UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Investigation of: *
*
KRISTIN ALEXIS/BARGE *MR. ERVIN* *
ALLISION WITH THE SUNSHINE BRIDGE * Accident No.: DCA19FM003
DONALDSONVILLE, LOUISIANA *
OCTOBER 12, 2018 *
*
* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Interview of: GEORGE PETRAS
Vessel Traffic Service

Lamar Dixon Expo Center
Gonzales, Louisiana

Thursday,
May 9, 2019

APPEARANCES:

CDR MATTHEW MESKUN, Lead Investigating Officer
United States Coast Guard

CWO4 [redacted] [redacted] Investigating Officer
United States Coast Guard

LT [redacted] [redacted] Hearing Recorder
United States Coast Guard

MICHAEL KUCHARSKI, Investigator in Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

SCOTT JENKINS, Esq.
Jones Walker, LLP
(On behalf of Cooper Consolidated)

LCDR [redacted] [redacted] Esq.
United States Coast Guard, District 8
(On behalf of Mr. Petras)

I N D E X

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:15 a.m.)

CDR MESKUN: The time is now 9:15, and we're back on the record, and we'll call our next witness, Mr. George Petras.

MR. PETRAS: Good morning, everyone.

CDR MESKUN: Good morning. If you'd please remain standing, Mr. [redacted] will administer your oath and ask you some preliminary questions.

(Whereupon,

GEORGE PETRAS

was called as a witness and, having been first duly sworn, was examined and testified on his oath, as follows:)

LT [redacted] Please state your full name and spell your last into the microphone.

MR. PETRAS: My full name is George Wilhelm Petras, Jr. My last name, P-e-t-r-a-s.

LT [redacted] Counsel, can you please identify yourself?

LCDR [redacted] Lieutenant Commander [redacted] Coast Guard District 8, staff attorney, agency counsel for the U.S. Coast Guard.

INTERVIEW OF GEORGE PETRAS

BY CDR MESKUN:

Q. Morning, Mr. Petras.

A. Good morning.

Q. Thanks for joining us today.

A. Oh, my pleasure. Thanks for inviting. I hope I can give you some valuable information to help you with the investigation that you guys are conducting. So --

Q. Thank you. So we're going to ask a series of questions. If you don't understand any of those questions, please ask us for clarification, or if there's something you don't know, just please state that you don't know.

A. Okay.

Q. Can you please describe to us what your job is, where you work, what the function is, what your background and experience is?

A. Okay. I work at the Vessel Traffic Service. I am the training coordinator there. I didn't start at that position. I started as, essentially, a bridging person between the contractors and the actual operators and the industry folks way back in 1998, when they initiated the Ports and Waterway Safety System Project here in New Orleans. That project was an acquisition project, where they were going to establish a Vessel Traffic Service here in the New Orleans area.

I was hired almost as a consultant, like I said, bridging the contractors that were in the Washington, D.C. area and coordinating meetings and discussions and focusing on developing the operations here at the Vessel Traffic Service when it came online.

Back in 2002, I became the training coordinator, but I still

assisted with some of their operational duties. I am currently the training coordinator, and that is my primary function at the Vessel Traffic Service in New Orleans.

I can describe, essentially, our work environment and what we do at the VTS if that's what you're interested in hearing.

Q. Please.

A. So I love to start the story off with describing, essentially, the challenges that we have on the Mississippi River and the challenges that we have at the VTS. Go back to 1972, essentially, is when the Ports and Waterways Safety Act was established and gave the Coast Guard the opportunity and the permission, and the instruction to develop Vessel Traffic Services.

At that time, some of the major ports in the United States were identified as needing or requiring a VTS to assist with safe navigation on the waterways, and New Orleans was one of those ports that was designated as a VTS port.

Now, they had some trials and tribulations, because at that time a lot of the information that they were gathering and a lot of the information that the Vessel Traffic Service would actually disseminate was using antiquated systems. They did not have accurate surveillance equipment or surveillance systems. So a lot of the information that they were providing the mariners didn't suit the mariners' needs. And a under a lot of protestation, I guess you would call, and budgetary issues, the VTS in New Orleans

actually was disestablished.

Talks about VTS being reestablished in New Orleans started after the Exxon Valdese, when a port needs study was conducted and it was identified that a spill of the significance of the Exxon Valdese would definitely impact the New Orleans area, the Lower Mississippi River region, probably the most of any port in the United States. And they thought that at that time, that the establishment of a VTS was a critical piece to ensuring safe navigation on the waterway.

This time, though, as opposed to the earlier VTS establishment, they decided to incorporate a lot of the input from the users. There were a lot of dialogue groups, a lot of work done with safety advisory commissions and groups within the Lower Mississippi region.

And essentially, they had a huge part in developing the baseline elements for the VTS, and one of which was the criticality of having real-time, accurate, reliable information being disseminated to the users. At that time they really didn't have a system, but they had a thought, and what they had anticipated could be developed was some sort of a system that could communicate directly between vessels, directly between the VTS and the vessels, directly between the vessels and the VTS, an information-sharing system. And it later became AIS.

We prototyped a lot of the equipment both on the national and international level here. That was part of my project duties, was

to ensure the testing of that was conducted and satisfactory, and that it met the needs of those baseline elements that were established by the focus groups that we had here in the New Orleans area.

Now, I failed to mention one thing. The entire time that we were going through these pieces of -- or these challenges of developing a VTS back in the '70s and then again in the '90s, that there was one thing that the Coast Guard did inherit from the Army Corps of Engineers, or the Department of Army, and that was a traffic management system that really no one understood was a traffic management system. And that is the -- was discussed as the light operation, the traffic control lights at Algiers Point.

