

July 14, 2026

MIR-26-21

Fire aboard Towing Vessel *William D*

On April 22, 2025, about 1750 local time, the towing vessel *William D* was pushing two barges near mile 20 of the Victoria Barge Canal, about 15 miles from Port Lavaca, Texas, with six crewmembers on board, when a fire broke out in the towboat's accommodation spaces (see figure 1 and figure 2).¹ Crewmembers attempted, but were unable, to extinguish the fire. All crewmembers evacuated the towboat to another vessel and were recovered by the US Coast Guard. The Coast Guard, Port Lavaca Fire Department, and two assist tugs responded to the scene, and the fire department extinguished the fire. There were no injuries, and no pollution was reported. The towing vessel was deemed a constructive total loss estimated at \$500,000.



Figure 1. The *William D* on an unknown date. (Source: Ralph Thomas, VesselFinder.com)

¹ (a) In this report, all times are central daylight 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. DCA25FM032).

Casualty Summary

NTSB casualty category	Fire/Explosion
Location	Victoria Barge Canal near mile 20, about 15 mi from Port Lavaca, Texas 28°33.08' N, 096°49.77' W
Date	April 22, 2025
Time	1750 central daylight time (coordinated universal time -5 hrs)
Persons on board	6 (<i>William D</i>)
Injuries	None
Property damage	\$500,000
Environmental damage	None
Weather	Visibility 10 mi, overcast, winds south-southeast 11 kts, air temperature 82°F, morning twilight 0545, sunrise 0642
Waterway information	Canal; width 320 ft, depth 15 ft

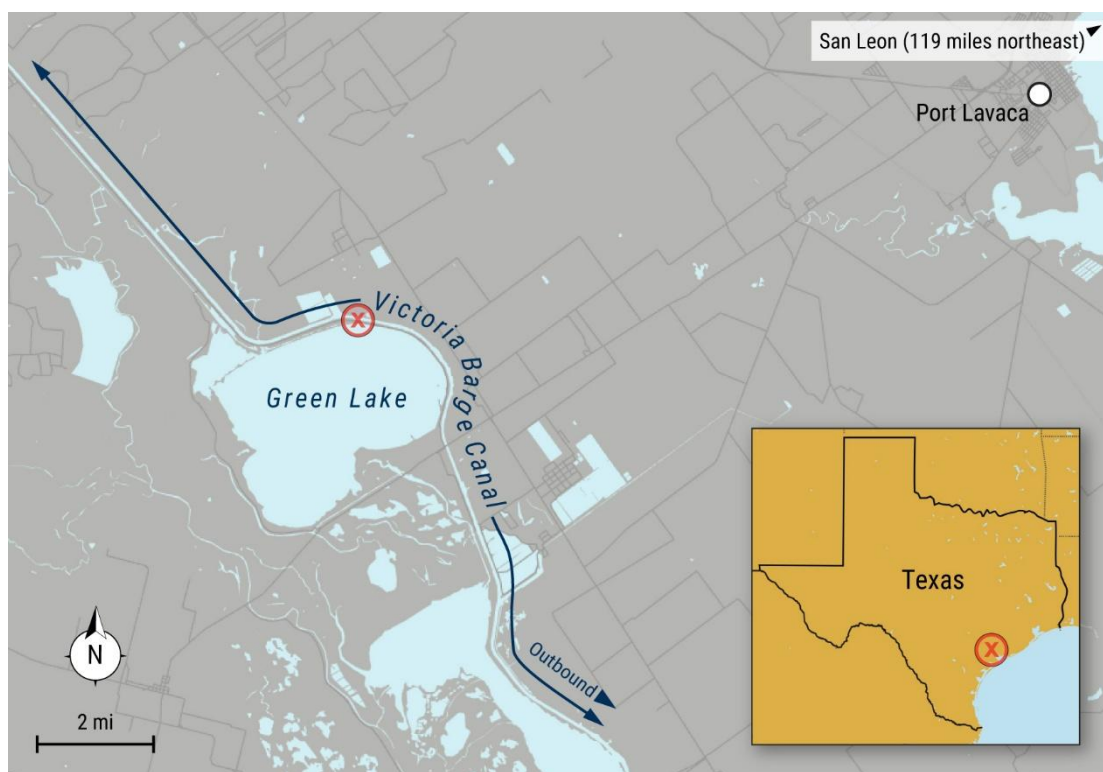


Figure 2. Area where the fire aboard the *William D* occurred, as indicated by a circled X. (Background source: Google Maps)

1 Factual Information

1.1 Background

The 95-foot-long towing vessel *William D* was constructed in 1957 of welded steel and was owned and operated by Pinnacle III LP. The operating company had a towing safety management system for the vessel approved by a third-party organization (Towing Vessel Inspection Bureau) and had a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection documenting compliance with Title 46 *Code of Federal Regulations* Subchapter M.

