



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary – DCA21FM008

Interview of: Ordoyne Griffin – Captain of the *Trent Joseph*
Date/Time: October 8, 2021, 1115 to 1240 CDT
Location: Telephonic
Interviewed by: Adam Tucker – NTSB, CWO3 [REDACTED] – US Coast Guard
Attendees: Barrett Rice – Legal Counsel representing Coastal Towing, LLC interests and Darren Pitre – Coastal Towing, LLC
Accident: November 22, 2020, Contact of barge towed by towing vessels *Trent Joseph* and *George C*, with the Bayou Barataria swing bridge (NTSB No. DCA21FM008). Barataria, Louisiana.

This interview summary has been compiled based on NTSB and US Coast Guard investigator notes taken during the interview of Mr. Ordoyne Griffin, captain of the towing vessel *Trent Joseph*.

- Mr. Griffin said they picked up the barges and realized that there was no bitt or button on the larger of the two barges for him to place his tow cable on, so they made it up with the bigger barge aft of the tow and the smaller barge at the head of the tow. Usually, they place the bigger barge at the head of the tow. They had to place the rake of the bigger barge facing backwards in the tow because if it faced the forward and smaller barge, the rake would pass over it. The *George C* had to use a nose line instead of making up to the barge like they normally do. There was nothing on the barge for the *George C* to make up to and there was a lot of deck obstructions that would have cut the push cables. They departed with the tow in that configuration because that was the only way they could do it.
- Mr. Griffin said they turned into the Barataria Waterway and were heading towards the bridge. He told the *George C* captain that they had to go as slow as they could because it had been about 15 years since he had been through that bridge. He called the bridge tender for the bridge to be opened which she opened. He saw that the bridge was open because of the green lights on top of the bridge span. He could not however see any red lights, so he called the bridge tender and informed her that he could not see any red lights and asked what side he was to pass on. She informed him to pass down the east side, the house side of the bridge. Upon hearing that he started to maneuver the *Trent Joseph* to pass through the east side of the bridge. He told the *George C* that they would go in there slow. As they approached the bridge, they were making about 1.5 to 2 mph.
- As the *Trent Joseph* got closer to the bridge, Mr. Griffin used the starboard spotlight on top of the wheelhouse to help see the guide walls. That is when he noticed the bridge was over rotated a bit and extending past the long guide wall. At the point at which he noticed

the bridge over rotated, it was too late to stop the tow because the current was hitting them from behind. Mr. Griffin told the *George C* to go as slow as he can go because the bridge was over rotated by about a foot.

- Passing through the bridge, they were going about one mile per hour or a little more. Mr. Griffin had the deckhand stand at the starboard side door to watch the barges pass through. Shooting the gap, Mr. Griffin looked back to see what the deckhand was seeing. The deckhand said the barges were falling a bit to the starboard, so Mr. Griffin turned the *Trent Joseph* to port which, caused the barges to first go to starboard before the towline took the tension to bring the barges back to the port. The barges started to come to port but at the small guide wall, the current was acting to push the barges to the starboard. The barges were coming fine behind them, but the deckhand said the aft barge was falling to starboard which at that time, he could do nothing about it. The *George C* was backing up at that time, and the barge hit the bridge span. Mr. Griffin felt the bump, and he stopped the boat, and the *George C* got the barge to port before Mr. Griffin told the *George C* they needed to get through the bridge. Once on the other side of the bridge they dropped the spuds on the barge and remained there.
- When asked about the bits/buttons missing on the larger barge as being the reason that it was placed aft versus forward, Mr. Griffin said if you have the smaller barge in the back, you will not have the notch facing forward so it would not catch on anything.
- When asked about the length of the tow line across the water from the stern of the *Trent Joseph* to the head of the barge, Mr. Griffin said there was a bridle connected to a shock collar connected to the main line, so from the stern of the boat to the bow of the barge there was about 70-75 feet at the most. The bridle was 65 feet, and the shock line was 15 feet, but most of the shock line was on the stern of the boat.
- When asked about the *George C* being the tail boat, Mr. Griffin said the tail boat helps slow the tow so that the tow doesn't run over the lead boat, which is why you never put a 20-foot tow line between the lead boat and the barge, which allows for distance to get away from it. When asked if the tail boat can help maneuver the aft barge Mr. Griffin said yes, that is what he is there for. The tail boat can pull the aft barge over to the port or starboard. The aft barge is at the tail boats end, so the tail boat is responsible to help move that barge. When asked if they spoke about this, Mr. Griffin said he called the *George C* on the radio and told him that he noticed the bridge was sticking out and over rotated, to keep an eye on it, and do what he had to keep the barge from hitting it.
- Usually, the tail boat will make up to the back of the barge, but the *George C* couldn't do that because of the way the barge was situated so they only had a nose line. The *George C* couldn't make up to the barge because of the anchor line and fittings on the deck that would have cut the push cables. When asked how long the nose line was, Mr. Griffin said he did not know.
- When asked since he had not been through the Barataria bridge in about 15 years if that prompted him to do any advance preparation or assessment before getting underway, Mr. Griffin said they had a safety meeting before they departed where he said they would go through slow and to take their time since they were not in a hurry. He recalled instructing for people to keep an eye out and have somebody watching through the bridges. He