Back in 1928, I've looked at correspondence between the port, the New Orleans Port Authority, and the -- with the backing of some of the users. They essentially said that the ships were getting bigger, carrying more dangerous cargos. There was more density in the traffic, and the population in New Orleans was growing. They needed to invoke some sort of traffic control measures. And that's when they established the traffic control lights at Algiers Point.

So this whole time, while the Coast Guard was establishing VTSs and discussing about opening another VTS, and then -- in the '90s, there was an operation that was being conducted during high waters from 1928 -- and I would have to say that that was a very successful operation and continues to be successful, and it is the

basis for our operations -- or the basis of the operations back in the 1990s when we started the VTS project for the second time.

So we knew that the challenge was, okay, this light operation, which was done from shore-side locations and towers, and traffic towers, and used traffic control lights and VHS communication systems, that we would essentially have to integrate that into the VTS program or the VTS that we would stand up; along with providing services across the entire, at that time, established Vessel Traffic Service area, which is from Port Hudson Light, mile mark 255 above Head of Passes, to approximately 12 miles offshore from Southwest Pass, a 12-mile radius.

So that's a huge area. We had one huge responsibility, and that was identify and create and operational procedure, or an operations at the VTS that could actually control the traffic lights and the traffic during high water around Algiers Point, and essentially conduct the services that are expected of a VTS. And those services are broken down into three categories.

One is an informational service, where we're available to provide critical and essential information to the mariners either upon their request or when we decide that it's necessary that they have this piece of information.

The other level of service that we would have to do, obviously, is to provide traffic organization, much like they've done at that Algiers Point area since the 1920s. We would then have to prove that we could, from a remote location, organize

traffic in such a way that there would be no meeting or overtaking or situations that would cause problems.

The third level of service, obviously, is providing information or assistance, navigation assistance, when vessels would request that, or we identify a serious situation like running into a shoal area or approaching a safety zone or a security zone in such a manner that would danger the vessel or the facilities.

So that is essentially what we do at the Vessel Traffic Service. We provide those three levels of service.

Focusing on traffic organization at Algiers Point was our primary mission. Around 2007, the Marine Safety Unit in Baton Rouge, essentially did a study of casualty data from 1999, I believe, to 2006, and they identified a region in their waterway that was prone to a significant number of casualties during high water, and they thought that they could mitigate that.

They presented their proposal to the LMRWSAC, and LMRWSAC identified the potential -- LMRWSAC, I should say, is the Lower Mississippi River Waterway Safety Advisory Committee, and that's a committee, a federal committee, that's established to focus on safety issues, address safety issues, assist counsel to Coast Guard, recommend things to the Coast Guard. But they were instrumental in identifying potential resolution to some issues that we were having, groundings, collisions, allisions, in what we would call -- refer to the Eighty-One Mile Point area.

And essentially, what that did for us, it established a regulated nav area around Eighty-One Mile Point, established some reporting points in that region so that we could either provide information or mitigate issues that we identified that would occur around Eighty-One Mile Point.

And that essentially leads us to 2010. In 2010, the VTS regulations were adopted, where the Coast Guard established the VTS at Lower Mississippi River. Again, it started in the 1990s, a lot of dialogue, a lot of discussion, a lot of work, a lot of proving to industry that we could do the duties and fulfill the responsibilities that they encumbered upon us with those 23 pieces of baseline services.

And 2010, December of 2010 is when we established the Vessel Traffic Service under the VTS regulations. And we've been operating out of -- no, I'm sorry -- we've been operating out of the sector building, which is located on 200 Hendee Street, in New Orleans.

And right now, under the current operations that we have, today's operations, with the extreme high water, we've established -- we essentially organized traffic in three areas: the Algiers Point area, the Eighty-One Mile Point area, and the Wilkinson Point. We've established temporary VTS measures during the extreme high water, where we're essentially controlling traffic around Wilkinson Point. It's a one-way-traffic-only during daylight and nighttime operations.

So I hope I've covered most of the stuff. If you have any specific questions, I'll be more than happy to answer those.

Q. That was great. Thank you. So what sort of sensors are available at Eighty-One Mile Point?

A. At Eighty-One Mile Point, well, we have established our primary focus, our primary surveillance capability is automatic identification system. We also have closed-circuit TVs, and we have radar, radar sight at Eighty-One Mile Point. Those are the three sensors that we have, and they're remotely -- that information is remotely cast back into the Vessel Traffic Center, which is at 200 Hendee Street.

Q. And just to clarify a few points, I know some of these locations may be common to the river men, but where is Algiers Point? Where is Eighty-One Mile Point?

A. Okay. So everything is measured from the Head of Passes below Venice, and Algiers is in the New Orleans region, and that's at around mile mark 93½ to 95. And Eighty-One Mile Point is essentially mile mark 178, 177, that region there. It's between major city -- it's below Baton Rouge and about 80 miles above -- river miles above New Orleans area. I don't know if that gives you an idea --

Q. That's perfect. And where does the Sunshine Bridge fall in relation to Eighty-One Mile Point?

A. Sunshine Bridge is actually one of our first reporting points in that Eighty-One Mile Point traffic management area. It's

actually what we call a vessel movement reporting system. It's a scheme that the Coast Guard has developed. It's codified in the VTS regulations. And essentially, what it does, it establishes voice communication locations.

