AVIATION HIGHWAY MARINE RAILROAD PIPELINE

April 22, 2026 MIR-26-13

Collision between Towing Vessel *Patrick J Studdert* and Bulk Carrier *Clara B* and Subsequent Sinking of *Patrick J Studdert*

On December 29, 2024, about 1934 local time, the towing vessel *Patrick J Studdert* and bulk carrier *Clara B* collided while underway on the Lower Mississippi River at mile 122, near Luling, Louisiana (see figure 1 and figure 2).[1] The *Patrick J Studdert* sank, forcing all five crewmembers to abandon the vessel into the water. A sheen of diesel fuel was visible downriver. The crew of the *Patrick J Studdert* were rescued by a nearby vessel; four crewmembers sustained minor injuries. The *Patrick J Studdert* was considered a total constructive loss valued at over $2.3 million. The *Clara B* sustained minor damage to its hull, estimated at $250,000 to repair.

Figure 1. *Patrick J Studdert* underway at unknown date. (Source: shamrockmarinellc.com)

[1] (a) In this report, all times are central standard time, and all miles are statute miles. (b) Visit ntsb.gov to find additional information in the public docket for this NTSB investigation (case no. DCA25FM012). Use the CAROL Query to search investigations.

Casualty Summary	
Casualty type	Collision
Location	Lower Mississippi River, mile 122, near Luling, Louisiana 29°56.79'N, 090°22.99' W
Date	December 29, 2024
Time	1934 central standard time (coordinated universal time –6 hrs)
Persons on board	5 (*Patrick J Studdert*), 22 (*Clara B*)
Injuries	4 minor
Property damage	$2.55 million est.
Environmental damage	Visible oil sheen on the water
Weather	Visibility 10 mi, clear, calm winds, air temperature 57°F, water temperature 51°F, sunset 1709, evening twilight 1723
Waterway information	River; depth 94 ft at casualty site

