



National Transportation Safety Board

Marine Accident Brief

Flooding of Towing Vessel *Alton St. Amant*

Accident type	Flooding	No. DCA20FM019
Vessel name	<i>Alton St. Amant</i>	
Location	Harvey Canal, New Orleans, Louisiana 29°54.05' N, 090°04.85' W	
Date	May 17, 2020	
Time	0530 central daylight time (coordinated universal time – 5 hours)	
Injuries	None	
Property damage	\$1.5 million est.	
Environmental damage	About 5 gallons of diesel fuel released and recovered	
Weather	Visibility 10 miles, mostly cloudy, winds 12 mph from south, air temperature 77°F, sunrise 0606	
Waterway information	The Harvey Canal is located on the west bank of the Lower Mississippi River in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. The canal, which is 125 feet wide and 12 feet deep, provides access to the Mississippi River and the Port of New Orleans.	

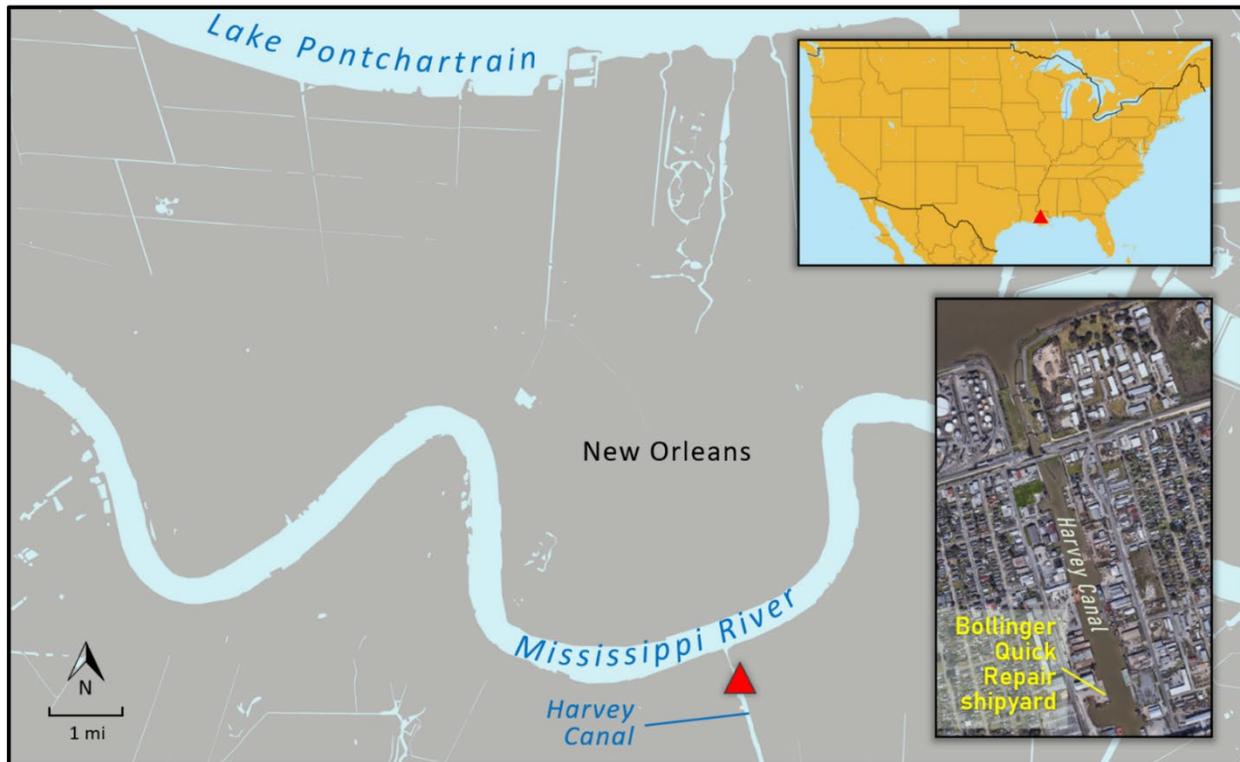
On May 17, 2020, about 0530 local time, a shipyard worker reported that the towing vessel *Alton St. Amant* was partially submerged while moored at a shipyard in the Harvey Canal in New Orleans, Louisiana.¹ There were no crewmembers or shipyard workers aboard the vessel. Approximately five gallons of diesel fuel were released into the water. Damage to the vessel was estimated at \$1.5 million. No injuries were reported.