instructed the tail boat to go slow and put it in reverse and do whatever he needed to do to get the tail end through. He told the *George C* to not wait for him to tell him to do something, and just do whatever it takes to move the barges through. When asked when this dialogue took place, Mr. Griffin said that was while they were making up the barges before they got underway.

- When asked where he gets his information related to the bridge clearances and air drafts, Mr. Griffin said he gets it from the map that is on the computer. When asked if he was aware that it was going to be a narrow passage with the size of the tow that he had, Mr. Griffin said he was aware of this. When asked to recall the width of the opening of the bridge relative to the tow, Mr. Griffin said he could not recall, but thought there would have been a 25-to-30-foot gap when passing through.
- When asked to clarify what green lights he saw and what red lights he was expecting to see but didn't, Mr. Griffin said the green navigation lights were the ones on the bridge span. He noted that when approaching the bridge, it was at a curve to where he was approaching from. The green lights would have been on the guide wall side.
- The red lights that he was expecting to see would have been on the guide walls. He did not see any when approaching and only when he was very close to the north entrance between the guide walls, he "barely" saw a red light on the south side of the long guide wall. He saw no other red lights. The red lights were supposed to be there to show where the guide wall is. When asked to clarify where he saw that light, it was on the south side of the long guide wall.
- When asked of the visibility and weather conditions that night, Mr. Griffin said it was a clear night, but it was dark, and with all the lights from the town and the floodlights on all the docks on the bank, it made it hard to see the bridge and its navigation lights.
- When asked if the green lights on the bridge span provide an indication on what side to pass based on if they are placed on the east, west or center of the span, Mr. Griffin said it does give you an idea of what side to pass, but without the red lights showing the location of the guide walls it makes it hard to determine where the guide walls are. He noted the last time he passed through the bridge, about 15 years ago, he passed down the east side but since then, the bridge had been hit many times, and he was not aware if anything different had been in place since then.
- When asked how he knew the bridge had been hit so many times in the past, Mr. Griffin said he heard this from other people and recalled a few years ago a rock tow hit the bridge and knocked it completely off the pedestal.
- When asked if he understood what the bridge tender said when she instructed him to pass on the east side, the house side of the bridge, Mr. Griffin said he did.
- When asked about the speed passing through the bridge, Mr. Griffin said the speed was between 1.5 to 2 mph approaching. The last time he saw the speed on the computer, they were passing through the bridge, and he saw they were doing about 1.2 or 1.3 mph and they were still slowing at that point. They were going through the bridge as slow as they could.
- When asked to confirm what computer he was referencing, he said it was the navigation computer called Coastal Explorer, the same company that makes Rose Point.

