



## National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594  
Office of Marine Safety

### Interview Summary – DCA21FM014

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**Interview of:** Carlos Chauvin – captain of the towing vessel *Robert Cenac*  
**Date/Time:** March 31, 2021 1510 to 1600 CDT  
**Location:** Telephonic/conference call  
**Interviewed by:** Lt. [REDACTED] – USCG and Adam Tucker – NTSB  
**Attendees:** Michael Held – Phelps Dunbar, LLC (attorney for Al Cenac Towing)  
**Accident:** January 13, 2021 Contact of barge *H238*, pushed by towing vessel *Robert Cenac*, with CSX Rigolets railway swing bridge (NTSB No. DCA21FM014). Rigolets Pass, Louisiana.

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This interview summary has been compiled based on NTSB investigator notes taken during the interview of Mr. Carlos Chauvin.

- Mr. Chauvin has worked for Al Cenac Towing since August of 2010 in the capacity of either captain or pilot. He worked on 10 of the 13 vessels in the Cenac Towing fleet.
- He has been credentialed with the Coast Guard for about 20 years and currently holds a 200-ton master's credential with a 200-ton towing endorsement. He has always sailed on towing vessels. Prior to obtaining his credential, Mr. Chauvin worked as commercial fisherman and a tankerman on towing vessels since about 1980.
- Mr. Chauvin was the captain of the *Robert Cenac* at the time of the accident. He was relieving the regular captain of the *Robert Cenac* who was not on board at the time of the accident.
- On the *Robert Cenac*, they work a 6 hour on and 6 hours off watch rotation. Mr. Chauvin was working the midnight to 0600 watch at the time of the accident. He works also from noon to 1800. The person he rotated watches with was the pilot.
- There 4 crewmembers on the *Robert Cenac*. Two deckhands, the pilot and himself. There is a deckhand that works each watch with the captain and pilot. Dylan Smith was the deckhand on watch with him at the time of the accident.
- The *Robert Cenac* was on its way from Heron Bay, MS on its way to Port Bienville, MS.
- The single barge pushed by the *Robert Cenac* was 195-feet long by 35-feet wide. It had a raked bow with an open hopper. The barge was empty at the time of the accident. Mr. Chauvin could not recall the draft of the barge at the time of the accident.
- The total length of the tow would have been 255 by 35.
- When asked if the *Robert Cenac* has flaking rudders, Mr. Chauvin said there was one flanking rudder on each side. The *Robert Cenac* is a 1340 total horsepower boat. Its engines are QSK19 type.
- The *Robert Cenac* draws about 6 feet and the width of the boat is 28 feet.
- Mr. Chauvin took over the watch from the pilot before midnight somewhere 2330 and 2340.

- At that time the pilot told him they were waiting for the Rigolets bridge to open and they were drifting around about a quarter to half mile south of the bridge.
- At some point, he was informed by radio that the bridge was open.
- Upon hearing the bridge was open, Mr. Chauvin approached the bridge from the south heading north. He noted that approaching the bridge, there are hardly any lights on it. There are two red lights on the west side fender works and one on the east side fender works of the bridge.
- He used the spotlight to see the bridge and fender works. About a half to a quarter mile away from the bridge, he saw the fender works with the spotlight and started to line the tow up on it to pass through. At some point, he noticed the bridge wasn't fully open after the bridge operator told him it was open. When he realized this and how close he was to it, he started to back down.
- The incoming tide was going north, and because of that, there was a cross current from east to west.
- He slowed up to stop once he realized the bridge wasn't fully open, but the current took the tow and threw it into the west side of the bridge. Mr. Chauvin said he thought he was going to land on the fender works but before he was able to stop, the barge struck the overhanging part of the bridge that was not all the way in behind the fender works. He backed off and landed on the fender works.
- Mr. Chauvin noted that before proceeding through, he was told the bridge was all the way open. If the bridge was full open, the barge would have just contacted the fender works and not the bridge.
- Mr. Chauvin had the spotlight up at the head of the barge and was expecting to see the fender works. When he moved the spotlight, he saw the bridge overhanging the fender works, but by then it was too late to avoid hitting it, so he backed down but was too close to stop.
- When the tow was laid up along the fender works, Mr. Chauvin spoke with the operator and said he thought he hit the bridge. He also called the Coast Guard and company management and reported everything. After that they just continued through. That was a little after midnight.
- The *Robert Cenac* itself never hit the bridge; it was just the barge. When asked where the barge hit the bridge, Mr. Chauvin said it was the port corner bow and small part of the hopper dome. The front corner and a little bit of the hopper.
- When asked when he relieved the watch from the pilot, Mr. Chauvin said they were drifting around about a half mile from the bridge on the east side of it just north of the intercoastal waterway.
- When asked to clarify communications with the bridge operator, Mr. Chauvin said the pilot on the previous watch initially called the bridge to arrange for passage. During Mr. Chauvin's watch, the bridge operator contacted him and said it was open, so he proceeded towards the bridge.