Alton St. Amant under way before the accident. (Source: Blessey Marine Services)

¹ All miles in this report are statute miles.

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Map of area where the *Alton St. Amant* flooded, as indicated by the red triangle. (Background source: Google Maps)

Background

The *Alton St. Amant*, an 84-foot-long, twin-propeller towing vessel, was built in 2009 for Blessey Marine Services, Inc., which operated a fleet of inland vessels and tank barges. Blessey's fleet transported liquid bulk cargoes such as residual fuels, asphalt, lubricating oils, petroleum products, and liquified natural gas throughout the inland waterways of the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys, associated tributaries, and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

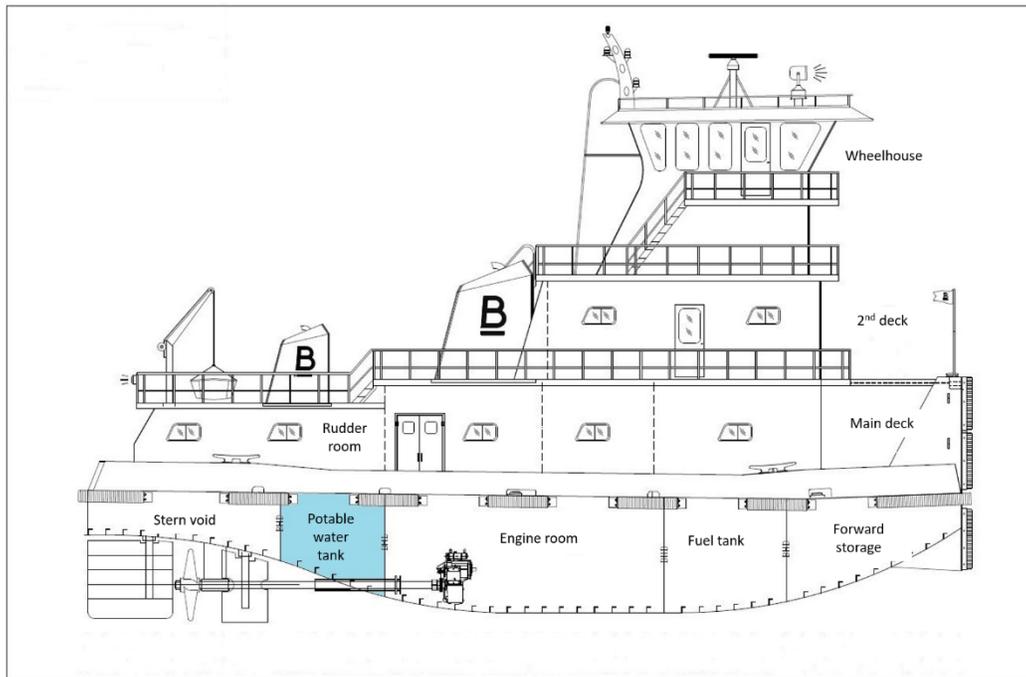
On April 1, the *Alton St. Amant* arrived at the Bollinger Quick Repair shipyard to be drydocked and to complete major maintenance that also included work to bring the vessel into compliance with towing vessel regulations (46 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Subchapter M). Maintenance items consisted of inspecting all the overboard fittings; blasting and painting the hull; replacing anodes; surveying and reconditioning, where necessary, all the running gear (propellers, shafts, bearings, etc.); and overhauling the bilge alarm system and associated pumps. Additionally, maintenance was scheduled on the main engines, generators, and gear sets, along with some small steel repairs. The vessel-monitoring and closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems were also to be upgraded.

During this maintenance period, there were no crewmembers aboard the vessel. A Blessey port engineer was assigned to the project and communicated directly with the shipyard project manager. Several shipyard workers and equipment specialists—such as welders, pipefitters, and painters—performed specific tasks aboard the vessel while it was in the shipyard. Upon completion of the maintenance, a sea trial was scheduled for May 18. The crew was expected to return to the *Alton St. Amant* the day after the sea trial.

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Accident Events

On May 9, after spending about 6 weeks at the Bollinger Quick Repair shipyard, the *Alton St. Amant* was shifted from drydock to a wet berth to complete outstanding maintenance items. Among the remaining work, two bilge pumps, which had been removed from the vessel for overhaul, were to be reinstalled; the sealing rings on several of the vessel's tank access hatches were to be replaced; and the sealing surfaces of the hatches were to be cleaned.