- When asked if he was able to configure the entire tow in Coastal Explorer so that he can see a scale profile of the tow on the chart, Mr. Griffin said no, the only thing he could see was his boat and the tail boat.
- When asked if he was using Coastal Explorer to pass through the bridge, Mr. Griffin said he was using it and the radar on the approach to the bridge but once you are close you go visual only.
- When asked to estimate about how far away he was when he noticed the bridge over rotated outside of the guide wall, Mr. Griffin estimated it was about 100 feet ahead when he noticed.
- When asked about the speed of the current that he had given in a statement to the coast guard as being 1.4 mph and his source of that information, Mr. Griffin said that is what the *George C* had said the current was running.
- When asked what instructions he gave to the *George C* when he noticed the bridge outside of the guide wall, Mr. Griffin said he told the *George C* to back down to which the *George C* replied that he would back down harder. He noted that he already had the *George C* backing what he remembered as quarter speed on the approach to the bridge. When asked to clarify quarter speed, Mr. Griffin said it would have been just above clutch and before half.
- When asked about how he saw the bridge sticking out about a foot from the guide wall, Mr. Griffin said when they were close enough to see the span, noting the guide wall timbers were all black and hard to see, he noticed the guide wall was inside of the bridge span corner. He saw a green navigation light on a pole on at the end of the bridge span in front of him.
- When asked of his communications with the bridge tender at the time he noticed the bridge sticking out from the guide wall, Mr. Griffin said he said nothing because at that point he was so busy with steering the boat to try to avoid hitting it with one hand on the steering wheel, and another on the spotlight and throttle. It would have been hard to use the radio at that time to tell the bridge tender the bridge was over rotated. He also had to tell the *George C* the bridge was sticking out and to keep an eye on it.
- When asked about the deckhand standing at the starboard side door and his communications to him, Mr. Griffin said the deckhand just let him know which way the barges were falling toward the guide wall, so he knew which way to start turning to correct it. The deckhand was on the opposite side of the bridge tender, and that was the reason by she didn't see anyone. The deckhand was his lookout. The deckhand did not call distances, and the information he provided was the direction that the barges were falling, to the port or starboard.
- When asked what he saw the last time he looked back at the barges, Mr. Griffin said the barges were following good until they got to the guide wall when the current, flowing with them, threw the barge away from them. There was an eddy at the top of the long guide wall. At the short guide wall, there was a different current which threw the barges back to the starboard. He noted if both guide walls were the same length, he would have been dealing with the same current. But with the long and short guide walls, there were two different currents coming through the bridge. If they had a head current, they would

have already been past the bridge before they got hit with the current. When the current is flowing with you, the current is different on the side that you enter. Once in the gap, Mr. Griffin said he was looking ahead to make sure they were in the middle, and the deckhand was providing information looking aft.

