

Log # M-410



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

## Safety Recommendation

---

Date: SEP - 4 1997

In Reply Refer To: M-97-58 and -59

Admiral Robert E. Kramek  
Commandant  
U.S. Coast Guard  
Washington, D.C. 20593-0001

---

About 2:11 p.m. on December 14, 1996, the Liberian freighter *M/V Bright Field* was headed downbound on the lower Mississippi River. As the ship passed under the Greater New Orleans Highway Bridge, engine problems occurred, and the vessel lost steering control and struck the Poydras Street Wharf. Several buildings on the wharf were damaged, and the vessel narrowly missed colliding with a moored gaming vessel that had passengers and crew on board. No fatalities occurred, but 4 individuals were seriously injured and some 58 persons sustained minor injuries as a result of the accident.

As the *Bright Field* headed toward the Poydras Street Wharf, its pilot radioed the U.S. Coast Guard Governor Nicholls traffic light operator to request that the operator alert the cruise ships and gaming and excursion vessels near the area, as well as the Riverwalk Marketplace, to the impending collision. Subsequently, the pilot aboard the *Bright Field* sounded the vessel's whistle repeatedly to warn the Poydras Street Wharf patrons. Less than 3 minutes elapsed between the call to the Coast Guard traffic light operator and the accident.

The crewmembers aboard the cruise ship *M/V Enchanted Isle*, which was docked at the Julia Street Wharf, stated that they did not hear the traffic light operator's announcement but heard the *Bright Field's* whistle, which alerted them to the emergency. The first mate of the gaming vessel, the *M/V Queen of New Orleans*, which was docked at the Poydras Street Wharf, overheard the *Bright Field* pilot's call to the traffic light operator and immediately began emergency evacuation of the *Queen of New Orleans*. The traffic light operator radioed the captain of an excursion vessel, the *M/V Creole Queen*, which was leaving the Canal Street dock at the time with passengers and crew on board. The captain returned the vessel to the dock and immediately began an emergency evacuation.

The Poydras Street Wharf and the adjacent Julia Street and Canal Street Wharves include several commercial properties: the One River Place condominium building; the Riverwalk Marketplace, a mall of 100 stores and restaurants, which receives approximately 1,350 visitors per day; the 1,600-room New Orleans Hilton Riverside Hotel; 2 cruise ship passenger terminals; docks for a gaming vessel and an excursion vessel; large open walkways; and a plaza area. These facilities are within the zone of the Captain of the Port of New Orleans, an area in which more than 300 incidents of vessel power loss, irregularity, or steering casualty were reported in 1995 and 1996.

According to the results of Safety Board surveys, marketplace patrons and employees were unaware of the meaning of the warning whistles from the *Bright Field*, believing them to signify normal river traffic. Fortunately, several Harbor Police officers recognized the warning whistles and tried to clear the area. Meanwhile, some marketplace patrons and staff members noticed the *Bright Field* heading toward them, and large numbers began to run away. Many individuals sustained injuries during the chaotic evacuation. The Harbor Police moved most of the crowd away from the area where the *Bright Field* struck; however, because they had had no advance notice, many visitors did not know what was happening, and they did not have the opportunity to obtain information from mall employees or security officers.

As a result of the *Bright Field* accident, a memorandum of understanding was developed between the Coast Guard Captain of the Port of New Orleans and the Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans. Under this agreement, which was implemented on March 11, 1997, the River Front Alert Network was established to warn the riverfront properties between the Toulouse Street Wharf and the Orange Street Wharf, including the Algiers Landing Restaurant, when a vessel on the river experiences an abnormality or irregularity. Upon receiving a vessel call, the Coast Guard Governor Nicholls traffic light operator is to alert the Port of New Orleans Harbor Police dispatcher by radio. When this system is activated, the traffic light operator will provide a short announcement describing the situation, and the dispatcher will repeat the message. Each riverfront property, including, but not limited to, the Delta Queen Cruise Terminal, the Riverwalk Marketplace, the New Orleans Hilton Riverside Hotel, the One River Place condominium building, the Aquarium of the Americas, and the Algiers Landing Restaurant, is responsible for monitoring this marine band radio so that it can assess the situation and take the appropriate emergency response.

The Safety Board believes that this system is an important first step in providing adequate warning to shoreside facilities of an impending collision and the need to evacuate. The Board of Commissioners has indicated to the Safety Board, however, that vessels that dock or moor in this area do not monitor the River Front Alert Network radio. The *Queen of New Orleans*, the cruise ships, and the excursion vessels are required to monitor their marine band radios and keep a bridge watch when at dock but are not required to participate in the River Front Alert Network. According to an *Enchanted Isle* crewmember on bridge watch and the traffic light operator, both of whom were on duty during the accident, the marine radio channel monitored by the cruise ships did not broadcast the warning call from the *Bright Field* to the traffic light operator.

Therefore, even though the cruise ships monitored the marine band radio and maintained bridge watches, they did not receive advance notice of the impending collision.

Further, while the pilot of the *Bright Field* notified the Coast Guard traffic light operator of the hazard his vessel posed to the Port of New Orleans, other vessels operating in the area and experiencing problems might not communicate their situations to this operator. If an initial warning call is not made to the traffic light operator, the River Front Alert Network system cannot function as designed. The early notification critical to this system depends on the participation of all parties, including vessels underway, docked and moored vessels, and shoreside facilities. The Safety Board believes that, to provide all riverfront properties the maximum amount of time to evacuate their patrons and passengers in case of emergency, all vessels operating within the zone covered by the River Front Alert Network should participate in the River Front Alert Network system.