Simple profile of the *Alton St. Amant* (not to scale), with the potable water tank highlighted. (Source: Blessey Marine Services; annotated by NTSB)

On Friday, May 15, about 24,000 gallons of fuel were loaded onto the vessel. The flush hatches to the vessel's two potable water tanks located on the main deck in the rudder room had been opened for maintenance, but the covers were not reinstalled at the end of the day. That same day, the port engineer requested that the shipyard workers fill the two potable water tanks. A pipefitter, who had worked for Bollinger Quick Repair about 8 years, returned to the shipyard the following morning, on Saturday, May 16, and began reinstalling the bilge pumps with three other shipyard workers about 0500. About 1000, after completing the pump installation, he started filling the potable water tanks from a shoreside water manifold that was connected to the vessel's potable water fill pipe via a 2-inch hose through the open exterior engine room doors. He opened the supply (fill) valve at the shoreside manifold, and began filling the two tanks, which had a combined capacity of 13,233 gallons. Unaware that the potable water tank access hatches were open in the rudder room, he left the shipyard about 1030 with plans to return the next day. He intended to fill the tanks and then allow them to overflow onto the exterior main deck through their vents to flush out any residual debris inside before turning off the water supply.

Throughout the remainder of the day and throughout the night, the two potable water tanks continued to fill with fresh water on the unmanned *Alton St. Amant*. After the pipefitter left, no other shipyard workers boarded the vessel to check the water tank levels. About 0630 on Sunday,

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May 17, a shipyard worker walking past the *Alton St. Amant* noticed that the vessel was sitting low in the water and called the shipyard general manager.



Alton St. Amant, partially submerged, on the morning of May 18. (Source: Coast Guard)

Upon arrival, the general manager found the *Alton St. Amant* partially submerged and resting on the bottom of the canal alongside the pier. The engine room was flooded, and the main deck was partially submerged. The US Coast Guard, Blessey personnel, and a local salvage company were notified. While observing the *Alton St. Amant*, the general manager noticed the potable water hose connected to the vessel was charged; he then closed the potable water supply valve on the pier manifold.

Pollution mitigation and recovery efforts began that morning. By 1630, the *Alton St. Amant* was lifted by crane from the bottom of the canal and refloated. No hull damage was found when the vessel was inspected. When the *Alton St. Amant* was then shifted to the drydock and placed on blocks by 2100, shipyard and Blessey personnel walked around the vessel and found that no water was leaking or seeping from the hull in the areas of the flooded spaces. The following morning, shipyard workers who were disconnecting electrical power cables from the recovered vessel found the potable water hose still connected to the fill pipe on the *Alton*

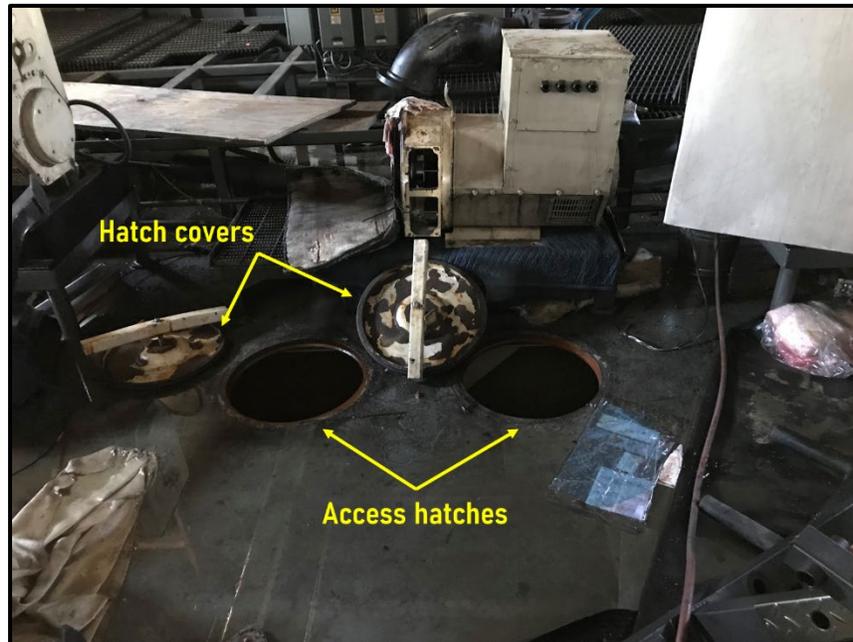
St. Amant. They also discovered that the access hatches for the potable water tanks in the rudder room were open.