- The initial call was made by the pilot to ask him to open the bridge. When the Mr. Chauvin was on watch, the bridge operator called him and said that the bridge was open. Mr. Chauvin was not in the wheelhouse at the time of the pilot's initial call.
- When asked about how they communicate, Mr. Chauvin said it was by VHF channel 13.
- When asked if he knew if there was an operator physically at the bridge, Mr. Chauvin said there is an operator at the bridge itself who is located in a building, but not on the turntable.
- When asked how he lined up to pass through the gap once informed the bridge was open, Mr. Chauvin said he lined up for the bridge a little to the east anticipating the current would throw him to the west.
- When asked about the current at the bridge, Mr. Chauvin said sometimes it is stronger than other nights when the current sets you to the west. If the tide is going out, the current wants to throw you to the east.
- When asked about the lighting at the bridge, Mr. Chauvin said that when approaching the bridge, there is only one red light on the south side of the west bridge fender works which is not marking the end. It is mid-way up which is the same for the light on the north side. For the fender works on the east side, there is only one light which is in about the middle of the fender works. There are no lights on the bridge itself and it is dark. There are no range lights (refer to diagram submitted by Mr. Chauvin).



- The bridge swings south, meaning clockwise, and when it is fully open, it is entirely behind the fender works.
- When asked if there were any reflectors on the fender works, Mr. Chauvin said there were not.
- When asked to describe how he noticed that the bridge was not fully open, Mr. Chauvin said he was expecting the fender wall. His attention was to look for the fender wall with the spotlight to make sure the tow was inside the fender works. When he noticed the

bridge outside of the fender works, all he saw was black. This was an indicator to him that something wasn't right which turned out to be the bridge outside of the fender works. He shouldn't have seen anything in front of him. The bridge should have just been open, and he should have seen only the reflection from the water with the spotlight. It shouldn't have been the black that he saw. He did not recall how far the barge was away at that point. He stopped the boat and the barge, but the current grabbed the tow and pushed it up against the fender works. If the bridge was open, like the operator told him, he wouldn't have hit anything.

- When asked if the fender works were damaged, Mr. Chauvin said as far as he knew, it was only the bridge that was damaged.
- When asked how he was aware of the tidal conditions that night, Mr. Chauvin said he is “a fisherman, a boat guy”, and he knows what way the water is going.
- When asked what he recalled when he started backing down after seeing the bridge, Mr. Chauvin first backed off the throttles and after seeing what was really happening, he backed down full.
- When asked about any propulsion delays when backing down, Mr. Chauvin said there is no more than a three second delay on the *Robert Cenac*.
- When asked what he recalled of the dialogue he had with the bridge operator, Mr. Chauvin said the bridge operator told him it was open. After hitting the bridge, he called the bridge operator and said he thought he hit the bridge. The operator asked him if he was sure he hit, and Mr. Chauvin replied that he was sure because part of the bridge was on the deck of the barge. The operator replied that he would close the bridge after the *Robert Cenac* and barge were out of the way. He recalled the operator saying something about an “elevator” which he thought might be the part that landed on the barge.
- Mr. Chauvin recalled the bridge operator telling him something like that he got the bridge closed. Nothing else was said. Afterwards, Mr. Chauvin called the coast guard, and he called his boss. He recalled the bridge operator saying to not get rid of the parts that were on the barge.
- When asked where the *Robert Cenac* went after getting clear of the bridge, Mr. Chauvin said they continued to their destination of Bienville, MS, about an hour away from the bridge. There, they tied up and waited for the Coast Guard to come.
- When asked if he had transited through the Rigolets CSX bridge before, Mr. Chauvin said “oh yeah, quite a few times”.
- When asked if the bridge operator was a male or female, Mr. Chauvin said it was a male voice.
- When asked if he had noticed a pattern of the bridge not being fully opened in the past, Mr. Chauvin said the only time he noticed was this time. He recalled some other people had problems with the bridge closing on them requiring them to back out.
- Three days before the accident, another boat that was working with them had to back out after the bridge started to close on them. That was the *Sarah Cenac*, the same boat they were on the currently working with. It was about 2 to 3 days before the accident. Mr.

Chauvin said he heard it was something to do with an electrical problem with the bridge did not have any specific details about what happened.

- When asked what the velocity of the current was at the time of the accident, Mr. Chauvin said he did not know.
- When asked about the weather, Mr. Chauvin said it was a nice night with no wind blowing. Good visibility.
- When asked who was operating the spotlight, Mr. Chauvin said that it was him.
- When asked if the other crew were around, Mr. Chauvin said because the watch had just changed, the off-watch crew were in the galley and they came to the wheelhouse after the contact with the bridge.
- When asked if he was the only one in the wheelhouse at the time of the contact with the bridge, Mr. Chauvin said the deckhand that just got off watch came up to see if there was anything he needed, and he was there when the barge struck the bridge.
- When asked what sensor inputs that go into the Rosepoint system on the *Robert Cenac*, Mr. Chauvin said it just had GPS and AIS.
- When asked what type of job the *Robert Cenac* was engaged in, Mr. Chauvin said they were working with a bucket dredge digging out of Bienville and bringing the dredge material to Heron Bay to restore the beach there.
- When asked about his approach to the bridge compared to his past approaches, Mr. Chauvin said it was a normal approach as before. When asked about water depth issues, Mr. Chauvin said there were no issues and there was about 24 to 30 feet of water in there.
- When asked about any challenges with the horizontal clearance between the bridge fender works, Mr. Chauvin said there are none.
- When asked what approach speed he was doing to pass through the bridge opening, Mr. Chauvin said he was doing about 7 mph, which is normal. When getting closer to the bridge, he slowed to about 6.5 mph. Upon noticing the bridge was not open, he backed down to stop.
- Mr. Chauvin said that passing through the bridge was normal navigation and there was nothing he would have changed about his approach or speed.

**End of summary**