Based on the Coast Guard's statement that a monitoring and public education program existed, the Board closed recommendation M-79-106 as acceptable. However, as a result of this accident the Board believes that improper use of the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency continues to be a problem.

As a result of its investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Coast Guard:

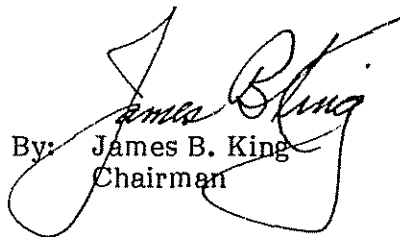
Amend the regulations concerning Algiers traffic lights to require passenger vessels over 300 gross tons to comply with the traffic lights or to obtain permission from the respective towerman before proceeding past a red light. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-32)

Establish an enforcement program to reduce improper use of the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone channel on the lower Mississippi River. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-33)

The Safety Board also reiterates the following recommendation which was made to the U. S. Coast Guard as a result of the accident in New Orleans, Louisiana, on December 4, 1977:

Expedite the installation of vessel surveillance systems and institute mandatory participation in the vessel traffic service for the Mississippi River near Algiers Point. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-79-103)

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

By: 
James B. King
Chairman

^{2/} Marine Casualty Report—"Spanish Motor Tankship RIBAFORADA Ramming of Barge MB-5, Three Wharves and Cargo Ship M/V TIARET, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 4, 1977, (NTSB-MAR-79-15)."