



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary

Casualty: Contact of *Miss Mollye D* tow with Bayou Ramos Bridge (NTSB No. DCA22FM008)

Date: December 23, 2021, at 0326 CST

Location: Bayou Boeuf, Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, near Amelia, Louisiana, 29°40.67' N, 91°8.37' W

Person Interviewed: Captain James Snow, Towing Vessel *Miss Mollye D*

Interview Participants: Mr. A. Ehlers, NTSB
LT [REDACTED], US Coast Guard
LTJG [REDACTED], US Coast Guard
Mr. Z. D. Deloach, Deloach Marine Services
Mr. W. Schwartz, representing Deloach Marine Services
Mr. J. Devall, representing Mr. Joseph Giordano
Ms. A. Hayes, Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development
Ms. Rebekah Esnault, Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development
Mr. D. Forrester, Ingram Barge Co.

Summary Provided By: Mr. A. Ehlers, NTSB

OVERVIEW

Captain Snow was interviewed via Zoom video conference on January 28, 2022. The interview was conducted in conjunction with the investigation into the December 23, 2021, casualty involving the contact of the *Miss Mollye D* tow with the Bayou Ramos Bridge near Amelia, Louisiana. Unless specifically delineated by quotes, the text that follows is not a verbatim record of the conversation. It has been developed from notes of the interview.

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

At the time of the casualty, Captain Snow was the acting captain of the *Miss Mollye D*. He filled this position during the medical leave of the assigned captain, Captain Ben Moffett. When Captain Moffett is in command, Captain Snow serves as a relief captain. Captain Snow's responsibilities when in command included:

- Maintenance and safe navigation of the vessel.
- Ensuring pertinent information is shared with the crew.
- Voyage planning, to include foreseeing navigational issues, making barge arrangements, and planning crew changes.

Captain Snow further described voyage planning as a continuous process of looking out "as far as I can," which is more than 6 hours ahead. The plan is recorded in the 7-hour Voyage Plan form. References used to develop the plan include local notices to mariners, weather reports, and VHF radio traffic.

Captain Snow stood wheelhouse watches daily from 0600 to noon and 1800 to midnight, also known as the front watch. His normal work schedule is 28 days on/14 days off, but he can be extended as needed by the company if agreed to by him. At the time of the casualty, he had been off the vessel about 1 week as part of his normal rotation.

Captain Snow has worked at Deloach Marine Services for his entire maritime career, which spans 11-12 years. He began as a deckhand, serving in this capacity for about 5 years. He then entered the steersman program, which is a training program to become a pilot. He was in the steersman program from 2-4 years before being “turned loose” as a pilot. Since 2018, Captain Snow has held a license as master of towing vessels for the western rivers, Great Lakes, and near coastal waters.

Captain Snow’s classroom training included a 4-week steersman course taken at Griff’s Marine Training Inc. in Raceland, Louisiana. The training did not include time in a simulator. While in the steersman program, he also completed a simulator course at the Seaman’s Church Institute. This course was not a requirement, and he has not attended a course since that time.

Captain Snow is normally assigned to the *Miss Mollye D* but has served on other towing vessels as needed by the company. He has served on the vessel since being a deckhand and has been a captain since August 2021.

Captain Snow described the *Miss Mollye D*, noting its dimensions: 47 feet high (air draft), 35 feet wide, and 86 feet long. It has the following equipment/configuration:

- Two Cummins main propulsion diesel engines, each producing 1,000 hp
- Two propellers (unshrouded/open)
- Two generators
- Two steering rudders
- Four flanking rudders

Captain Snow could not recall the age of the engines (they are tracked by hours) but stated that the port engine had been replaced within the last 2 years. When asked, he stated that pre-underway checks were conducted for the engines and steering, to include clutching the engines in and observing the prop wash.

The *Miss Mollye D*’s normal crew complement consists of two wheelman and three deckhands. Occasionally, an additional deckhand/steersman will be assigned. All crewmembers have the same rotation (28 on/28 off – with additional days on as needed), but crew change dates are staggered. He noted that there has been some turnover in crew, as some have moved on due to a slowdown in business. When asked whether the vessel was adequately manned to safely maintain and operate it, he responded, “Absolutely.”