The vessel's main deck consisted of the galley, two bunkrooms (Bunkroom 1A on the port side and Bunkroom 1B on the starboard side), and the upper level of the engine room (see figure 3). Bunkrooms 1A and 1B each had an exit to an internal passageway and an exit to the external weather decks. A head was located on the main deck, and its entrance was in the internal passageway that connected Bunkrooms 1A and 1B. The lower level of the engine room, as well as the forward machine room (which contained air compressors and storage racks), were located below the main deck. The second deck, which was above the main deck, was comprised of four bunkrooms (Bunkrooms 2A through 2D) with two adjoining heads. Most bunkrooms had a window and were outfitted with a window-mounted air conditioning (A/C) unit. The wheelhouse was above the second deck. According to the captain, the bulkheads of the passageways, the interior bulkheads of the wheelhouse, and the interior bulkheads of all bunkrooms were covered in wood paneling.

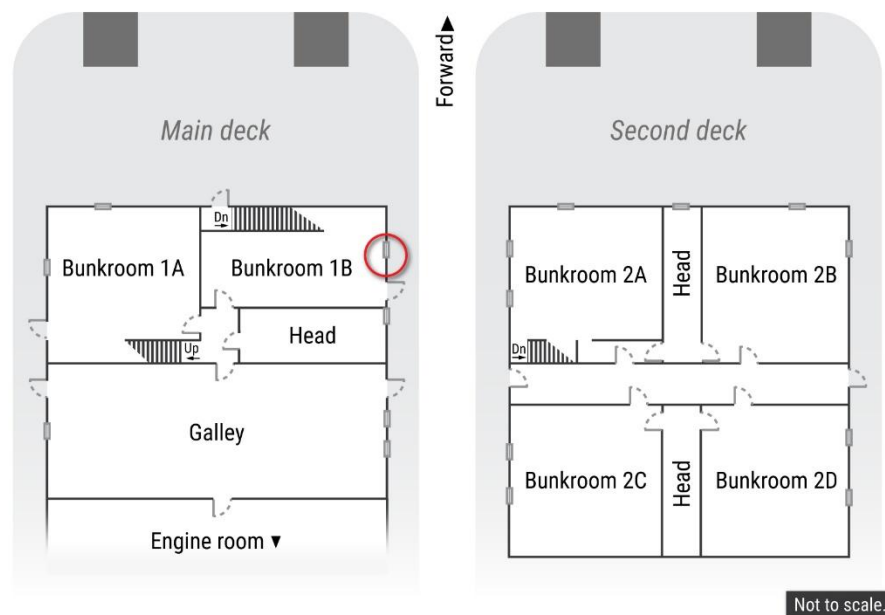


Figure 3. Partial plan views of the main and second decks of the *William D*. The location where the fire was first observed is circled. (Not to scale.)

1.2 Event Sequence

On April 22, 2025, about 1415, the *William D* departed the Vulcan Materials Company dock in Victoria, Texas, pushing two barges (*P 370* and *P 380*) loaded with sand and gravel outbound on the Victoria Barge Canal, en route to San Leon, Texas. The remotely operated bow boat *Chief*, which was used to assist in maneuvering the tow, was at the head of the tow.² The *William D* had six crewmembers on board (captain, pilot, and four deckhands).³ The captain and two deckhands (deckhand 1 and deckhand 2) were on watch at the vessel's departure. The pilot and the other deckhands (deckhand 3 and deckhand 4) were off duty.

About 1715, on the same watch, when the tow was near mile 20 of the canal, the captain received an audible and visual alarm on the wheelhouse fire alarm panel. The alarm panel indicated that the fire was in one of the bunkrooms. The captain

² A *bow boat*, or a *bow steering unit*, is a small auxiliary vessel that is used to increase the maneuverability of a tow from the tow's head. A bow boat is usually made up to the lead barge or barges and is remotely controlled from the towboat's wheelhouse.

³ *Pilot* is a term used aboard towing vessels on inland waterways for a person, other than the captain, who navigates the vessel.

called deckhand 1 and deckhand 2 via handheld radio, alerted them to the alarm, and instructed them to check the bunkrooms for possible fire.