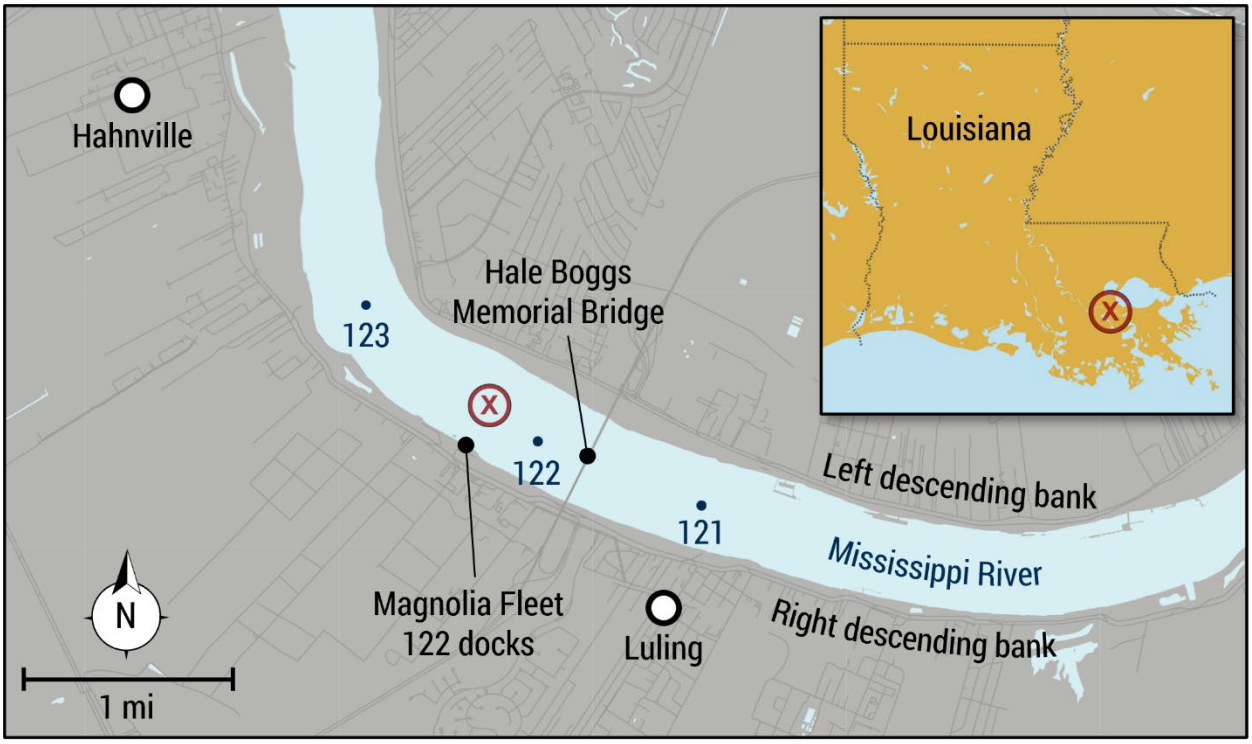

Figure 2. Area where the *Patrick J Studdert* and *Clara B* collided, as indicated by a circled *X*. (Background source: Google Maps)

1 Factual Information

1.1 Background

The 84-foot-long, steel-hulled towing vessel *Patrick J Studdert* was constructed in 2011, owned by Shamrock Marine, and operated by Buffalo Marine Service, Inc. The *Patrick J Studdert* was typically operated in a line-haul service between Houston, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. Vessel propulsion was provided by two 1,000-hp Cummins KTA38 diesel engines, each driving a fixed-pitch propeller through a reduction gear. Blade-type rudders located behind each propeller, as well as flanking rudders forward of the propellers, provided steering. The vessel had five decks: (from bottom to top) the below-deck area, main deck, second deck, third deck, and wheelhouse. The *Patrick J Studdert* operated under its company's towing safety management system (TSMS) and had a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection documenting compliance with Title 46 *Code of Federal Regulations* Subchapter M.

The 738-foot-long, steel-hulled bulk cargo vessel *Clara B* was constructed in 2004, owned by My Shipholding Ltd, and operated by Blumenthal Asia Pte Ltd (see figure 3). The vessel had a single rudder and a single right-hand-turning propellor directly driven by a Kawasaki Heavy Industries slow-speed diesel main engine rated at 12,670 hp.