And vessels that are within those boundaries should check in with the Vessel Traffic Service, as well as specified reporting points. And the Sunshine Bridge is one of those reporting points, 167.5. And that is a reporting point for vessels that are northbound and that are going to proceed through that Eighty-One Mile Point vessel movement reporting system area.

Q. And I believe you mentioned one of the sensors at Eighty-One Mile Point was AIS; is that correct?

A. Yes. Our entire area from the Port Hudson light to 12 miles offshore from Southwest Pass, that radius around that Southwest Pass entrance light, is covered. We have continuous -- contiguous coverage with AIS, and Eighty-One Mile Point region, the 167.5, is in that area.

Q. Can you just describe in a little bit more detail those two or three locations, Algiers Point, Eighty-One Mile Point, what do you do to or for the vessels that are operating in those areas?

A. Right. So what we typically do is our responsibilities, again, we divvy our services up into three areas: Informational services, navigation assistance, and traffic organization. Traffic organization is one of the more complex and probably the most difficult level of service that we can provide. Essentially,

what it does, it entangles all meeting, overtaking, crossing situations within a specific boundary.

Now, that vessel movement reporting system may be about a 20-mile area, but our primary focus is on about a mile-and-a-half section of the waterway at that region of Eighty-One Mile Point or at Algiers Point. And what our primary responsibility there is to ensure that we have no meeting, overtaking, or crossing situations that would result in a collision.

And essentially, we're preventing those accidents from happening. We do not want those things. Obviously, we don't want them to happen anywhere in the waterway, but it has been identified as a specific risk at those locations, that mile-and-a-half section of waterway. And that is where our primary focus is.

And what we're doing is we're organizing traffic in a way to avoid those situations to occur there. So, essentially, we're slowing vessels or preventing them from getting underway when they report in so as not to interfere with the organization that we have established. We'll try to find windows where we can get them underway and either bring them up or bring them down around those points, about a mile-and-a-half section in Eighty-One Mile Point region and Algiers Point is where we're making sure those things do not happen.

Q. Previously you indicated that you would share information with boats that call up.

A. Oh, absolutely.

Q. What kind of information? Like, would bridge clearance, the vertical clearance information, would that be something that would be shared?

A. And that's information that we typically share a lot. Specifically, or more importantly -- not specifically -- but regularly during high water, you know. I stand watch -- one thing I failed to mention was that I also stand duty as the watch supervisor. And during this high-water season, that has been a call that we often receive.

Now, that call will either come over the VHF radio or it'll come directly to the center. And the way we typically respond to them is we'll give them the current river stage that we have and the -- typically, we'll give them the equation, which is published in the Army Corps -- I believe they call it a flood map. It's essentially a map of the river, and in there -- there you go. Got the picture up there. And eventually it gives -- or essentially it gives you that equation.

And so what we would do is give them the current reading, the most up-to-date and accurate reading that we have for that specific gauge to enable the mariner to assist the mariner in doing the calculation.

Now that's not the case for all bridges. There are two bridges. And this sensory equipment and this piece of equipment we established -- we beta-tested here in New Orleans early-on. I think we had discussions about establishing these sensors, the

physical oceanographic real-time surveillance systems put out by the Naval Oceanographic Services, NOS. They work for NOAA.

But two phenomenal pieces of equipment that we essentially got installed, we beta-tested, and we determined that this piece of equipment is something that we really would like to have and really needed. That is an air gap sensor. It uses LADAR, a combination of -- well, the way I understand is it uses microwave as well as laser to give us readings of the air gap.

We have two bridges within our VTS area that have that, and that is the Huey P. Long Bridge as well as the Crescent City Connection. And we talked at great length of where those pieces of equipment should be installed. And we used our safety advisory committees and other users when that came about, when those discussions came about. And it was determined that those sensors should be installed at the lowest steel level. Essentially, within the navigable waterway, the channel, we would identify where that location would be on the bridge. And essentially, that would be the air gap that would be measured, that lowest steel reading.

Q. I do have a question specifically pertaining to those two bridges, and you may not know off the top of your head. The Crescent City Bridge and the Huey P. Long that you just mentioned, do you know how many navigation channels there are that you can pass through the bridge?

A. It would depend on the type of vessel and the size of vessel

of where you would be restricted from or preferred waterway to pass. So those gauges, those sensors, are on the main channel. There are other alternative spans that you could go through but are typically a lot lower with regards to the air gap capability or the availability of the air gap.

So it's typically on the main channel, and there are several alternate spans. The Crescent City Connection has one, and I believe there are two other on the Huey P. that you could safely navigate through. Is that the Huey P. that you have up? Okay. Yup.

But again, the sensor itself and the readings are taken off of that main channel at the lowest safe steel level. And I think you'll have others that can describe how that's calculated and determined, but that's the extent of my knowledge on that.

Q. Going back to the question on information that's shared. As it pertains to bridges that have a main or alternate span, or channel span, or west span, or whatever the situation may be, could a mariner, a towboat, call you up and ask you which channel to take, which span to take?

A. Oh, absolutely. Like I said, during this extreme high water situation, we get a lot of calls, mainly vessels that are headed to the Port of New Orleans, container vessels that have a high air draft, and they want to ensure -- you know, I kind of use the equations or the information that's available there for this bridge -- it's the Sunshine Bridge -- it gives a vertical

clearance as 147 minus the Donaldson gauge. I liken that to -- I use, would use that information if I were a ship sailing from a port overseas or at another location within the United States.

Typically, what they do is a passage planning. It's a resource management technique that they teach. I've been at that course, and a lot of focus in that course is on passage planning. And I refer to this as part of your passage planning regimen.