- When asked, about the barge falling to starboard and his steer to port to correct, Mr. Griffin said that the towline is always tight but whenever you turn, the back of the boat will go to starboard causing the tow line to become taught and then pull the barges back to the port.
- When asked if he made any propulsion changes in the gap, Mr. Griffin said no, and that he did not speed up noting that would have made things worse. He was just above clutch ahead, maybe at about 900 rpm on both engines.
- When asked when he turned into the Barataria Waterway, what side of the channel he followed (the west or east side), Mr. Griffin said that when he was approaching the bridge, he was at the center of the channel coming down, and once close to the bridge he pulled off to the port (east side). He noted there was a curve and a boat dock in the area so in the turn around the curve, the boat wanted to head towards the dock and the barges would slide in the turn.
- When asked if there were any technical, mechanical, or steering issues with the *Trent Joseph* prior to the accident, Mr. Griffin said the only issue was there was no bitt on the bow of the larger crane barge for them to make up to which gave them no choice but to make the crane barge up aft and the smaller barge forward.
- When asked of the draft of the *Trent Joseph*, Mr. Griffin said it was 10 feet.
- When asked of how many crew the *Trent Joseph* had at the time of the accident, Mr. Griffin said there were 4 crew total on board.
- When asked if the *Trent Joseph* was inspected, Mr. Griffin said it was an inspected towing vessel. It was inspected by the Coast Guard. They were inspected by the Coast Guard in a shipyard just before they started the job they were on at the time of the accident.
- When asked if the barge contacted the protective fendering on the north side of the bridge, Mr. Griffin said no it did not. When asked if he saw the fendering on the starboard side (the longer fender wall) Mr. Griffin said that the night they were passing through, when he saw the fender wall, he recalled saying to the deckhand, look how many times that boats hit the bridge, based on how much damage there was to the guide walls. The deckhand never said anything about the barges touching the guide wall on the starboard side, and that was the side that he was standing on.
- When asked if there were any communications with the bridge tender when passing through the bridge, or any warnings given by the bridge operator, Mr. Griffin said no there were not.
- When asked if the bridge tender ever communicated the condition of the bridge, for example if it was fully open, Mr. Griffin said she told him the bridge was fully open and to come on through.

- When asked if he was informed by the bridge tender if the navigation lighting was working or not, Mr. Griffin said she told him that the red lights on the fender walls were not working properly because of damage that had occurred earlier, noting that was why he asked what side to pass on, because he didn't see any red lights.
- When asked if he was aware of what side to pass the bridge on in advance of the approach to the bridge, Mr. Griffin said he saw on the computer that he would have to pass on the east side, and he remembered passing on that side 15 years ago, but when he only saw the green lights on the span and no red lights for the fenders, he wondered if anything had changed, and he wanted to verify with the bridge tender that was the side he was supposed to pass on.
- When asked if he had previously worked with the captain of the *George C*, Mr. Griffin said no that was his first time.
- When asked if the captain of the *George C* communicated any kind of warning in advance of the barge hitting the bridge, Mr. Griffin said no.
- When asked when he initially called the bridge tender to open the bridge and how he knew when and where to call from, Mr. Griffin said you just always call at a bridge about an eight to a quarter mile before the bridge to let them know you are coming and to open the bridge. They will let you know if it is open already or if they need to open it.
- When asked if there were any frequency problems on the VHF radios, Mr. Griffin said there was a lot of traffic on channel 13 but there were no communication issues or misunderstandings. There was no trouble understanding each other. When asked how he was communicating to the *George C*, Mr. Griffin said there are two VHF radios in the wheelhouse of the *Trent Joseph* and that he was communicating with him on another channel but could not recall what channel it was.
- When asked what watch he was on Mr. Griffin said he was on the front watch from 1800 that evening. He woke up that day about 1600 and said he felt rested. When asked if he was taking any medications, Mr. Griffin said no. When asked if he wore glasses, Mr. Griffin said no but he used glasses for reading.
- When asked if he heard any sound signals or any strange noises, Mr. Griffin said no and the only thing he heard was a "pow" when the barge hit the bridge span which they also felt.
- When asked after the contact if the tow made it through Mr. Griffin said yes, because the barges started to drift down to the port (east) side, so he told the *George C* that they needed to get through before the barges hit the other side. Once through they dropped the spuds and started with the paperwork and notification to the Coast Guard and company personnel.
- When asked if he was contacted by the police, Mr. Griffin said he spoke to a police officer by cell phone after the contact with the bridge.
- When asked what he thought would have happened if the bridge was fully open and behind the guide wall as it should have been, Mr. Griffin said nothing would have happened. They may have rubbed up against the guide wall, or maybe not. The straight corner of the barge hit the bridge span and nothing else.

- When asked it was common for barges and tows to slide up against guide walls, Mr. Griffin said it happens and that the tow is not a car where you can just point it straight and it goes that way. With the current running as it was that night, a whirlpool would form at the northern end of the long guide wall.

End of summary