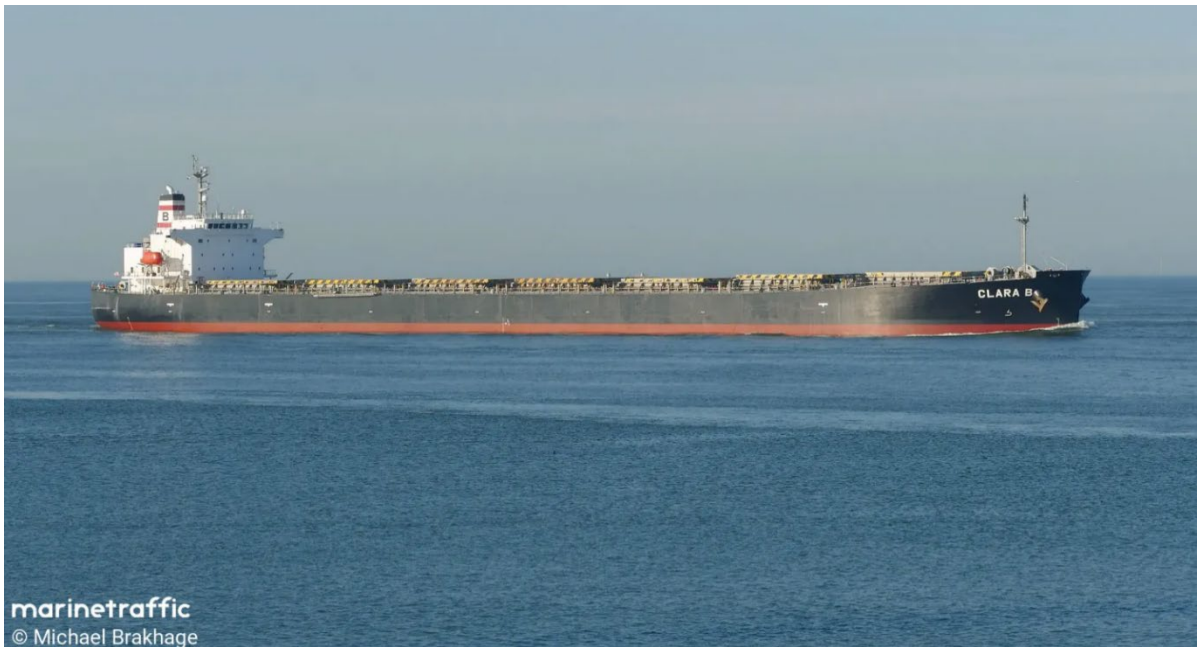

Figure 3. *Clara B* underway on October 25, 2024. (Source: Michael Brakhage, marinetraffic.com)

1.2 Event Sequence

On December 29, 2024, about 1810, the *Patrick J Studdert* was moored at Magnolia Fleet 122 docks, located near mile 122 on the right descending bank of the Lower Mississippi River, northwest of Luling, Louisiana. The vessel was moored port side to the dock, with its bow pointed upriver, and was taking on fuel. A towing vessel, the *Mary Moran,* was also moored at the dock, one berth upriver. There were five crewmembers on board the *Patrick J Studdert*—a captain, pilot, two tankermen, and a deckhand.

Shortly before mooring at the dock, the crew had moored the barges that made up their tow at a fleeting area on the left descending bank, about 2,100 feet upriver. While the vessel was taking on fuel at the Magnolia Fleet 122 docks, the crew prepared to get underway to return to their moored barges at the fleeting area across the river. There, they would await orders from the operating company regarding where to take the barges.

About 1929, the bulk carrier *Clara B* was transiting upriver—in darkness—and passed under the Hale Boggs Memorial Bridge (Luling Bridge), located about 0.8 miles downriver from the Magnolia Fleet 122 docks, at a speed of 8.1 knots. A New Orleans-Baton Rouge Steamship Pilot Association (NOBRA) pilot was aboard and had the conn, along with a pilot-in-training. The chief officer of the *Clara B* was the Officer in Charge of the Navigational Watch during the transit.

As the vessel transited upriver, the NOBRA pilot made passing arrangements via VHF radio with the operator of the *Bold Venture*, a downbound towing vessel pushing barges with an overall length of 820 feet. They agreed to a starboard-to-starboard passing near mile 122, between the Luling Bridge and the Magnolia Fleet 122 docks (see figure 4).