The pipefitter told investigators after the accident he was unaware that the access hatches were open. Although a pre-work safety meeting was conducted each day, the status of these hatches was not communicated to the pipefitter.

Additional Information

After the sinking of the *Alton St. Amant*, Bollinger Quick Repair conducted an internal investigation and implemented procedures for conducting water transfers. These procedures were intended to ensure communication reached the shipyard's management and staff; project managers obtained approval from the facility superintendent; and a pre-inspection of tanks, valves, piping, and other components of the vessel's water system be conducted. Additionally, water transfers were to be monitored for the duration of the filling process.

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Open access hatches and their covers for the two potable water tanks in the rudder room. (Source: Coast Guard)

Analysis

After shipyard managers reported to the shipyard on the morning of the sinking, the potable water supply valve at the manifold ashore was found in the open position. Later that day, during the post-salvage inspection of the *Alton St. Amant*, the access hatches to the potable water tanks in the rudder room were found to be open and the 2-inch hose supplying water to the vessel was still connected to the vessel's fill pipe for these tanks. Fresh water had been filling the potable water tanks for over 20 hours.

The pipefitter was not aware of the open access hatches when he began filling the tanks. After he departed the vessel, no other persons came aboard to monitor the status of the tank levels, and there was no shipyard policy for monitoring the filling process. Having been filled for several hours, the potable water tanks reached capacity, resulting in an overflow through the open hatches in the rudder room (rather than the tank vents as planned). After the rudder room flooded, the water spilled over the open doorsill onto the main deck of the engine room and began flooding down into that space. With the bilge system inoperable due to planned maintenance during the shipyard period and no one aboard the vessel to monitor the water transfer, the potable water continued to fill the aft spaces undetected and submerged the vessel until it came to rest on the bottom of the canal.

Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the flooding of the towing vessel *Alton St. Amant* was the absence of shipyard pre-inspection and monitoring procedures for water transfer, which resulted in potable water tanks overflowing through their open access hatches during an unmonitored transfer.

Precautions for Tank Filling

Crew and shipyard personnel designated to conduct liquid transfers must be aware of the status of a vessel's tanks, including their access hatches and associated piping systems, whether ashore or at sea. When filling a tank, open access hatches create a risk of unintended flooding. Pre-inspection and monitoring of transfers provide the opportunity to identify and remedy any issues in order to ensure they are safely completed.

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Vessel Particulars

Vessel	<i>Alton St. Amant</i>
Owner/operator	The Big Five, LLC / Blessey Marine Services, Inc.
Port of registry	New Orleans, Louisiana
Flag	United States
Type	Towing vessel
Year built	2009
Official number (US)	1217650
IMO number	N/A
Classification society	N/A
Construction	Steel
Length	83.5 ft (25.4 m)
Beam/width	30 ft (9.1 m)
Draft	7 ft (2.1 m)
Tonnage	355 GRT
Engine power; manufacturer	2 x 1,000 hp (1,494 kW); Cummins KTA38-MO diesel engines
Persons on board	0

NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from Coast Guard Sector New Orleans, Louisiana, throughout this investigation.

For more details about this accident, visit www.nts.gov and search for NTSB accident ID DCA20FM019.

Issued: March 11, 2021

The NTSB has authority to investigate and establish the probable cause of any major marine casualty or any marine casualty involving both public and nonpublic vessels under Title 49 *United States Code*, Section 1131(b)(1). This report is based on factual information either gathered by NTSB investigators or provided by the Coast Guard from its informal investigation of the accident.

The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for a marine casualty; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, “[NTSB] investigations are fact-finding proceedings with no formal issues and no adverse parties . . . and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights or liabilities of any person.” Title 49 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Section 831.4.

Assignment of fault or legal liability is not relevant to the NTSB’s statutory mission to improve transportation safety by conducting investigations and issuing safety recommendations. In addition, statutory language prohibits the admission into evidence or use of any part of an NTSB report related to an accident in a civil action for damages resulting from a matter mentioned in the report. Title 49 *United States Code*, Section 1154(b).