If you wanted to know on the day that I would sail, I would use two pieces of information. I would use this bridge clearance information, and then I would go to the NOAA, National Weather Service website, which gives the 5-day forecast or a 30-day forecast, and you would use -- you would look at the date that you would likely be underway in that area, and you use that to make your passage plan. You use that to -- okay.

So there's a forecast there. There's another -- if that's an active Web page, if you scroll to the top, there's 28 days and a 5-day forecast, but that gives you about a 5-day forecast of what the river stage will be at, at that gauge. And you could use that to determine a passage plan.

What I like to refer the gauges that we have at the Crescent City and Huey P. are more of a tactical element. That means it's giving you real-time, within 6 minutes. Typically, that information will refresh every 6 minutes. And if you want to know real-time what the bridge clearance is, that gauge is what gives you the bridge clearance. So on those two bridges, we give you --

we say specifically at such-and-such a time, the gauge, the air gap gauge, reads this.

And that is how we typically respond to vessels that call us that are headed to the Port of New Orleans. We say at such-and-such a time, 6 minutes ago, 12 minutes ago, whatever that specific reading was, we give that reading out. And I call that the tactical reading.

But for the bridges that do not have a sensor like that, we typically give them the most current river stage. And that's pretty much updated hourly. That's an hourly reading off of the gauge. And then we'll also give them the information about how to calculate the air gap using that equation. That would be the information that we would provide the vessels when they call.

Q. Okay. And this passage planning that you spoke of, would that be, like, a similar term to something like "voyage planning"?

A. I would think so. It sounds appropriate. But I know during the course that I went through, they talked about passage planning, and that's the term that I'm most accustomed to. But voyage planning, if you're doing any kind of -- voyage planning includes the elements of that passage plan, then absolutely.

Just in a general sense, a passage plan would include the intended route, any alternative routes that you could take or need to take if there were issues, and then identify any obstructions or issues that you would encounter during that planned transit. Absolutely. So if -- was it a voyage plan -- if that were similar

to that, had the same elements as a passage plan, then absolutely. I would expect that to occur.

Q. You may not know this off the top of your head, but if the Donaldsonville gauge had a reading of 18, roughly 18 feet, would that be considered a high-water period?

A. So typically what we do, we do our high-water off of the Carrollton gauge, and I think we were at a 9-foot 9½-foot. You may have a log. The VTS maintains a daily log. And 0600 and 1800 are our transition times.

And typically what a watch supervisor will do is -- the first thing they do is initiate the log entries, and one of those log entries, I think, are the Donaldsonville gauge as well as the Carrollton gauge. And I think our Carrollton -- okay.

So that looks like what our log is, and the Carrollton gauge there reads 9.9. High water typically starts when we're at a 8-foot level on the Carrollton gauge.

Q. And you're referring to -- this is listed as IO Exhibit -- is that 56?

A. Yup. And so the Donaldson gauge there at that time of relief, at -- what is that -- 18 -- looks like an 1800 to 0600. Around 1800, those gauge readings were pulled off of that website.

Q. And just to clarify your previous statement --

A. Yes, sir.

Q. -- 9 feet on the Carrollton gauge is when you would consider high water?

A. No, 8 feet and rising. So high water is considered 8 feet and rising until it reaches 9 feet and is predicted to fall that 9 feet. So as the water rises, once it reaches 8 feet, we enter into a high-water contingency operation, where we start actively ensuring that vessels are not meeting and overtaking or crossing in those mile-and-a-half regions at Eighty-One Mile Point and Algiers Point.

And if that gauge continues to rise, we're good. If it begins to fall and it's predicted to continue to fall, and it reaches that 9-foot level, then we turn those traffic control measures, the traffic organization service, essentially, off.

So this would be considered a high water on this date.

CDR MESKUN: Okay. Any other questions for Mr. Petras? Yes?

BY MR. [redacted]

Q. Mr. Petras, by the Donaldsonville gauge, is there a point on that gauge when you would consider it high water, or you just use the Carrollton gauge?

A. We use the Carrollton gauge, yeah. There's a plan that the 8th District has for all of the sectors, and it just so happens that -- and that's called the Waterway Action Plan. And in there are specific triggers that institute specific actions by either the sector or, in this case, the Vessel Traffic Service, for different locations. There are no specific guidelines with regards to Donaldson gauge. It's typically the Baton Rouge gauge and the Carrollton gauge that institute high-water actions. Those

are our trigger -- the gauges we use that have trigger points.
Q. Okay. You probably don't know this, but I'll ask anyway. Does the Donaldsonville gauge change more significantly than the Carrollton gauge? So, like, if the Carrollton gauge changes 1 foot, could that possibly be a 2-foot change on the Donaldsonville gauge?
A. I really can't give you the ratio. There are a lot of factors that come into play there, regional rainfall, the opening of the Bonnet Carre Spillway. There are a lot of different factors that could throw that ratio or that factor off, and I would not be able to give you a good idea.

Someone who may be able to do that would be the Army Corps of Engineers if that's really something you want to figure out. And over the past several years, you know, we've seen changes -- I personally have seen changes. I can't say "we." I personally have seen changes in the correlation between certain gauges.

Years ago, we could anticipate if the Cairo gauge read a certain level, that you would divide that by three, and in two weeks, you would see a level very similar to that at the Carrollton gauge. And then if that gauge were to fall, after a week or so, you would see a significant fall on the Carrollton gauge. But what we're seeing now is something unprecedented, where the Baton Rouge gauge and the Carrollton gauge are steadily at one specific level when you see a fluctuation in what I call the Cairo gauge, which was the gauge that we would use. So a

correlation between the different gauges? It's hard to say if there is any at this point.