The investigation of the *Bright Field* accident has also uncovered areas of concern regarding vessel evacuation during such emergencies. At the time of the accident, 637 passengers and crewmembers were aboard the gaming vessel *Queen of New Orleans*, which has a capacity of 1,800 persons. According to Safety Board surveys of passengers, when the vessel's first mate made the initial evacuation announcement, passengers were confused. When a second announcement was made, ordering the immediate evacuation of the vessel, passengers and nonoperating crewmembers began running toward the gangway. By this time, the *Bright Field* had already struck the wharf and was continuing to move toward the bow of the *Queen of New Orleans*.

The bow wave from the *Bright Field's* approach destabilized the boiler (02) deck gangway of the *Queen of New Orleans* several times during the evacuation process, causing it to move up and down approximately 1 to 2 feet and rendering it unusable. Passengers were not advised of alternative means of escape to the dock. During the third episode of destabilization, the captain ordered the gangway to be raised and the crew to go to their mooring stations. Several nonoperating crewmembers aboard the *Queen of New Orleans*, including the director of security, later said they could only instruct the passengers to "run" to the stern of the vessel at this time. Some passengers panicked. One individual leapt from the deck to the dock to avoid the oncoming *Bright Field* and sustained serious injuries. According to the gaming vessel's captain, when the *Bright Field* came to rest about 70 feet from the bow of the *Queen of New Orleans*, approximately 70 to 80 percent of the passengers had been evacuated.

According to the *Queen of New Orleans's* Emergency Evacuation Plan for Moored Conditions, as provided to the Safety Board by the vessel owner, New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., the vessel can be exited only from the bow section of its 02 deck. The plan states that to evacuate the vessel in an emergency, every passenger is to be directed to this gangway. New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., has also stated that three portable emergency gangways, which are designed to be used in the event the main gangway is inoperable, are aboard the vessel. The vessel's Emergency Evacuation Plan for Moored Conditions, however, does not refer to these portable gangways, provide instructions on how to make them operable in an emergency, or give

guidance for directing passengers to them. The evacuation plan also does not appear to take into account the time needed to alert the crew to take action, or for the crewmembers to stage the portable gangways and assure their safe operation. Because the emergency gangways were not used during the *Bright Field* accident, the only exit available was the 02 bow gangway.

The *Creole Queen*, a New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., excursion vessel with a capacity of 1,000 passengers and crew, was docked astern of the *Queen of New Orleans*. At the time of the accident, 174 passengers and crewmembers were aboard. Following the captain's instructions to evacuate, passengers exited the vessel across a single dockside gangway. When the bow wave from the *Bright Field* passed the *Creole Queen*, the wave destabilized this gangway so that it dropped from the side of the vessel and caused three passengers to fall into the Mississippi River. One passenger sustained serious injuries; the other two sustained minor injuries. By this time, approximately half of the *Creole Queen's* passengers had been evacuated. The remaining passengers could not exit the vessel until the three passengers in the water had been rescued and the gangway repositioned.

In statements made to a Safety Board investigator, the captains of the *Queen of New Orleans* and the *Creole Queen* said they believed the evacuations had been adequate, given the limited time available between the initial evacuation announcement and the *Bright Field's* collision with the wharf. However, if the *Bright Field* had struck the *Queen of New Orleans*, the remaining 20 to 30 percent of passengers still on board the gaming vessel, numbering some 130 to 190 persons in total, would have been in grave danger. Because many of the passengers were still positioned near the gangway at the bow of the vessel, the number of injuries would probably have been much higher, and fatalities would have been likely.

Furthermore, had the vessel been filled to its capacity of 1,800 passengers and crewmembers, the number of persons unable to evacuate in time could have been significantly higher, possibly reaching more than 1,000 persons. The ensuing panic most likely would have been more hazardous had the vessel been filled to capacity, possibly resulting in a higher number of, and more severe, injuries.

The Safety Board believes that better provisions must be made for the timely and safe evacuation of all New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., vessels in the event of an impending collision or other emergency. The provision of safe evacuation procedures for any vessel requires careful consideration of all factors that could be involved in evacuating persons under a wide variety of circumstances, as well as comprehensive knowledge of the evacuation capabilities and limitations of the subject vessel. The Coast Guard's experience in vessel evacuation procedures would be of great assistance to New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., in reviewing and amending its emergency evacuation procedures to ensure the timely and orderly evacuation of passengers under moored or docked conditions.

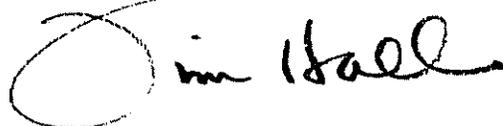
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the U.S. Coast Guard:

Require that all commercial vessels that operate within the River Front Alert Network zone participate in the network and notify the U.S. Coast Guard traffic light operator whenever they experience an irregularity or abnormality that could result in a safety risk to the Port of New Orleans area. (M-97-58)

Work with New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., to review and amend the Emergency Evacuation Plan for Moored Conditions of the *Queen of New Orleans* regarding current evacuation procedures and the number of immediately accessible gangways and disembarkation locations, and to develop and implement procedures for evacuation under moored or docked conditions for all New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc., excursion vessels to ensure that passengers can exit each vessel in a timely and orderly manner should an emergency evacuation be necessary. (M-97-59)

The Safety Board also issued Safety Recommendations M-97-60 and -61 to the Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans and M-97-62 and -63 to New Orleans Paddlewheels, Inc.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in these recommendations.

  
By: Jim Hall  
Chairman