

December 9, 2025

MIR-25-43

## Contact of Towing Vessel *William E Strait* with Moored Barges at Shell Norco Refinery Dock

On December 10, 2023, about 0139 local time, the *William E Strait* tow was pushed in to the bank on the Lower Mississippi River near Norco, Louisiana, when the towing vessel *Steel Skipper*, which was reconfiguring the tow, pushed the tow astern, and the *William E Strait* contacted two moored barges upstream at the Shell Norco Refinery dock, damaging the barges and dock (see figure 1 and figure 2).<sup>1</sup> There were no injuries, and no pollution was reported. Damage to the moored barges and facility was estimated at \$501,000.



**Figure 1.** *William E Strait* underway at unknown date before the casualty. (Source: Jeff L. Yates)

---

<sup>1</sup> (a) In this report, all times are central standard time, and all miles are statute miles. (b) Visit [nts.gov](https://www.nts.gov) to find additional information in the [public docket](#) for this NTSB investigation (case no. DCA24FM012). Use the [CAROL Query](#) to search investigations.

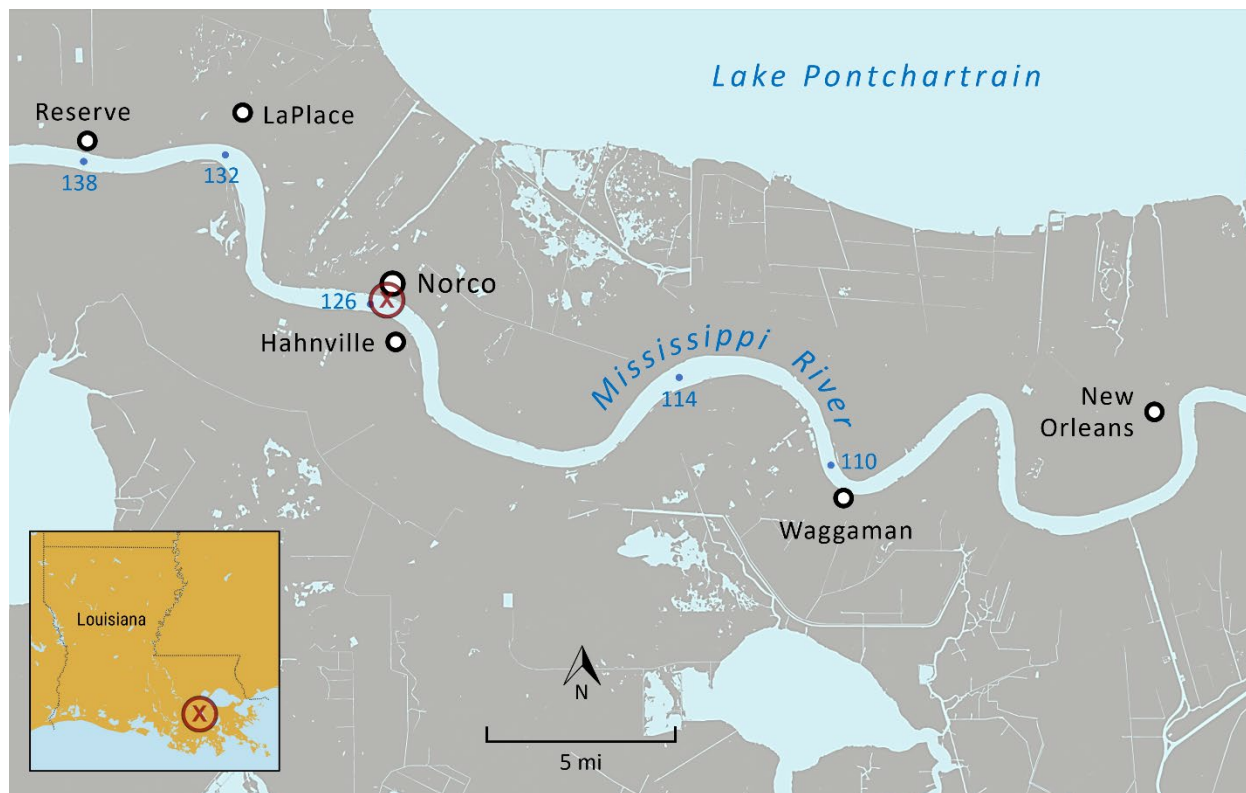
---

## Casualty Summary

---

<b>NTSB casualty category</b>	Contact
<b>Location</b>	Lower Mississippi River, mile 126, Norco, Louisiana 29°59.82' N, 090°25.45' W
<b>Date</b>	December 10, 2023
<b>Time</b>	0139 central standard time (coordinated universal time -6 hrs)
<b>Persons on board</b>	9 ( <i>William E Strait</i> ), 3 ( <i>Steel Skipper</i> )
<b>Injuries</b>	None
<b>Property damage</b>	\$501,000 (facility \$500,000; barges \$1,000)
<b>Environmental damage</b>	None
<b>Weather</b>	Visibility 100 ft, rain and dense fog, winds south 15 mph, gusts 30 mph
<b>Waterway information</b>	River, width 0.5 mi, depth 9 ft

---



**Figure 2.** Area where the *William E Strait* contacted the *Cajun Courage*, CDB02, and the Shell Norco Refinery dock, as indicated by a circled X. (Background source: Google Maps)

---

## 1 Factual Information

The 184-foot-long *William E Strait* was built in 1955 by Dravo Corporation of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The towing vessel was operated by Western Rivers Boat Management LLC in the line haul service. The vessel had two propellers, each driven by a 3,600-hp diesel engine. The *William E Strait* operated under the operating company's towing safety management system and had a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection documenting compliance with Title 46 *Code of Federal Regulations* Subchapter M.