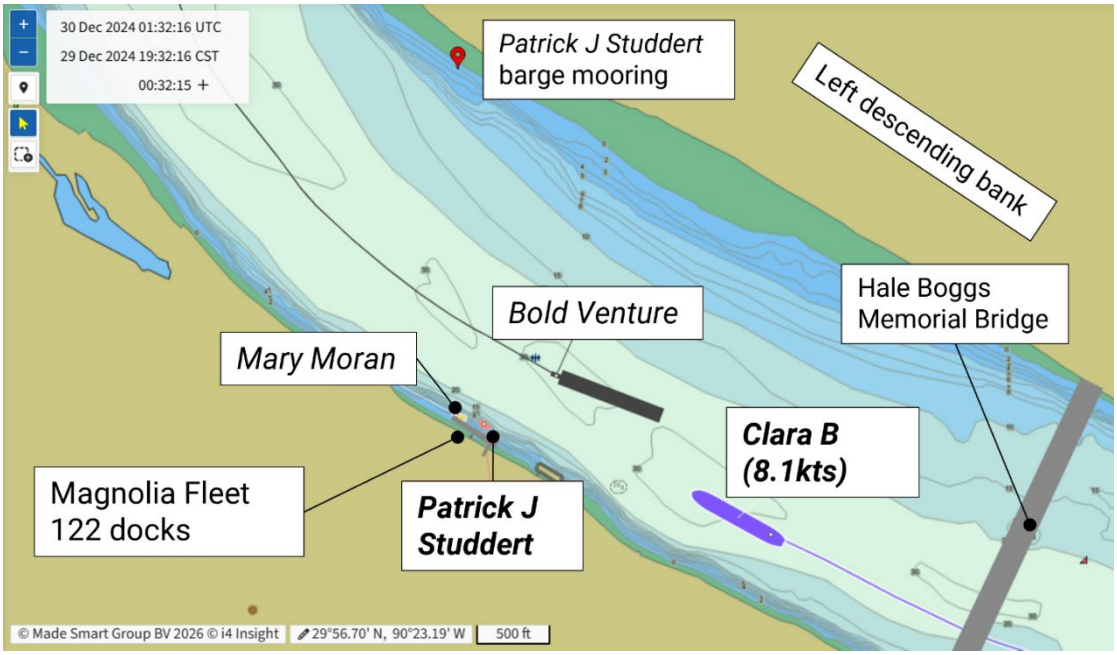

Figure 4. *Clara B* shown passing *Bold Venture* tow near Magnolia Fleet 122 docks as the *Patrick J Studdert* gets underway. (Background source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration electronic navigation chart US5LU8AG, as viewed on Made Smart)

As the downbound *Bold Venture* tow passed the Magnolia Fleet 122 docks, the on-watch tankerman and deckhand of the *Patrick J Studdert* took in the lines, and at 1932:03, the vessel got underway with the captain at the helm in the wheelhouse. (The off-watch tankerman was in the galley on the main deck. The pilot was in his sleeping quarters on the second deck.) The tankerman and deckhand then congregated on the second deck exterior walkway, forward on the vessel.

According to the captain, the *Patrick J Studdert* had two VHF radios: One was monitoring channel 67, used for general traffic in the area, and the other was on channel 82, used to communicate with the vessel's deck crew for unmooring. The captain also told investigators that he checked the radar while getting underway.

The captain stated that he was aware of the upbound *Clara B* and had planned to loiter above the fuel dock until the *Clara B* passed clear and then cross the river to give the ship extra room. However, when investigators reviewed automatic identification system data from the *Patrick J Studdert,* it showed that the vessel proceeded directly across the channel toward the fleeting area immediately after getting underway.

About 1933, the *Clara B* maneuvered toward the right descending side of the channel as it passed the *Bold Venture tow*. Based on audio from the *Clara B*'s voyage data recorder, the NOBRA pilot aboard the *Clara B* saw the *Patrick J Studdert*

underway about 1933:32. About 1933:38, he attempted to hail the *Patrick J Studdert* over VHF channel 67 but did not receive a response.

About 1933:45, the pilot on the *Clara B*, recognizing the danger of collision, requested the bridge crew sound the danger signal on the ship's whistle and repeated his request several times with increasing urgency. The pilot also ordered the rudder to starboard 20°. The pilot again attempted to hail the *Patrick J Studdert* over VHF radio but did not receive a response.

About 1934:18, 32 seconds after the pilot's initial request to sound the *Clara B*'s whistle, the chief officer sounded one short blast, followed by a continuous blast of the ship's whistle. (The captain of the *Patrick J Studdert* told investigators that he was unsure when or whether he heard the *Clara B*'s whistle.) The pilot ordered the ship to stop engines and hard port rudder. However, about 1934:27, the bow of the *Clara B* struck the starboard quarter of the *Patrick J Studdert*, about 380 feet away from the docks (see figure 5). The *Patrick J Studdert*'s hull and pilothouse impacted the bow of the *Clara B* before passing down the starboard side of the ship. The pilot of the *Clara B* called out on VHF radio to request assistance from any nearby vessels for the *Patrick J Studdert* while the *Clara B* continued upriver, unable to stop and turn around in the narrow channel.