Q. Okay. Thank you.

BY MR. KUCHARSKI:

Q. Good morning again, Mr. Petras.

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Just as a preliminary, you gave some of your background. Do you hold a Coast Guard license?

A. I did. I did have a license. I felt as though it was necessary to show some credibility. I did not mention that I'm a graduate of the Coast Guard Academy, served about 6 years on different vessels. I was a commanding officer of a Coast Guard cutter at one time, executive officer on several others, worked in the Aids to Navigation field.

I never really pursued my license. It wasn't until I came here to the New Orleans area that I thought it may be beneficial to get that. By that time, a lot of the recency was out, so I believe I was able to sit for a 500-ton masters is what I had.

I did not bring that with me, and I think it may have expired. But I wanted to ensure and show folks that I do have capability and knowledge to achieve a merchant mariner's license indeed.

Q. And so --

A. I don't work on the -- I didn't work on the river. I didn't work off of that license.

Q. But you have navigating experience?
A. Oh, yes, sir. Yes, sir. No doubt.
Q. So if I understand correctly, where you said the call-in points were and the area where VTS has purview of or, you know, where the vessels call in, the Sunshine Bride is a call-in point, is that correct?
A. Yes, sir. And it is indeed. And it was selected so, so that we could do that advance planning for the traffic organization around Eighty-One Mile Point. That's the reason it is there at 167. We thought that would give us enough time and enough information to evaluate a vessel's speed, intentions, and then determine how to organize included in our traffic scheme around Eighty-One Mile Point. Yes, sir. It is a reporting point --
Q. So south of where the *Kristin Alexis* left from in Convent Fleet is not in the VTS area?
A. No, no. There are two different areas, and it's somewhat difficult to understand. The two areas have different definitions and different requirements.

The 167.5 is where our vessel movement reporting system area for Eighty-One Mile Point begins. And a vessel movement reporting system is essentially a system, a scheme of communications, reporting points that are designated call-in points for vessels. They call us in -- call in to us. We evaluate the situation, and we give either information or direction with regards to how we want them to either proceed or not proceed.

The vessel traffic service area is all-encompassing from Port Hudson Light to 12 miles offshore. And we are -- there are responsibilities for the VTS as well as VTS users, which are vessels that are going to be transiting that waterway.

And on the -- obviously, the VTS's responsibility is to provide service and advice, but the responsibilities of the VTS users is, essentially, report -- to maintain a listening watch on the designated frequency, respond in English when hailed by the VTS, and a responsibility to report any hazardous or hazardous vessel operating conditions.

So to say that we would not speak or would not communicate with vessels is not properly characterizing what we would do and doesn't describe what our role in a VTS area is. And the VMRS area is embedded inside that VTS area, and essentially, it's nothing more than a framework of reporting systems, or reporting points to assist us in organizing traffic.

Q. So if I can briefly summarize all that, it's --

A. Okay.

Q. The VTS service area, you would provide information --

A. Yeah, oh, absolutely.

Q. But the vessels wouldn’t have to call in?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Only at the reporting places or where they actually have to report?

A. That's right, unless one of those conditions occur, the

hazardous vessel operating condition or a hazardous condition.
Q. So if a towboat called up, and they're not in the reporting area, but in the VTS service area --
A. Yes.
Q. And asks you for a gauge reading --
A. Happens all the time.
Q. No problem. Okay. And if that same operator called in that service area, not in the reporting area, and said, hey, can you give me the bridge clearance --
A. Oh, yeah.
Q. Not a problem?
A. Not a problem.
Q. Okay.
A. I mean, and you know, even if they call on the wrong frequency, it doesn't matter. You call on the telephone, contact the VTS, we have that information, we'll definitely get it out to you, and we'll make sure it's accurate. We'll vet that information before we give it, obviously.
Q. So in your experience --
MR. KUCHARSKI: Let's if we can, can we see the Huey P. Long Bridge? It's out of the map book. Oh, yup.
BY MR. KUCHARSKI:
Q. So who typically -- you mentioned about the air gap sensor there, and --
A. Um-hum.

Q. Who typically uses the alternate spans or the, you know, the lower spans? Who typically uses that?
A. Typically, vessels that have a shallower draft that can safely navigate that area and can make that bridge clearance without that air gap; they can safely pass under there. So you'll see light boats, you'll see supply vessels, you can see some tows transit those alternate spans. You may even see an oceangoing tow every now and then use that span.

But for the most part, it'll depend on the situation. The activity, the traffic density, and those types of things will determine whether other vessels will use those alternate spans. But they're typically your light boats and support vessels that you'll see transit those areas.

Q. Are there pre-calls for getting underway in a VTS area, where there are calling points -- they have pre-calls?
A. Not in our VTS area, not in the complete -- that -- not in our VTS area. Within our vessel movement reporting areas, those VMRS areas, definitely they call before getting underway. Absolutely. But for those areas not covered, or not designated, as a vessel movement reporting system area, call-ins prior to getting underway would overwhelm us.

I mean, we've got three of the top 10 ports in the United States. The volume of traffic and the volume of information that we would then have to process over voice would overwhelm our traffic center with the staffing that we have currently.