Deckhand 3, who was on the stern of the vessel making a phone call, heard the fire alarm. Deckhand 4, who had been asleep in Bunkroom 1A, was awakened by the fire alarm sounding. He encountered heavy smoke in the shared passageway with Bunkroom 1B, so he exited his bunkroom from the exterior door. The pilot, who had been asleep in Bunkroom 2A, was also awakened by the fire alarm. He exited his bunkroom into the passageway and then through the door on the port side to the exterior. About this time, the captain looked over the port bridge wing, saw that smoke was now coming from Bunkroom 1A, and sounded the general alarm.

Meanwhile, deckhand 1 and deckhand 2 had verified the engine room and forward machine room were free of fire. Deckhand 1 and deckhand 2 entered Bunkroom 1B through the interior passageway door and saw a fire on the starboard bulkhead, which deckhand 2 reported to the captain via handheld radio. Deckhand 2 told investigators that, when he first saw the fire, the flame was the “size of [his] phone.” He stated that the fire was near the window A/C unit and electrical outlet and quickly started rising along the bulkhead.

Deckhand 1 and deckhand 2 exited Bunkroom 1B via the interior passageway door to retrieve fire extinguishers. They opened Bunkroom 1B’s exterior door to fight the fire and discharged at least three portable dry chemical fire extinguishers. Deckhand 3, who had joined deckhand 1 and deckhand 2, was instructed to find another fire extinguisher. Deckhand 3 found an additional fire extinguisher, gave it to deckhand 1, and then pulled out the vessel’s firehose on the starboard side and turned on the water. Flames started coming out of the A/C unit of Bunkroom 1B, and the crew continued to fight the fire by aiming the firehose water stream onto the A/C unit.

While the crew was fighting the fire, the captain stopped the tow. The fire had climbed to the second deck of the vessel, and the wheelhouse had begun to fill with smoke. The captain ordered deckhand 4 to pull the emergency fuel stops (located on the aft transverse bulkhead of the main deck superstructure) for the generator and main engines. The captain then ordered all crewmembers to evacuate forward onto the barges. Deckhand 3 reported that, at this time, he saw windows cracking and popping on the main and second decks as the flames contacted the glass. With the wheelhouse full of smoke and both sides of the vessel aflame, the captain descended the forward walkway onto the lower decks, where he evacuated to the barges (see figure 4).



Figure 4. The *William D* on fire as seen from the barges during the casualty. (Source: Pinnacle III)

At 1750, the captain notified the Coast Guard via cell phone, reported the vessel's position, and was instructed to call 911. At this time, canal traffic was stopped for all but responding vessels. The crew made its way forward along the barges and boarded the bow boat *Chief*, located at the head of the tow. The crew disconnected the *Chief* from the tow and maneuvered to a safe distance. Port Lavaca Fire Department, two good Samaritan tugs, and the Coast Guard responded. Once on scene, the Coast Guard recovered the crew from the *Chief*. At 2200, Port Lavaca Fire Department reported the fire as contained. The following day, the *William D* was towed to San Leon, and at 0600, the canal was reopened to all traffic. The barges, which were undamaged, were rounded up by good Samaritan tugs.

1.3 Additional Information

1.3.1 Damage

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board and the Coast Guard examined the damage to the *William D*. The Coast Guard also requested assistance from Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) certified

fire investigators, who participated in the examination. The wheelhouse had extensive damage to its interior and exterior. Sections of the main and second decks showed severe interior and exterior fire damage, with the second deck's damage concentrated in the forward section. The main deck's damage was focused in the accommodation spaces and the galley, forward of the engine room. The engine room sustained minor heat and smoke damage, while the forward machine room had extensive heat and smoke damage.

On May 1, 2025, a damage survey was conducted and determined the *William D* to be a constructive total loss estimated at \$500,000.

1.3.2 Postcasualty Investigation

ATF fire investigators concluded that the fire originated in Bunkroom 1B, which had extensive thermal damage, with the bed, bulkhead paneling, and other furnishing almost totally consumed and the steel structural bulkheads sustaining heavy charring and warping.

Deckhand 1, who occupied Bunkroom 1B, stated that the A/C window unit (powered on and running) and a phone charger (not charging a device) had been plugged into the bulkhead electrical outlet in the area where the fire was first discovered. He stated that the A/C window unit had been functioning normally during his time on the vessel. He told investigators that he did not smoke cigarettes.