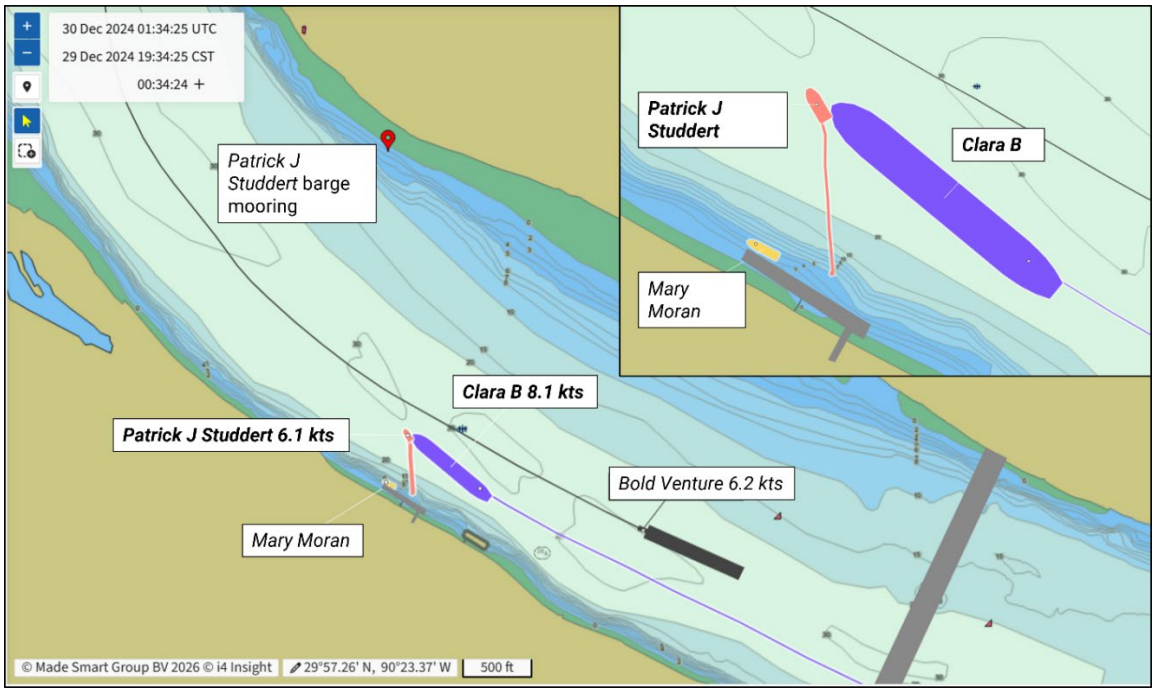

Figure 5. *Clara B* and *Patrick J Studdert* at the time of collision, 380 feet away from the docks. The *Patrick J Studdert*'s path is shown leading directly toward its mooring destination. (Background source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration electronic navigation chart US5LU8AG, as viewed on Made Smart)

Immediately following the collision, the *Patrick J Studdert* stopped, listed toward the port quarter, and began to flood. The off-duty tankerman, in the galley at the time, attempted to exit from the forward door on the main deck. He stated he saw "water pouring through on the hinge side" of the door and turned around. He reached an office room on the starboard side when the boat "rolled real hard" to port. As water began to flood the office, a personal flotation device (PFD) floated up next to him, and he grabbed it. He was able to escape by breaking a sliding window in the office and climbing out onto the starboard side.

The on-duty tankerman went inside to alert the pilot, who had been asleep in his room. The pilot had awoken as a result of the collision, and he and the on-duty tankerman were able to escape from inside the sinking vessel. Once on deck, the off-duty tankerman and the pilot donned type-V PFDs.[2] The on-duty tankerman and deckhand were already wearing type-V PFDs as required by the company and regulations for working on deck. The captain was able to exit through the starboard-side pilothouse door while the deckhand remained outside.

The *Mary Moran* captain and a deckhand were in the tug's pilothouse and observed the collision. The *Mary Moran* got underway about 3 minutes after the collision, at 1937, to provide assistance. Soon afterward, the *Patrick J Studdert* sank in about 96 feet of water, and the crew entered the water.

Four of the *Patrick J Studdert* crewmembers were wearing PFDs; the captain entered the water without a PFD but was able to swim to a life ring, which had floated off the sinking vessel. The *Mary Moran* crew rescued all five crewmembers from the water using a "MateSaver" recovery pole. The device allowed them to position the crewmembers of the *Patrick J Studdert* toward the stern before recovering them over the side of the tug. The *Mary Moran* returned the *Patrick J Studdert* crewmembers back to Magnolia Fleet 122 docks about 1952. The *Patrick J Studdert* sank, and there was a visible oil sheen downriver (about 29,000 gallons of fuel were on board at the time of the casualty).