Q. Have you heard the term deep-draft traffic?
A. Yes, sir.
Q. And what would you consider deep-draft traffic?
A. Deep-drafts are typically your oceangoing vessels, your ships, with 28 feet of draft. I think the Army Corps uses or designates 18 feet as a deep draft port.
Q. And --
A. I think that's -- to the best of my knowledge, I think 18 feet is what the Army Corps designates. But for us, it's any oceangoing vessel with significant draft.
Q. Would you say does deep-draft traffic run north of Baton Rouge?
A. Oh, yes.
Q. How far do they go north of Baton Rouge?
A. Okay. So deep-draft vessels, oceangoing, maritime vessels typically do not sail north of the Highway 90 Bridge, 190 Bridge, is the Huey P. Long. There's a railroad and a highway traffic bridge. It is at the northernmost boundary of what I would call Baton Rouge harbor. And typically, maritime traffic does not transit above there. And that's mainly a restriction due to the air gap. It's significantly lower. Highway 190 Bridge.
Q. Okay. Would you consider a bridge area to be an area of heightened concern for the VTS, navigating in and around a bridge area?
A. Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, it is an area of concern

that we would have. Absolutely. Is it a priority with regards to the staffing and the capabilities that we have in New Orleans to maintain a watchful eye over that? I would say we couldn't do that today with what we have, and the procedures we have in place, and more importantly, the staffing that we have.

We're primarily focused on organizing traffic in those critical areas where risk has been identified either by studies, by working groups, by our community, the maritime community, and said we need you to mitigate that. And we use the tools that we most -- are capable of using and the people that we have available to identify those areas of high-risk.

So is it a risk? Is it a concern? It is a concern. But is it the most dominating concern with regards to risk and what we're able to prevent? I would say it would be difficult for us to address that at this time at our VTS with the staff and equipment, and the procedures we have in place.

Q. Okay. Well, sort of tying into that, and I realize, you know, staffing is always a critical issue for you, how many people, and where you look at the, as you said, you know, the high-risk areas. But looking at the Sunshine Bridge, let's just concentrate on the Sunshine Bridge, okay?

A. Okay.

Q. Yeah. And so vessels coming from the north are already in the system, so to speak, where they're reporting in?

A. Um-hum.

Q. So as they approach the bridge, you know about that, and you're monitoring their movement?
A. Absolutely.
Q. Okay. How about from the south? If I were to ask you just for this bridge, just for this bridge, how much -- what are we talking about in staffing if you said move that call-in point 3 miles south, okay? So you understand what I'm saying?
A. Yeah, oh --
Q. That's about pre-calls, and things, you know, so --
A. Yeah, I understand. So moving the reporting point to a area lower than that, we could investigate that and see how that would play a beneficial role into the operation that we have in place at Eighty-One Mile Point.

How difficult would it be? I don't know. We'd have to look at it and see what the net benefit would be. Is it that critical being exactly at that location? No, that's open. I believe that would be open internally to investigate whether or not that change is possible.

Q. Thank you, thank you.

BY CDR MESKUN:

Q. Do you know approximately what the monthly average is on how much vessel traffic there is through the river there?
A. I do not have that data. We do maintain that data, but I did not come prepared to give you that number. We do maintain daily statistics for vessels that transit the Eighty-One Mile Point and

the Algiers Point areas. I can get those for you if necessary.
Q. Sure.
A. After the break.
Q. Do you know if the *Kristin Alexis* called in on October 11th or October 12th to ask for information?
A. I was not on watch. I do not know that.
Q. Okay. Do the VTSs have a set of rules or procedures that guide them in how to do their job?
A. Yes, sir. Yeah, we have an internal operating procedure that is published and our people are trained on and regularly reviewed with them.
Q. Do those procedures discuss anything about the reporting of air draft information?
A. Specifically, air draft information I don't think we have. I think that is described as a type of information that we could provide when requested. So if a vessel requests that information, we know and are trained on how to give that information.
Q. You're referring to, like, vertical bridge clearance?
A. Yes, sir.
Q. Okay.
A. And even the horizontal. We know where to get that information and how to get it and how to provide it to the mariners, yes, sir.
Q. What about for the check-in locations for these VRMS areas? Is a towing vessel, if they're pushing a vessel of significant

draft, air draft, are they required to tell you, hey, I'm pushing a crane barge of X numbers of feet?

A. They're required to tell us the type of vessel they have and if there are any operating conditions that would be unusual or preclude them from transiting what we would consider a normal transit route. Absolutely, absolutely.

They would be required to report that whether it be a restricted in their ability to maneuver, a restriction with regards to their ability to see out of their bridge, if they couldn't make a certain speed or there were some other issues with regards to the maneuverability of the vessel. Absolutely.

Q. That's all the questions I have.

CDR MESKUN: I'll turn it over to Cooper -- oh, you --

BY MR. KUCHARSKI:

Q. Just a quick question.

A. Yes, sir.

Q. You know, you mentioned about controlling traffic, so to speak?

A. Okay. A lot of mariners don't like the term "control," but I like to use the term organizing traffic. But it can be -- yeah, it's -- yes, sir.

Q. Sure. Understood.

A. I understand what you're saying.

Q. Sorry. Sorry for the use of the words -- ex-mariner. I know what you mean.

A. Yes, sir.
Q. But if two vessels were approaching the bridge at the same time, would you generally give suggestions on --
A. Oh, absolutely.
Q. -- what to go ahead and do?
A. Absolutely. We do that a lot.
Q. And if one said, you know, I've got a, you know, high crane, or something like that, take into consideration, you know, that they had the high crane, or whatever it was --
A. Absolutely. We would give them -- so if you would -- if you were, as the commander had asked, if you were to provide us that restriction, that ability, you couldn't do this or you had to have the channel to yourself because of a specific maneuverability issue, we would definitely identify that, flag you, and we would ensure that you had the proper passage. We would assist you with an appropriate passage. Absolutely.

