



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: February 3, 2009

In reply refer to: M-08-6

State and Federal maritime academies
(list attached)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge you to take action on the safety recommendation in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in the recommendation because it is designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

The recommendation addresses the need for maritime academy cadets to understand their responsibilities as licensed officers when they assume their first navigation watch as professional mariners. This safety issue derives from the Safety Board's investigation of the May 14, 2007, grounding of the passenger vessel *Empress of the North* and is consistent with the evidence we found and the analysis we performed.¹

About 0130 on Monday, May 14, 2007, the 300-foot passenger vessel *Empress of the North*, operated by Majestic America Line, grounded on a charted rock at the intersection of Lynn Canal and Icy Strait in southeastern Alaska, about 20 miles southwest of Juneau. The vessel was negotiating a turn west out of Lynn Canal into Icy Strait on its way to Glacier Bay, the next stop on a 7-day cruise, carrying 206 passengers and 75 crewmembers. The junior third mate, a newly licensed officer, was on his first navigation watch when the vessel struck the rock, known as Rocky Island, which was illuminated by a flashing green navigation light. The U.S. Coast Guard and several good Samaritan vessels assisted in evacuating the passengers and nonessential crewmembers and safely transporting them back to Juneau. No injuries or pollution resulted from the accident. The vessel sustained \$4.8 million in damage.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the grounding of the *Empress of the North* was the failure of the officer of the watch and the helmsman to navigate the turn at Rocky Island, which resulted from the master's decision to

¹ For further information, see *Grounding of U.S. Passenger Vessel Empress of the North, Intersection of Lynn Canal and Icy Strait, Southeast Alaska, May 14, 2007*, Marine Accident Report NTSB/MAR-08/02 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2008). The report is available on the Safety Board's website at <http://www.nts.gov/publictn/2008/MAR0802.pdf>.

assign to the midnight-to-0400 watch an inexperienced, newly licensed deck officer who was not familiar with the route, the vessel's handling characteristics, or the equipment on the vessel's bridge.

The day before the accident, the senior third mate on the *Empress of the North* fell ill. As a consequence, the master assigned the newly arrived junior third mate to the midnight-to-0400 watch on May 14. The junior third mate had joined the company on May 12 and had graduated from California Maritime Academy less than 3 weeks before. He held an unlimited, any-ocean third mate's license but had never before stood an underway watch on the vessel or traveled the waters of Lynn Canal.

The junior third mate told investigators that he was unfamiliar with the bridge equipment and the bridge procedures. Neither the master nor the chief mate had reviewed the route with him, discussed the steering modes (manual or autopilot), or familiarized him with critical bridge components such as the radar. The route contained at least one potential hazard (Rocky Island) and at least one critical decision for the watch officer (selecting the route from Lynn Canal into Icy Strait). The junior third mate lacked any knowledge of the route and should not have been left to make this critical decision on his own. However, as a trained and licensed officer, the junior third mate was not without knowledge of ships or of how a navigation watch should be conducted. He told investigators that he understood that he was on the bridge because he had a license and that the helmsman "would be in control of the boat." Those circumstances did not free him from his responsibility to safely navigate the *Empress of the North*.

As a licensed officer, the junior third mate was duty-bound to make certain that he understood his watch duties. He had about 12 hours' notice before the watch began. On his own, he could have used some of that time to acquaint himself with the navigation equipment and become thoroughly familiar with the chart and the geographical area he would be transiting, including lights, prominent points, and currents. For example, he might have consulted the *Coast Pilot* and discovered its warning about the inadvisability, because of erratic currents, of taking the route from Lynn Canal into Icy Strait that passed between land (Point Couverden) and Rocky Island.

Once he assumed the watch, the junior third mate had a duty to take charge of the bridge. Instead, he allowed the helmsman to maneuver the vessel as he saw fit. Three minutes before the accident, the junior third mate gave his first indication of a maneuvering intention when he stated, "We'll pass inside of that," referring to the flashing green light on Rocky Island that he had just seen. (By "pass inside" he presumably meant pass between Rocky Island and Point Couverden.)

The Safety Board concluded that the junior third mate failed to understand and fulfill his responsibilities as a licensed officer on an underway navigation watch. Newly licensed third officers will often find themselves on a ship they have never sailed on, in an unfamiliar waterway they have never transited before, and in the company of a master and crew they have never served with before. These circumstances do not, however, absolve them of their responsibility to take charge as the officer of the watch when so assigned. Junior officers are also responsible for speaking up to their supervisors about any apprehension or uneasiness they might feel regarding their assigned duties. The junior third mate told investigators that he felt

“comfortable” about assuming the watch. His expressed confidence, despite his lack of knowledge about the route, the vessel, the bridge equipment, and the bridge routine, suggests that he did not fully appreciate his duties and responsibilities and what was required to fulfill them.

The Safety Board concluded that the accident did not result from deficiencies in the junior third mate’s maritime training. The Board believes, however, that maritime academy cadets would benefit from learning about the circumstances of the accident because it demonstrates that newly licensed officers can be placed in situations for which they are unprepared, and also that it is incumbent on all licensed officers to thoroughly understand what is expected of them and to assess their ability to perform a task before they undertake it. The Safety Board therefore recommends that your academy take the following action:

Teach your students the circumstances of this accident, including their responsibility as newly licensed officers to prepare themselves for assigned duties and to express their concerns if placed in situations for which they are unprepared.

(M-08-6)

As a result of its investigation of the *Empress of the North* accident, the Safety Board also issued recommendations to the six other U.S. maritime academies and to the Passenger Vessel Association. The Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days, addressing actions you have taken or intend to take to implement its recommendation. In your response, please refer to Safety Recommendation M-08-6. If you would like to submit your response electronically rather than in hard copy, you may send it to the following e-mail address: correspondence@ntsb.gov. If your response includes attachments that exceed 5 megabytes, please e-mail us asking for instructions on how to use our Tumbleweed secure mailbox procedures. To avoid confusion, please use only one method of submission (that is, do not submit both an electronic copy and a hard copy of the same response letter).

Acting Chairman ROSENKER and Members HERSMAN, HIGGINS, SUMWALT, and CHEALANDER concurred with this recommendation.

[Original Signed]

By: Mark V. Rosenker
Acting Chairman

**Grounding of U.S. Passenger Vessel *Empress of the North*, Intersection of Lynn Canal and
Icy Strait, Southeast Alaska, May 14, 2007**

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