[2] A Type V PFD, also called a "Special Use Device," can be constructed of buoyant foam or contain an inflatable device.

1.3 Additional Information

1.3.1 Damage

About 11 days after the vessel sank, it was salvaged. Salvors opened the vessel's doors to assess the damage (they did not keep track of whether the doors were found opened or closed).

In addition to water damage, the vessel suffered structural damage to the upper decks and pilothouse (see figure 6). Salvors found no signs of a hull breach below the waterline. The vessel was considered a constructive total loss valued at $2.3 million. Because the vessel sank, investigators could not confirm the channel settings or volume levels of the radios, nor the status of the radar.

The *Clara B* sustained minor damage on the stem and starboard side of the hull, estimated to cost $250,000.

Figure 6. *Clockwise from top left*: Damage to the *Patrick J Studdert* on the starboard quarter, where the initial contact occurred, and deformed metal of the pilothouse. Damage (*circled*) to the *Clara B*'s starboard bow and stem. (Background source: Coast Guard)

1.3.2 Cell Phone Use

The operating company's TSMS cell phone policy allowed crewmembers to use a personal cell phone if it did not impede or distract from the safe navigation of the towing vessel. During interviews, the captain stated that he did not use a cell phone while the tow was underway after leaving the dock. Cell phone records indicated that the captain of the *Patrick J Studdert* made a voice call on his personal cell phone at 1931 and the call was terminated at 1935.

2 Analysis

On December 29, 2024, the towing vessel *Patrick J Studdert* was crossing the channel in lightboat condition, and the bulk cargo vessel *Clara B* was transiting upbound—in darkness—on the Lower Mississippi River near mile 122, when the two vessels collided. The *Patrick J Studdert* subsequently sank in the channel, and the five crewmembers entered the water before being rescued by a nearby tug.

The *Patrick J Studdert* was moored alongside the Magnolia Fleet 122 docks, facing upriver on the right descending bank, when the crew got the vessel underway for their short transit back to their barges in the fleeting area just upriver on the left descending bank. The captain stated that he was aware of the *Clara B*'s position as it transited upbound and planned to wait for the bulk carrier to pass before crossing the river. However, given the orientation of the *Patrick J Studdert* and the captain's immediate field of view while facing upriver, the timing of the passing downbound *Bold Venture*, and the captain's direct course toward the fleeting area just after getting underway, it is likely the captain was unaware of the *Clara B*'s position when he got the *Patrick J Studdert* underway.

Although the captain stated he did not use his personal cell phone, phone records indicate he made an outgoing call beginning about 1931, just before getting underway at 1932. The call lasted until 1935, moments after the collision, meaning he was on the phone the entire time he was operating the vessel to transit across the river. The operating company's TSMS allowed crewmembers to use a personal cell phone if it did not distract from navigating. However, when an operator engages in non-navigational or secondary tasks, such as making a call on a cell phone, there is a risk that performance of the primary task will suffer or that the operator will become distracted from their primary task of navigation (which can persist even after the secondary task ends, in the form of cognitive distraction).

The *Clara B*'s lights were visible in the darkness, and the vessel could have been identified on radar. Despite having the tools to detect the upbound *Clara B*, the *Patrick J Studdert* captain got underway and maintained a consistent course that crossed into the path of the bulk carrier. Because the captain was distracted by personal cell phone use while operating the *Patrick J Studdert*, he was not maintaining a proper lookout and, therefore, lacked situational awareness of the imminent risk of collision with the *Clara B*. The nonoperational use of cell phones while operating a vessel is a distraction from a mariner's primary duties and has been cited numerous times as a causal factor to major marine accidents in NTSB reports.

Adding to the captain's lack of situational awareness may have been complacency, which occurs when operators repeatedly complete a task without consequence, desensitizing them to its inherent risk. As with any repetitive task, individuals become increasingly familiar and comfortable over time. The captain planned to transit the vessel across the river about half a mile away—a short trip that he had completed previously after initially dropping off the barges at a fleeting area. A transit of such a short distance, within eyesight, may have seemed routine and likely contributed to the captain's complacency in not using all available means to check for vessel traffic before navigating across the river.