Using a picture provided by Mr. Ehlers, Captain Snow described the wheelhouse controls and equipment:

- To starboard of the wheelman’s chair are two rudder controls (levers); the first, on a raised box, is the primary control for the steering rudders; the second is the secondary control for the steering rudders.
- To the port of the wheelman’s chair are another set of two rudder controls; the first, on a raised box, is the primary control for the flanking rudders; the second is the secondary control for the flanking rudders.
- Indicators in the wheelhouse show the actual position of the rudders.
- Two throttle levers are located centerline in front of the wheelman’s chair (not visible in the photo shown) pneumatically coupled to the vessel’s gear box.
- A radar display is located on the wheelhouse console to port
- Two computer screens are located to starboard on the console. One computer screen normally displays the Rosepoint electronic charting system (ECS). The second screen is configurable; Captain Snow stated that this usually has the electronic log on it.
- Two spotlight control arms are located above the console; Captain Snow stated that the spotlights were not illuminated continuously during night transits but were used as needed. For example: spotlights were shown on barges tied to trees on the undeveloped side of the channel.

The primary means for receiving weather data is through the Rosepoint ECS. Clicking on a button on the system will bring up a window with the information. The weather data window does not obscure the navigation window when activated. Weather data on Rosepoint is from the nearest NOAA reporting station. Other sources of weather information include VHF radio and smart phones.

The *Miss Mollye D* was last in the shipyard in June and July 2021. During that period, a rudder was replaced, shafts were pulled and reinstalled, and packing was replaced. Captain Snow stated that the shipyard period was scheduled for routine maintenance (i.e. not due to a casualty or damage), but the company took advantage of a slow operating period to conduct major repairs.

The Houston to New Orleans route that the tow was on the morning of the casualty could not be considered a regular route, but it was “not unfamiliar.” Captain Snow had transited this route numerous times, and he was familiar with the route.

Captain Snow stated that during his hitch previous to the casualty, the *Miss Mollye D* had “handled fantastic.” During this time, the vessel and its tows did not experience any unexpected sheers to port or starboard. He stated that, in the past, tows would occasionally turn to port or starboard, but it was gradual, and he could steer out of the turn.

Captain Snow was informed of the casualty via a text from deckhand Matt Parker stating, “Joe hit a bridge.” Captain Snow was surprised by the news.

Captain Snow described how tows were made up. The makeup is determined by the captain or wheelman (pilot), depending on who is on watch. The captain and pilot will discuss the makeup ahead of time to “get an idea of what we want.” When choosing how to make up a tow, the following factors are considered:

- Whether the barges have a rake or box bow
- Whether the barges are empty or loaded
- Barge drafts
- Barge drop locations

Captain Snow was asked whether the make-up of the tow at the time of the casualty (two loaded barges aft in the port string of the tow, one empty barge ahead of the loaded barges, and three empty barges in the starboard string) impacted the maneuvering of the tow. He stated “no, not at all,” noting that putting the loaded barges in a string “rides better” and was more stable. Asked if the increased draft of the loaded barges affected steering, he replied “not by much.” When towing similarly configured tows in the past, Captain Snow stated that he “never had a problem” with control. He stated that in these configurations, the *Miss Mollye D* was not offset to the side with the loads; it was always centerlined on the entire tow.

Captain Snow noted that empty barges were affected by wind, although the effects could be mitigated by having loaded barges in the tow. He stated, “I’d rather have 1–2 loads as opposed to 6 empties.”

Captain Snow stated that there were no factors that make Bayou Boeuf particularly challenging to navigate. The only potential challenge was traffic waiting for the Bayou Boeuf lock. Other than that, there are no restrictions to navigation and “plenty of room.” Barges or other vessels moored to the banks do not impede traffic, and it is not difficult to pass oncoming vessels in the area. On some days there is a “fair tide” that creates “a little bit” of current, but other days it is light. He never noticed outflows from Bayou Ramos or other intersecting waterways creating difficulty with maneuvering. When asked what could cause a tow to sheer in Bayou Boeuf, he responded “steering acting up” or a “real hard, high wind,” but it wasn’t something he had experienced.

Asked about the Bayou Ramos Bridge, Captain Snow stated that prior to the casualty he did not know that there was a bridge in that location. He could not say that it was hard to see; rather, he was “focused on other stuff” when passing the area and did not get near the bridge. He was not aware of any fendering on the bridge.

Captain Snow was shown a maintenance record from September 2021 reporting throttles needing to be adjusted on the *Miss Mollye D*. The record was created by another wheelman, and Captain Snow was not familiar with this specific case. He stated that it was not unusual for the throttles to get out of adjustment, but that it had only occurred a maximum of 2–3 times in the time he had been aboard the vessel. He stated that the impact was a possible delay in the engines engaging.