Based on the fire patterns and damage, witness statements, and the likely movement of the fire within the vessel's internal spaces due to ventilation, ATF investigators concluded that the fire most likely originated on the starboard bulkhead of Bunkroom 1B (where the electrical outlet powering the bunkroom's A/C had been mounted before the fire) (see figure 5). ATF investigators noted no electrical wiring remained within the starboard bulkhead at the location of electrical outlet (where crewmembers stated they first observed flames), which could indicate the possible origin area or cause of fire. ATF investigators identified electrical failure as the most probable cause of the fire and, ultimately, classified the cause of the fire as accidental. However, ATF investigators determined the extent of thermal damage "prevented conclusive identification [of] a specific electrical fault" and that further forensic testing would be required to determine a more precise point of failure.

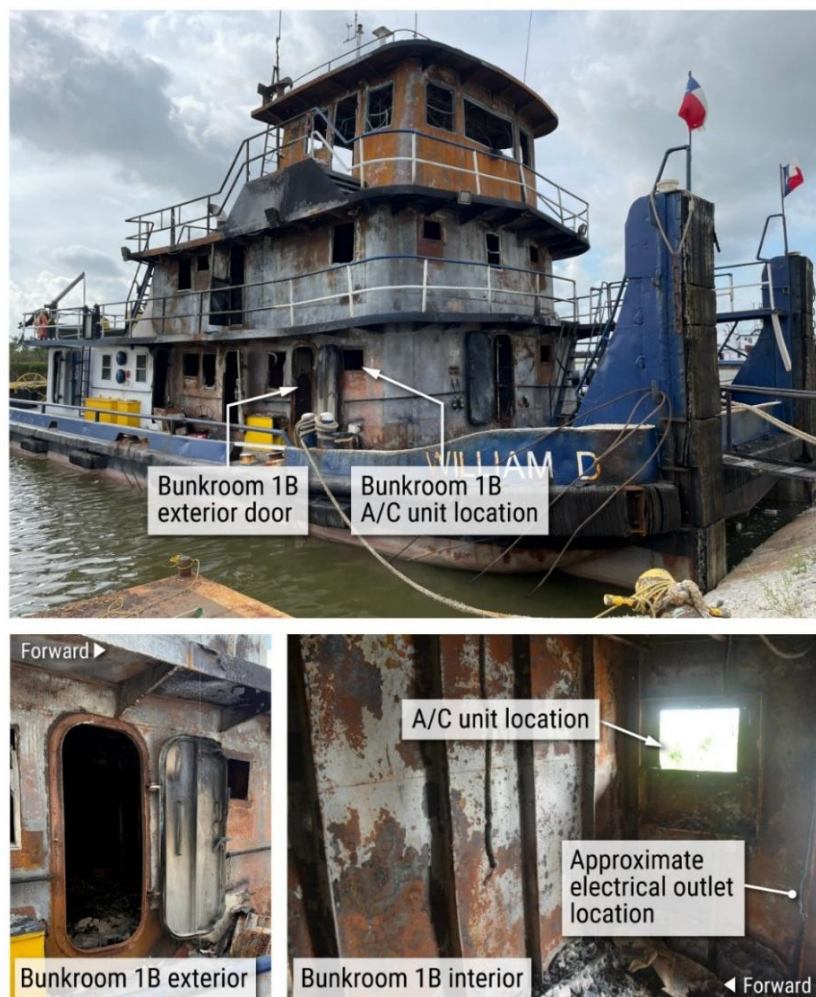


Figure 5. Starboard view of the *William D* after the fire, the exterior door of Bunkroom 1B, and the interior of Bunkroom 1B, showing the location of the A/C unit and the approximate location of the electrical outlet. (Background sources: Pinnacle III [bottom left] and ATF [bottom right])

ATF investigators noted two factors likely aided the fire's development. First, deckhand 4 initially tried to exit his bunkroom (1A) through the passageway but had to evacuate through the exterior door due to heavy smoke. Opening the passageway door and then opening the exterior door created a "ventilation flow path" from Bunkroom 1A to Bunkroom 1B via the interior passageway door that deckhands 1 and 2 had opened while searching for the fire's location. According to ATF investigators, "this ventilation, combined with the chimney effect created by open

[ladderwells], likely intensified the fire's development both within [Bunkroom 1A] and the shared hallway leading from [Bunkroom 1B]."⁴

Then, as deckhand 1 and deckhand 2 were attempting to fight the fire in Bunkroom 1B, they opened the exterior, starboard-side door, introducing oxygen to the area. Combined with the already-open interior passageway hallway door, another ventilation flow path was created. According to ATF investigators, this flow path likely "pulled hot gases and flames upward through the [ladderwell] in the shared [passageway] and structural voids, contributing to fire extension into upper compartments."