On November 30, 2023, the *William E Strait*, with a crew of nine, got underway southbound on the Lower Mississippi River, from mile 953 at Cairo, Illinois. Over the next 9 days, the crew picked up and dropped off barges at various locations while en route to the Gnats fleeting area at mile 118 in St. Rose, Louisiana.

On the night of December 9, about 2350, the tow arrived at mile 126.8 and pushed in along the left descending bank to drop off barges, just downriver of the Shell Norco Refinery in Norco, Louisiana. At the time, the vessel was pushing 19 barges, configured in five strings of four barges each, with a notch (an empty spot) on the starboard string at the head.

The unmanned 192-foot-long crane barge *Cajun Courage* and 195-foot-long deck barge *CDB02* were moored at the nearby Shell Norco Refinery dock no. 3.<sup>2</sup> The barges were lit by a spotlight from the dock.

A cold front with gale force winds was forecasted to impact the area overnight on December 9, and the area experienced rain, thunderstorms, and southerly 15 mph winds during the fleeting operations, with gusts up to 30 mph. A dense fog advisory was in effect, and the *William E Strait* mate told investigators that they experienced "almost shut out visibility."

The fleeting tug *Steel Skipper* was tasked with moving three barges from the *William E Strait* tow across the river from the Shell Norco Refinery dock to the Upper St. Rose fleeting area near mile 126 on the right descending bank.<sup>3</sup> The *Steel Skipper* operated with a crew of three—a captain and two deckhands. The *Steel Skipper* and *William E Strait* captains had agreed by radio that the *Steel Skipper* would take the

---

<sup>2</sup> Cajun Industries LLC owned and operated the crane barge, which was built in 2010, and the deck barge, built in 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The 68-foot-long fleeting towing vessel *Steel Skipper* was built in 2021 in Bayou La Batre, Alabama.


three barges in two trips across the river to the Upper St. Rose fleeting area. Operations began at 0100, with the *Steel Skipper* taking one barge on the first trip, then the remaining two barges on the next trip (see figure 3).