Captain Snow was shown a maintenance record from November 2021 reporting that there was a major delay when engaging both engines in forward or reverse. The record was created by another pilot, and Captain Snow was not familiar with this case. When asked what the impact might be, he stated that the wheelman would have to plan ahead and be ready to react.

Captain Snow was shown a maintenance record that he submitted in late November 2021 reporting multiple leaks on the starboard engine gearbox. He stated that the leaks had no effect on the operation of the gearbox, and he observed no issues with the gearbox after the leaks were repaired with new hoses and clamps.

Captain Snow was shown a maintenance record from September 2021 reporting that a steering pump was not operational. The report was submitted by another wheelman. He was not familiar with the issue but noted that the vessel has two steering pumps, so the loss of one pump does not result in the loss of steering. The report stated that the problem was resolved by replacing “locators.” Captain Snow did not know what was meant by locators.

Captain Snow was shown a maintenance record from October 2021 reporting that the flanking rudders were not working. The record was created by another pilot, and Captain Snow was not familiar with the issue. He stated that, as far as he knew, the issue was resolved.

When asked, Captain Snow stated that he had not experienced any problems with the propulsion or steering systems since the casualty.

Captain Snow was asked several questions about Mr. Giordano, the pilot at the helm during the casualty. Mr. Giordano is a regularly assigned crewmember on the *Miss Mollye D*, although he has worked other vessels in the fleet. Per the captain’s recollection, Mr. Giordano was in his third week of rotation on the vessel. Captain Snow has worked with Mr. Giordano for “quite a while” as a deckhand and steersman. The captain stated that, although Mr. Giordano was only recently made a pilot, he had been a steersman for a significant period. Mr. Giordano was “familiar enough with the vessel...competent...ready to be a pilot...well adequate.” Captain Snow had observed Mr. Giordano operate the vessel in all kinds of capacities with different types of tows, and he “did it very well.”

Captain Snow stated that written performance evaluations were not required for the crew. Evaluations were generally done for deckhands looking to move up. They could be filled out to assist the deckhand or management in making promotion decisions. Captain Snow had not filled out an evaluation for Mr. Giordano as a pilot. Prior to the casualty, Captain Snow had no concerns about Mr. Giordano’s performance.

When asked, Captain Snow could not recall how much sleep he gets each 24-hour period while on board the *Miss Mollye D*, but he stated that he slept between both watches. He is able to sleep soundly in his cabin, which is located on the second deck. He stated that he could hear the engines from his bunk, and although it could be considered loud, he did not have trouble sleeping.

Captain Snow was asked to describe the term “being posted.” He stated that it refers to when a wheelman that is experienced in the particular area and knows the hazards rides with the vessel. It is different than a steersman, who has either a captain or pilot in the wheelhouse with him/her, but similar in that there was “someone in the wheelhouse with you.” Captain Snow did not know of an official policy at Deloach Marine Services for being posted, but if someone was unfamiliar with an area, an experienced wheelman would be assigned.

Captain Snow stated that the process for signing off steersman Towing Officer Assessment Records (TOARs) was to observe evolutions, ensuring correctness, and then signing. Sign-offs occurred aboard the *Miss Mollye D*; however, in his capacity as relief captain or acting captain, Captain Snow was not authorized to sign off on TOARs for steersmen. Sign-offs could only be done by Captain Moffett. Once a steersman had completed all sign-offs and received their pilot license, he/she would be cut loose and assigned to a vessel on the back watch.

Captain Snow was asked what things were required to be reported to the company regarding the engine room. He replied "anything," either via logs or via repair reports. He stated that there may be things the crew can do to address problems or basic maintenance, but, in any case, the company is kept informed (perhaps verbally, if not through the report system).

Captain Snow was asked what things he expected to be woken up for as captain. He replied with the following:

- Anything the pilot cannot handle; "Come and get me; I will help."
- Mechanical problems, depending on the severity.
- If the vessel can't move or the engines shut down.
- A marine casualty.

Captain Snow stated that his standing orders included the following:

- "Keep the boat clean."
- "Stay busy."
- "Take care of what needs to be taken care of."

Written orders were part of the company's "Watch Duty List."

When asked, Captain Snow stated that in his career he had hit or overrun an object with a tow. He said that the hit could be felt "most of the time." When he overran a buoy, he could feel a shudder. He described it audibly as "duh-duh-duh-duh."

When asked what could have caused the Bayou Ramos casualty, he responded "I can't speculate. I have no idea."

END SUMMARY



A. Ehlers
Marine Casualty Investigator