

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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ISSUED: December 29, 1981

Forwarded to:

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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-87 through -89

On November 25, 1980, a 22-foot U.S. sailboat, the MR. B, grounded near Punta Chivata, Mexico, in the Golfo de California. The MR. B was one of five boats participating in a juvenile delinquent rehabilitation program sponsored by Vision Quest National, Limited of Tucson, Arizona. Three of the nine persons aboard the boat died; the other six are missing and presumed dead. The estimated loss of the boat was \$7,000. 1/

The Safety Board believes that this accident may have been prevented if the expedition leader had established better operating procedures. The boat operators were instructed to maintain as wide a separation as possible without losing visual contact with at least one other boat. This instruction made the operator of the MR. B responsible for maintaining contact with the SUNDANCE, a faster boat, on the voyage between Isla Tortuga and Isla San Marcos. The operator of the SUNDANCE was not required to maintain contact with the MR. B. Since the BRILLIG and the GLORIA MARIUS were larger boats, the expedition leader should have stationed either boat aft of the flotilla so that if one of the small boats got into trouble, the operator of the small boat could immediately make visual or radio contact with the BRILLIG or the GLORIA MARIUS. When the MR. B lost visual contact with the SUNDANCE, there was no plan for reestablishing contact with the MR. B.

The Safety Board believes that the expedition leader and other supervisory Vision Quest personnel may not have fully appreciated the inherent hazards of the sea. Vision Quest's previous youth programs were land-based, and as such, were not likely to encounter situations where the margin for averting disaster is so unpredictable as at sea. A youthful error or mistake on land is not likely to have serious results. There would generally be time for counselors or supervisory personnel to step in to correct any such mistake before a serious mishap. Operating small open sailing boats on unprotected waters, such as the Golfo de California, demanded that the expedition leader in the escort boat maintain continual visual contact with the flotilla. Under the wind and wave conditions experienced by the

1/ For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Grounding of U.S. Sailboat MR. B, near Punta Chivata, Mexico, November 25, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-13).

flotilla during November 25, 1980, it would have taken only a few minutes for a boat to capsize or get blown on a lee shore. With 6-to 8-foot seas and adverse currents up to 3 knots known to exist at times in the area, even the best swimmer would be hard pressed to survive for any length of time.

The experience of the operators of the boats varied considerably. The GLORIA MARIUS had a Mexican licensed operator and an assistant operator. In addition, the expedition leader, who had been an executive officer aboard a Coast Guard cutter and had 5 years' experience as owner and operator of a 63-foot charter sailboat, was also aboard the GLORIA MARIUS. The operator of the LAZARUS held a Coast Guard license as an operator of auxiliary sailboats on inland waters and had been the owner and operator of the BRILLIG for several years. Before this voyage, the operator of the BRILLIG had had 3 years' experience as a deckhand aboard the BRILLIG. In comparison to the other operators, the operators of the SUNDANCE and the MR. B had limited experience. Besides some canoeing and sailing experience on inland waters, the SUNDANCE operator's principal qualification was the 2-week Hurricane Island Instructors' course and the previous 2-week Ocean Quest voyage. Although he had spent 8 years in the U.S. Navy, the MR. B operator's open water sailboat experience was 9 months as a deckhand on the BRILLIG, the 2-week Hurricane Inland Instructors' course, and the previous Ocean Quest voyage.

An applicant for a Coast Guard license as an operator of sail-propelled vessels in ocean service and subject to Title 46 Subchapter T of the Code of Federal Regulations must have:

- (1) Two years' service as operator in charge of ocean or coastwise sail vessels carrying [six or less] passengers; or
- (2) Three years' service in the operation of ocean or coastwise sail vessels.

Even an applicant for a Coast Guard license as an operator of a sailboat on other than ocean or coastwise waters must have at least 12 months' experience in the operation of similar sailing vessels. The operator of the SUNDANCE had 4 weeks' experience in the operation of coastwise sail vessels, and the operator of the MR. B had less than 1 year's experience in the operation of ocean and coastwise sail vessels. If the sailboats had been certificated, the Coast Guard would probably have required two licensed operators for continuous operation in excess of 12 hours. By 0800 on November 25, the boats had been in continual operation for 44 hours and were to continue operating for an additional 3 to 4 hours.

The Safety Board believes that the four boats carrying the teenagers were not adequately manned for the voyage. Although Ocean Quest is a survival-oriented experience for the teenagers, it should not expose them to any unnecessary dangers. The second Ocean Quest voyage should not have been undertaken without two Coast Guard licensed operators on each boat carrying inexperienced teenage passengers. After more than 44 hours of continuous operation and a night of heavy weather, the operator of the MR. B may have been too fatigued to safely navigate his boat when it got caught on a lee shore.

If the Vision Quest boats had been certificated by the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard would have required Type I personal flotation devices suitable for the open waters of the Golfo de California, in addition to other safety features and equipment. Although the Coast Guard has not made a final determination about whether the Vision Quest boats were required to comply with Subchapter T, the Safety Board believes that, before the

first Ocean Quest voyage was undertaken, Vision Quest should have contacted the Coast Guard and complied as closely as possible with Coast Guard regulations regarding certification, licensing, and manning for the safety of the teenagers.


Therefore, as a result of its investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that Vision Quest National, Limited:

Whether required to or not by law, comply with U.S. Coast Guard regulations for small passenger vessels, 46 CFR Subchapter T, when more than six passengers are being carried on Vision Quest owned boats. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-87)

Provide an adequate number of U.S. Coast Guard licensed operators for the intended route and service when passengers are carried on Vision Quest owned boats. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-88)

Require that visual contact be maintained at all times between boats participating in programs similar to Ocean Quest. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-89)

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


By: James B. King
Chairman