⁴ A *chimney effect*, or *stack effect*, is the vertical airflow within a structure caused by the temperature-created density differences between the structure's interior and exterior or between two interior spaces.

2 Analysis

While the towing vessel *William D* was pushing barges *P 370* and *P 380* outbound near mile 20 of the Victoria Barge Canal, a fire broke out in one of the towboat's bunkrooms. The crew fought the fire while the captain contacted the Coast Guard as well as the Port Lavaca Fire Department, who extinguished the fire. The crew, who had evacuated from the vessel to its bow boat, were recovered by the Coast Guard.

A postcasualty investigation conducted by the ATF indicated that the starboard bulkhead of Bunkroom 1B, located on the main deck, was the likely origin location of the fire and identified electrical failure as the "most probable cause" of the fire. An electrical outlet on the bulkhead was providing power to a window-mounted A/C unit (turned on) and a phone charger (no device connected to it) when the fire broke out. An electrical fault—such as a loose, broken, or frayed wire, or broken receptacle hardware—within the outlet or nearby circuitry, could have created excessive resistance heating sufficient to ignite nearby combustibles. However, due to the extent of the fire damage, the exact ignition source and exact cause of the fire could not be determined.

The combustible material in the bunkrooms, passageways in the accommodation spaces, and wheelhouse, including wood paneling, provided fuel for the fire. Air introduced through open doors, windows, and openings where A/C units were mounted provided oxygen for the fire. In addition, open doors created ventilation flow paths, which combined with the ladderwells' vertical airflow to form a chimney effect. The chimney effect helped the fire and smoke spread rapidly through the main deck, up to the second deck, and, finally, to the wheelhouse, ultimately consuming the superstructure. The crew attempted to extinguish the fire using portable extinguishers and the vessel's fire hose, but their efforts were unsuccessful due to the rapid spread of the fire.

The National Transportation Safety Board has previously investigated fires aboard vessels wherein the substantial use of combustible materials in interior spaces and finishes, as well as the lack of structural fire protection, contributed to the extent of the damage each vessel sustained.⁵ Structural fire protection is a component of an overall vessel fire-protection strategy that uses passive design features in a vessel's structure to slow the expansion of a fire from one compartment to another. Structural

⁵ See *Fire aboard Towing Vessel Mary Dupre near Freeport, Texas, June 26, 2022*, [MIR-23-12](#); *Fire aboard Towing Vessel Jaxon Aaron on the Lower Mississippi River, mile marker 770, August 13, 2016*, [MAB-17/19](#); and *Fire On Board Fish Processing Vessel Juno in Grays Harbor, Westport, Washington, December 28, 2013*, [MAB-15/05](#).

fire protection uses fire-resistant materials and insulation installed on the horizontal and vertical surfaces of a compartment, on doors/hatches, and in pipe and cable openings to slow the transfer of heat and smoke, thus providing additional time to evacuate and for firefighting to contain and extinguish a fire. Towing vessels are inspected under the regulations in 46 *Code of Federal Regulations* Subchapter M; however, these regulations currently do not require vessel owners to incorporate structural fire protection on their vessels.

3 Conclusions

3.1 Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the fire aboard the towing vessel *William D* was likely an unknown electrical source in the starboard main deck bunkroom. Contributing to the rapid spread of the fire and the extent of the damage were air introduced through open doors, windows, and other openings, and the substantial use of combustible wood paneling throughout the accommodation spaces.

Vessel Particulars

Vessel	<i>William D</i>
NTSB vessel group	Towing/Barge (Towing vessel)
Owner/operator	Pinnacle III LP (Commercial)
Flag	United States
Port of registry	Freeport, Texas
Year built	1957
Official number	275606 (US)
IMO number	8992807
Classification society	N/A
Length (overall)	95.0 ft (29.0 m)
Breadth (max.)	30.0 ft (9.1 m)
Draft (casualty)	8.3 ft (2.5 m)
Tonnage	266 GRT
Engine power; manufacturer	2 × 1,000 hp (746 kW); Cummins KTA38-M1 diesel engines

NTSB investigators worked closely with our counterparts from **Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Victoria** throughout this investigation.

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For more detailed background information on this report, visit the [NTSB Case Analysis and Reporting Online \(CAROL\) website](#) and search for NTSB accident ID DCA25FM032. 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—

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