We do that a lot in Algiers and we do it to some degree at Sunshine Bridge area, but we see it almost on a daily basis at and around Algiers Point. Absolutely.

Q. Thank you. And just a few kudos on what you do. Your VTS area and all of the VTSs were -- the NTSB was asked to review by the Commandant of the Coast Guard, all the VTS areas, is that correct?
A. Yes, sir.
Q. And you did pretty good on your review, yes?

A. I think so, but there's always areas for improvement, and the NTSB identified those things, and we're trying to take those recommendations and make those changes as best we can.
Q. Thank you. Thank you for what you do.
A. Thank you.
CDR MESKUN: Cooper?
BY MR. JENKINS:
Q. Good morning, Mr. Petras.
A. Yes, sir. Good morning.
Q. Thank you for being here. This has been informative. My name is Scott Jenkins. I represent Cooper Consolidated, and I just -- I'm going to ask you a couple of -- well, just a few questions. I don't want to mislead you and say it's a couple, but I'll try to be brief.
MR. JENKINS: Lieutenant [redacted] can you please pull up Exhibit 56? And could you please scroll to the bottom of that document? That's good.
BY MR. JENKINS:
Q. You said you weren't on watch that night, but this is -- I understand this is sort of the official record log of what happened that --
A. Yeah. Yes, sir.
Q. -- early morning?
A. Okay. Right, right. So that's a particular log for our watch from 1800 to 06. So we split our watches by 12 hours, and

it gave you a list of the personnel. So this particular log is from the 1800 to 06.

And so on the left-hand side are the times that we identified or were notified of some sort of an activity or issue that the VTS watch supervisor identified as being important enough to enter into what we call our smooth log. So these entries obviously were important enough during that 18 to 0600 to warrant an entry.

Q. Okay. So --

A. There are a lot more activities going on during that watch than just these entries, I assure you, but these are the things that are most prominent during that watch.

Q. So at 0520, it's noted that "no bridge clearance or river stage information was requested by the *Kristin Alexis*"?

A. Okay.

Q. So --

A. That's an after-the-fact statement.

Q. Correct. And that's -- if you look at the other entries on the log, and it's, you know, a few hours after the incident occurred, does that -- I know you weren't on watch, but does that lead you to believe that perhaps somebody contacted you all during the course of the early investigation to see if the *Kristin Alexis* had contacted VTS?

A. I think that the watch -- if I were the watch supervisor, that would be the first thought come through my mind: Hey, did anyone -- did we even know this, did we even give this type of

information? I would do that query for who was on watch whenever the incident occurred.

And they probably likened the -- put that information down so that it -- not necessarily is fresh in their mind, but there is an ability to reference that. Yeah. I did ask that question to the watchstanders. I did ask that question to myself, did I ever field a call, and I wanted to make sure that it's in that log that I did ask those questions.

Q. Okay. Good. Thank you.

MR. JENKINS: Lieutenant [redacted] Exhibit 8, please, sir?

LT [redacted] What page?

MR. JENKINS: Page 11.

BY MR. JENKINS:

Q. Now, Mr. Petras, you testified that vessels can contact VTS and request information on clearance with respect to the Sunshine Bridge?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And I believe you said that you're sort of -- your source for reference would be this chart that we see on the screen now?

A. Right, right.

Q. Along with the information from NOAA?

A. Right. If this information is from that flood -- the Army Corps of Engineers. It's a chart book. There it is. That looks like the cover of it. Then, if it is from that, then this is what we would use, yes, sir. It's typically used by mariners that

transit the river.

Q. Do any vessels ever ask VTS which span they should take?

A. They never ask us -- my experience when I'm on watch, I never get asked that question. They ask us is that span open and available. Yes. Now, the logical point is, well, are there any restrictions on that vessel. Well, typically, we leave that up to the vessel to make those determinations. But in most cases, they'll ask us is that span available.

And why would a span not be available? In some cases, we have dredging operations that occur, and there would be dredge pipeline laid along there, or there would be some sort of a construction job or work being done, or there would be some sort of information that would be listed in the local notice to mariners that essentially wouldn't restrict their transit, but would some way or another affect that transit through that span.

So we would have that information. We have the capability to give that information to the vessel. So on a normal case, we would not dig down. We would essentially say, yeah, that span is available for navigation.

Q. Other vessel traffic doesn't make a span not available, as you're describing that now, does it?

A. Other vessels transiting through?

Q. Right.

A. No, no, no.

Q. And --

A. So long as they agree to that. I mean, they're --
Q. And that was my next question. That's communication between the vessels and how they arrange that?
A. Absolutely. There are prescribed rules, navigation rules, that dictate or predicate the behavior of certain vessels so as to avoid collisions. And one of those is to make those types of arrangements of where and when and how to meet. Absolutely. And that can be done VHF or other means.
Q. When a vessel contacts VTS and asks for information on clearance, when you give information back to them, do you go off of the minimum vertical clearance number?
A. So that -- my expectation is that's how that is derived, how that information is derived, that that is the information that's given to us, and this is the minimum capable air draft at that lowest steel level.