The NOBRA pilot recognized the dangerous situation developing as the *Clara B* passed the *Bold Venture* tow about a minute before the collision and began hailing the *Patrick J Studdert* on VHF radio. However, the *Patrick J Studdert* captain did not respond. The towing vessel's captain told investigators that he was monitoring VHF radio while navigating but did not report hearing the NOBRA pilot hailing him. Investigators were unable to confirm the status of the *Patrick J Studdert*'s VHF radios. It is possible the captain did not auditorily perceive (hear and comprehend) the NOBRA pilot hailing him because he was distracted by his personal phone call. It is also possible the captain did not have the volume turned up or the radio tuned to the correct channel, having just used VHF radio to communicate with the deck crew while letting go of the lines.

When a mariner is in doubt about a vessel's erratic movements or an operator's intentions, they should sound blasts of the whistle to signal uncertainty. When the NOBRA pilot did not receive a response from the *Patrick J Studdert* captain over VHF or see a change in the vessel's course or speed, he requested the ship's chief officer, sound the ship's whistle—just over 40 seconds before the collision. However, the chief officer did not immediately respond, and the ship's whistle did not sound until 32 seconds after the initial request, seconds before the impact, rendering it ineffective in alerting the towing vessel captain to the imminent collision. (The delay in response could have been due to a delayed understanding of the pilots' instructions by the foreign ship's officer.)

The collision caused the *Patrick J Studdert* to roll toward the vessel's port quarter. The vessel began to flood and sank within a few minutes of the collision. After the vessel was salvaged, there were no signs of a hull breach below the waterline, indicating the water ingress was through a non-watertight opening above the main deck. Crewmembers stated that all main deck doors were secured, though the doors were weathertight, so water may still have been able to enter the vessel slowly through the doors even if they were secured. On the main deck, there were multiple air intakes and exhaust vents. Once the vessel heeled substantially, water would have readily entered the hull through one or more of these openings.

3 Conclusions

3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the collision between the bulk carrier *Clara B* and towing vessel *Patrick J Studdert* and subsequent sinking of the *Patrick J Studdert* was the *Patrick J Studdert* captain's distraction due to his cell phone use, which resulted in him not maintaining a proper lookout and navigating the towing vessel directly into the path of the upbound *Clara B*.

3.2 Lessons Learned

Distraction Due to Personal Electronic Devices

Nonoperational use of cell phones and other personal electronic devices by on-duty crewmembers in safety-critical positions has been a factor in casualties and accidents in all transportation modes. Using cell phones and other personal electronic devices has been demonstrated to be visually, manually, and cognitively distracting. Nonoperational use of cell phones should never interfere with the primary task of a watchstander or a bridge team member to maintain a proper lookout.

Vessel Particulars

Vessel	*Patrick J Studdert*	*Clara B*
Type	Towing/Barge (Towing vessel)	Cargo, Dry Bulk (Bulk carrier)
Owner/Operator	Shamrock Marine / Buffalo Marine Service, Inc. (Commercial)	My Shipholding Ltd / Blumenthal Asia Pte Ltd (Commercial)
Flag	United States	Liberia
Port of registry	Houston, Texas	Monrovia, Liberia
Year built	2011	2006
Official number	1239042 (US)	N/A
IMO number	N/A	9304083
Classification society	N/A	Nippon Kaiji Kyokai
Length (overall)	83.5 ft (25.5m)	738.2 ft (225.0 m)
Breadth (max.)	32.3 (9.8 m)	106.0 ft (32.3 m)
Draft (casualty)	10.6 ft (3.2 m)	44.3 ft (13.5 m)
Tonnage	296 GRT (392 GT ITC)	40,424 GT ITC
Engine power; manufacturer	2 × 1,000 hp (746 kW); Cummins KTA38 diesel engines	12,670 hp (9,319 kW); Kawasaki Heavy Industries diesel engine

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