

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: July 14, 1981

Forwarded to:

Mr. Robert A. Frosch
 Administrator
 National Aeronautics and Space
 Administration
 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
 Washington, D.C. 20546

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-69

At some time on October 25 or 26, 1980, the 523-foot-long U. S. freighter SS POET disappeared in the North Atlantic Ocean about 500 nautical miles east of Delaware Bay. No distress signal was heard from the POET, and no trace of the ship or its 34-person crew has been found. The estimated loss for the ship and its cargo was \$4,250,000. ^{1/}

The Safety Board believes there are several possible reasons why there was no distress signal heard from the POET. First, the POET may have sunk so quickly that the radio operator was not able to send a distress signal or the distress signal was of such short duration that no one heard the signal. The representative of the Radio Officers Union stated that it should have taken from 30 to 40 seconds for the radio operator to send a distress signal. The automatic signal keyer could have been activated to continue to send the distress signal even if the radio operator had to abandon ship. Second, no ship may have been within listening range when the POET sent its distress signal or the distress signal could have been sent during a nonsilent period and was not heard over other transmissions. Third, the radio operator may have first tried unsuccessfully to raise another ship or shore station and the ship sank before he could activate the automatic signal keyer. The radio operator was relatively inexperienced; this was his first ship and only his second voyage as a licensed radio operator. The RCA service representative testified that the radio operator was not familiar with fine-tuning the POET's radio equipment. The radio operator's transmission of USMER ^{2/} reports on the previous voyage from Port Said, Egypt, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was erratic compared to the USMER messages transmitted by other radio operators on the POET. If the POET had experienced trouble during the storm on October 25 and 26, the radio operator may not have been successful in transmitting any distress signal before the ship sank. Fourth, no Emergency Position Indicating Radiobeacon (EPIRB) signal was heard because either the EPIRB did not function or there were no aircraft over the area in which the POET sank during the 48 hours that the EPIRB would have broadcast.

^{1/} For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Disappearance of U. S. Freighter SS POET in North Atlantic Ocean about October 25, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-6).


^{2/} U. S. Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System operated by the U. S. Maritime Administration.

The institution of a worldwide satellite system such as Search and Rescue Satellite-Aided Tracking (SARSAT), which will pick up a distress signal from a new type of EPIRB, should greatly improve the detection of ships in distress. A satellite system should have been able to locate the position of the sinking of the POET within a matter of hours. Both NASA and the U. S. Coast Guard are working towards achieving such a system. The Safety Board urges NASA to expedite its SARSAT program and has urged the Coast Guard to obtain as soon as possible the necessary legislation to require satellite EPIRB systems on U. S. vessels.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration:

Expedite the establishment of a satellite-assisted search and rescue system for the detection of U. S.-flag vessels in distress. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-69)

DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in this recommendation. KING, Chairman, did not participate.


By: James B. King
Chairman