Now, I think we understand that some of these bridges have, like, some curvature to them, and things like that. So the actual clearance in the mid-center span, where those green lights are, it might be a little bit greater. But the lowest level of steel is what we are using, which we believe is that information that's on that chart. So what we would give them is that equation that is written there plus the current Donaldson gauge reading.
Q. Okay. So to be safe, you want to give them the lowest number, because if you give them the highest number, the highest number only pans out if you hit that location, correct, in the

span?
A. The --
Q. Well, I'm sorry. Let me -- I'll scratch the question. So you give them a calculation based on, just to be clear, the minimum vertical clearance?
A. Yes, yes --
Q. So, for example, the chart we're looking there would be 111? Or is that 117? 111?
A. I would give them -- the vertical clearance, I would say 147 minus the Donaldson gauge.
Q. Okay. So --
A. So that's how I would figure it. So it looks like that -- what is it, the minimum vertical clearance is when the Donaldson gauge equals 36, and that would be 111.
Q. So --
A. So that makes sense. That adds up to 147.
Q. Right. So on the day in question, and if it was at approximately 18 feet, that would put you at about 129 feet.
A. Okay. Yes, sir.
Q. Actually, it's 18 point --
A. For the west span, for the west span.
Q. Yes, sir.
A. Yeah.
Q. So it actually would have been 18. -- just based on these numbers. This is information they would have gotten had they

called you?
A. Absolutely.
Q. Okay. So if it was 18.37, to be accurate, that would put the minimum clearance for the west span based on the calculations you use at just under 129?
A. 147 minus 18.37.
Q. Right.
A. If that is what it comes out to, I --
Q. Okay.
A. I hope someone did the math, and then that is exactly right.
Q. Do you make the calculation for them or do you just tell them the numbers and assume that they're going to do it?
A. We typically give them that Donaldsonville gauge number, and we tell them that it's 147 minus the Donaldsonville gauge. And if they ask, well, what is that, we will try to give that to them, as well. But typically, they understand how to do that. Just like you provided that information to me, I would then do the math, double-check that math, and then proceed.
The air gap sensor is a lot different. All I do is take that reading off of the NOAA webpage, provide them that air gap reading and give them the time that that air gap reading was done.
Q. Okay. So if you had a northbound tow, and in the tow was a crane barge that had an air draft of, say, 130 feet, you would never recommend that vessel take the west span, would you?
A. No, no. If we had those pieces of information, no.

Q. And certainly, if you -- 136, you definitely wouldn't take it either? And you're exceeding the space --
A. Right, right, right. Absolutely. And in some cases, we would try to monitor that. But remember, our primary focus would be -- and this is what you alluded to earlier -- are there procedures that you have in place to ensure that they're doing it. It would be dependent on the traffic density and volume. We would identify that vessel as having a potential issue, identify what the best span would be. They would actually tell us we're going to take the main span. And then we would essentially try to monitor that, but our primary focus would be a Eighty-One Mile Point and organizing that traffic.
Q. So if the *Kristin Alexis* would have contacted VTS and -- just so I understand the distance -- that contact would have been made how far south of the Sunshine bridge?
A. Wherever they were getting underway from or wherever they made that request from.
Q. Okay. So if they -- let's say they're a few miles south of the bridge. They contact VTS and ask -- and he tells you that "I'm a northbound tow; I've got crane barge *Mr. Erwin* in tow heading north," and they contacted you and asked for information. Would there be any discussion at that point as to which span? Would your assumption be that they're going to take the center span and you would help them coordinate that? How would that work?

A. So the information that you just provided me did not include a air draft.
Q. Okay. So if they had told you their air draft would have been -- let's just say the air draft --
A. Yeah.
Q. -- was 130.
A. Um-hum.
Q. What would your --
A. Our folks would probably look at that -- I would look at that and say, wait a minute, that doesn't compute. Those two numbers are incongruent, and he's not going to likely make it through that west span. But that's all hypothetical at this point.
Q. And again, whether it actually would have or not --
A. Right.
Q. I'm talking about decisions being made to the point where you're getting to the bridge.
A. We would have assisted -- that's what -- remember I discussed there were three levels of services that we provide. That would be considered the navigation assistance service.

And again, our primary focus at this point during the high river at Eighty-One Mile Point would be traffic organization, responding to information, and giving that information. And then at that point, now we're looking at a third level, and that's making sure they don't hazard their vessel, put their vessel into danger.

Q. No further questions. Thank you.

CDR MESKUN: Mr. Eastman? Mr. Wade?

MR. EASTMAN: No questions.

CDR MESKUN: Any follow-up questions?

(No response.)

CDR MESKUN: Mr. Petras, thank you.

MR. PETRAS: Okay.

CDR MESKUN: You are now released as a witness from this Formal Marine Casualty Investigation. Thank you for your testimony and cooperation. If I later determine that this joint investigation team needs additional information from you, I will contact you through your counsel. If you have any questions about this investigation, you may contact the recorder, Lieutenant [redacted]

MR. PETRAS: Thank you very much.

CDR MESKUN: Thank you.

Time is now 10:21. We will take a 15-minute recess, and we are off the record.

(Whereupon, at 10:21 a.m., the testimony was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF:	*KRISTIN ALEXIS*/BARGE *MR. ERVIN* ALLISION WITH THE SUNSHINE BRIDGE DONALDSONVILLE, LOUISIANA OCTOBER 12, 2018 Interview of George Petras
ACCIDENT NO.:	DCA19FM003
PLACE:	New Orleans, Louisiana
DATE:	May 9, 2019

was held according to the record, and that this is the original, complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed to the best of my skill and ability.

[redacted]

Danielle S. VanRiper
Transcriber