#### Arrival at mile 126



BIG606	BIG798B	JIMBO332B	BIG160
BIG631	SCF26135	BIG790B	BIG562
BIG109	RTI422B	RTI507B	RTI409B
BIG635	NBI9618B	RTI401B	BIG2010B
RTI474	BIG808B	RTI517B	

#### Departure from mile 126



BIG606	BIG798B	JIMBO332B	BIG160
BIG631	SCF26135	BIG790B	BIG562
BIG109	RTI422B	BIG808B	RTI474
BIG635	NBI9618B	RTI401B	BIG2010B

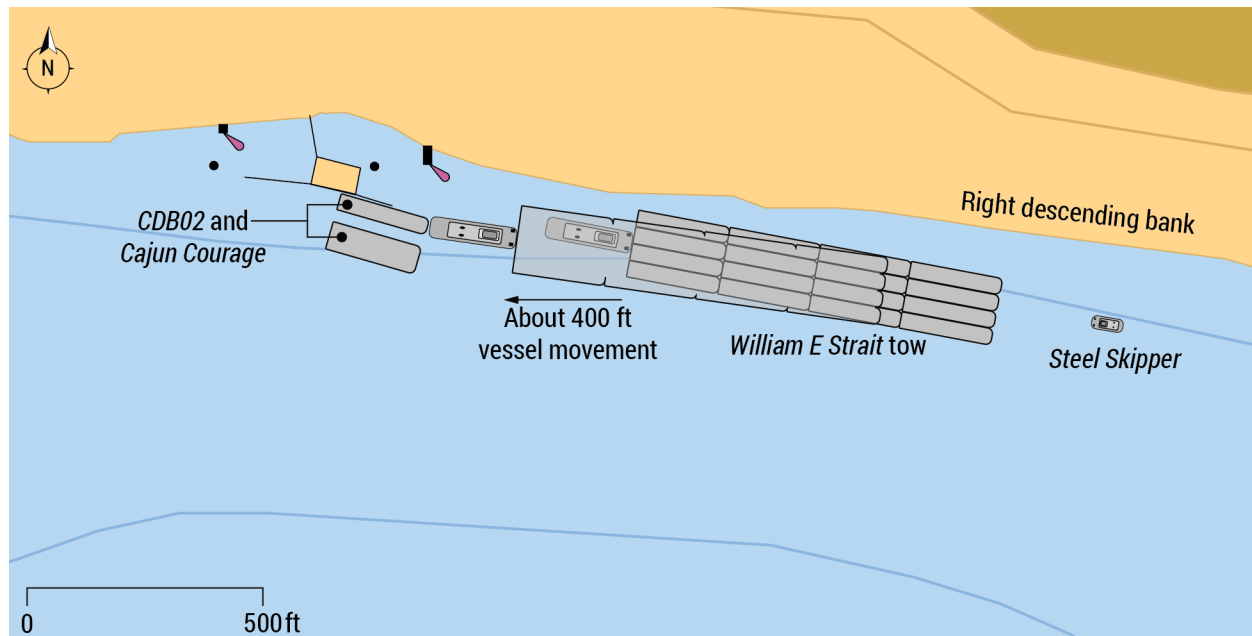
● Removed to Upper St. Rose fleeting area    ● Repositioned

**Figure 3.** *William E Strait* towing arrangement on arrival and departure from mile 126.  
(Background source: *William E Strait* mate)

Once the transfer of the 3 barges to the Upper St. Rose fleeting area was completed, the *Steel Skipper* began to reposition the remaining two barges in the starboard string to the newly created space in the center string (from the barges moved to the Upper St. Rose fleeting area) to create four strings of four barges each for the next leg of *William E Strait*'s voyage. The mate of the *William E Strait* said that, about 0210, he felt the vessel begin to move astern in the direction of the Shell Norco Refinery dock as the fleeting tug moved the last two barges into position at the head of the tow. The *William E Strait*'s engines were not engaged. The *Steel Skipper* finished its work about 0215, and, with the weather clearing, the mate then noticed "extra equipment tied off to [the] Shell dock. It appeared to be a barge that wasn't lit well but a bit below [the] dock." He walked to the stern to check that the towboat was clear. The mate got the *William E Strait* underway about 0300 and began heading downbound with 16 barges for the Gnats fleeting area at mile 118.

A few days later, the Shell Norco Refinery discovered damage to the no. 3 dock and to the two barges moored there. A Shell Norco Refinery boat lift was also damaged. Damages were estimated at \$1,000 for the *Cajun Courage* and CDB02 and \$500,000 for the facility.

Using automatic identification system and vessel traffic service data, investigators found that, at the time the last two barges were pushed into place by the *Steel Skipper*, the *William E Strait* moved astern about 400 feet toward the moored crane and deck barges at the Shell Norco Refinery dock (see figure 4).



**Figure 4.** *William E Strait* astern movement toward moored barges on December 10.  
(Background source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration electronic navigation chart US5LA52M as viewed on Rosepoint)

---

## 2 Analysis

Early on the morning of December 10, in darkness, the towing vessel *William E Strait* was pushing 19 barges and stopped downstream of the Shell Norco Refinery no. 3 dock on the Lower Mississippi River to drop off three barges at a fleeting area across the river on the right descending bank near mile 126. While the fleeting tug *Steel Skipper* was repositioning barges, the vessel pushed the *William E Strait* tow astern, and the stern of the *William E Strait* contacted two moored barges at the dock about 400 feet upriver. The two barges were pushed into the dock, damaging it.

According to the mate, the two moored barges did not have deck or running lights and were only lit by a spotlight from the dock. Additionally, a dense fog advisory was in effect at the time, which the mate said reduced visibility. Because of the reduced visibility, the mate, who was on the bridge at the time, did not recognize that his vessel was in danger of contacting the moored barges and dock aft of the tow, and therefore did not use his engines to attempt to avoid them.

## 3 Conclusions

### 3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the contact of the towing vessel *William E Strait* with moored barges at the Shell Norco Refinery dock was the *William E Strait* mate not recognizing the proximity of the unlit barges astern of his towboat as the vessel was pushed astern by an assisting fleeting tug while repositioning barges. Contributing was the dense fog and rain, which obscured visibility during the operation.



## Vessel Particulars

Vessel	<i>William E Strait</i>	<i>Steel Skipper</i>	<i>Cajun Courage</i>	<i>CDB02</i>
<b>NTSB vessel group</b>	Towing/Barge (Towing vessel)	Towing/Barge (Towing vessel)	Towing/Barge (Crane barge)	Towing/Barge (Deck barge)
<b>Owner/operator</b>	Smithland Towing & Construction LLC / Western Rivers Boat Management Inc. (Commercial)	Commerce Bank / Plimsoll Marine, Inc. (Commercial)	Cajun Industries LLC (Commercial)	Cajun Industries LLC (Commercial)
<b>Flag</b>	United States	United States	United States	United States
<b>Port of registry</b>	Paducah, Kentucky	New Orleans, Louisiana	N/A	N/A
<b>Year built</b>	1955	2021	2010	2021
<b>Official number</b>	270550 (US)	1302251 (US)	1228907 (US)	1312778 (US)
<b>IMO number</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Classification society</b>	Inland Towing Operators (Third-party organization)	American Bureau of Shipping	N/A	N/A
<b>Length (overall)</b>	184.4 ft (56.2 m)	67.5 ft (20.6 m)	192.0 ft (58.5 m)	195.0 (59.4 m)
<b>Breadth (max.)</b>	45.0 ft (13.7m)	28.0 ft (8.5 m)	60.0 ft (18.3 m)	35.0 ft (10.7 m)
<b>Draft (casualty)</b>	11.7 ft (3.6 m)	9.5 ft (2.9 m)	N/A	N/A
<b>Tonnage</b>	1,103 GRT	120 GRT	1,063 GRT	601 GRT
<b>Engine power; manufacturer</b>	2 x 3,600 hp (2,685 kW); 20-645 E7B EMD diesel engines	2 x 803 hp (599 kW); Mitsubishi 803 diesel engines	N/A	N/A

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

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable cause of the accidents and events we investigate, and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for any accident or event investigated by the agency. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.



The NTSB does not assign fault or blame for an accident or incident; rather, as specified by NTSB regulation, "accident/incident 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 investigating accidents and incidents 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)).

For more detailed background information on this report, visit the [NTSB Case Analysis and Reporting Online \(CAROL\) website](#) and search for NTSB accident ID DCA24FM012. Recent publications are available in their entirety on the [NTSB website](#). Other information about available publications also may be obtained from the website or by contacting—

National Transportation Safety Board  
Records Management Division, CIO-40  
490 L'Enfant Plaza, SW  
Washington, DC 20594  
(800) 877-6799 or (202) 314-6551