



## National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594  
Office of Marine Safety

### Interview Summary – DCA21FM014

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**Interview of:** Charles James Sablan Ronchetti – pilot of the towing vessel *Robert Cenac*  
**Date/Time:** June 11, 2021 1000 to 1105 CDT  
**Location:** Telephonic/conference call  
**Interviewed by:** Adam Tucker – NTSB  
**Attendees:** Michael Held – Phelps Dunbar, LLC (attorney for AI Cenac Towing)  
**Accident:** January 12, 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. Charles Ronchetti, pilot of the *Robert Cenac*.

- Mr. Ronchetti has worked on the *Robert Cenac* for about a year and was the pilot on board the *Robert Cenac* at the time of the accident. He has worked with the company for 2 years and 4 months and is still currently working on the *Robert Cenac*. He was working the 1800 to midnight watch on the night of January 12, 2021 and works 6 hours on and 6 hours off watches.
- The *Robert Cenac* departed Heron Bay at mile marker 40 and started heading westbound on the ICW east towards the Rigolets Railroad bridge. At mile marker 38, Mr. Ronchetti established initial contact with the railroad bridge tender. He came over the radio and said “Rigolets Railroad bridge, this is the *Robert Cenac* calling”. He received a reply of “Rigolets, go ahead” to which Mr. Ronchetti then said, “we are about 30 minutes out inbound”. The reply he received was, “I got a train coming so it’s going to be a minute”.
- Upon hearing the information, he slowed but continued to mile marker 36 and there, he stopped the vessel and drifted in the area.
- It was about 2230 when Mr. Ronchetti initially called the Rigolets bridge.
- Around 2330, the captain came up to the wheelhouse and the boat was still drifting around at that time. Mr. Ronchetti still had not received a call from the bridge to say if they were open or if they were going to open. Both he and the captain commenced a watch turnover where he briefed the captain of what was going on. Before turning over the wheel to the captain, Mr. Ronchetti called the Rigolets bridge again over the radio to say they were still waiting and questioned if the bridge was open.
- The bridge tender replied and asked where the *Robert Cenac* was located, to which Mr. Ronchetti replied they were 15 minutes away from the bridge. The bridge operator responded, “I’m gonna get it open for you cap” to which Mr. Ronchetti replied, “roger that”.

- Mr. Ronchetti, turned over to the captain and he departed the wheelhouse and went below to the galley to finish some paperwork.
- From the galley, he heard the engines rev up about three to five minutes after leaving the wheelhouse. Sometime later, he heard the engines backing down, going full astern and wondered to himself what was going on. He got up to leave the galley and he felt a bump, which he described as like going through the locks and the boat touching the guide wall. When he stepped out of the galley door, on the port side of the boat, he saw the bridge itself, and not the fender wall.
- Thinking they just hit the bridge, Mr. Ronchetti went up to the wheelhouse and asked the captain what was going on, to which the captain told him he just hit the bridge. From that point on, the captain made calls to the bridge tender, the company, and the customer that they were working for.
- Mr. Ronchetti noted that after the tow hit the bridge, they bounced off and the bridge continued to open. The tow just remained on the fender wall while all the calls were made and once done, they continued inbound to their destination. The captain couldn't find the number to call the Coast Guard, so Mr. Ronchetti called the Coast Guard by radio and said they needed the contact number to report a marine incident. The coast guard gave him the phone number over the radio and the captain then called the Coast Guard. Mr. Ronchetti took over the wheel while the captain was on the phone with the Coast Guard. He continued to drive the boat to the JC Deville 2201 which was their destination. Once the captain was done with the Coast Guard, he took helm and docked the barge. Mr. Ronchetti then went to bed because he had to be back on watch at 0600.
- When he was back on watch, Mr. Ronchetti went out to the barge with the dredge foreman to inspect it. There was a hole in the void tank, but it was nothing that affected the job that they were doing.
- The Coast Guard later came and did an inspection of the *Robert Cenac* and barge. The only thing the Coast Guard needed from Mr. Ronchetti was to show them on the Rosepoint the recording of the vessel's movement and track.
- When asked if it was a normal procedure to call the Rigolets bridge 30 minutes out, Mr. Ronchetti said that they were told by a bridge tender that the bridge was not allowed to open unless they were 10 minutes away. The bridge however takes 15 to 30 minutes to open, so they established a procedure to call 30 minutes out which was enough time to see if they were open and if not, make the request for them to open. That also allowed for enough time to correct the vessels position to line up on the bridge.
- Mr. Ronchetti noted that where the bridge is located, the current and the wind, affect the tow. The tow can't just standby close to the bridge and wait for it to open. Time and distance are needed to adjust the vessel's position to properly line up on the bridge because the current will either set the vessel one way or another. You can't just sit there a thousand feet away and wait for the bridge to open. The tow needs to be at least 2 miles away, from his point of view, to be at a safe distance to properly line up when the bridge is open and ready to pass through.

- When asked where he was when he made the initial call to the Rigolets bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said they were at mile marker 38 on the ICW east. That is generally the location from which they initially call the bridge.
- When asked to recall the communications again between him and the Rigolets bridge tender, Mr. Ronchetti said the only thing he said was that they were 30 minutes out, they were inbound, and that they would like for the bridge to be opened. The response from the bridge tender was that he had a train coming and it could be a while. Mr. Ronchetti replied, “roger that”, and that he would standby and wait for his call.
- When asked about when the *Robert Cenac* was drifting south of the Rigolets bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said that he was drifting but occasionally he would put the engines in clutch astern because the current was setting the *Robert Cenac* towards the bridge.
- When asked again when the captain came up to the wheelhouse, Mr. Ronchetti said it was at 2330 and their handover was about 15 minutes in duration. At 2345 the captain took the helm.
- When asked what he recalled of the elements of their handover, Mr. Ronchetti said they discussed the current direction, because every night before midnight the current usually runs inbound. He told the captain he spoke to the bridge tender and they were waiting on a train. He told the captain he saw two trains already pass and he had not received a call back from the bridge. He told him what barge they had, and that operations were normal. He also briefed the destination for the barge at JC Deville and that there, there was a barge ready for them to take back. Everything was running well.
- Before handing over the helm, Mr. Ronchetti called the bridge and asked if they were clear to come through the bridge. The response he received was “cap, where are ya at?” to which he said, “I’m sitting here waiting on you, about 15 minutes away”. The bridge tender then said “I’m gonna get it open for you cap” to which Mr. Ronchetti replied, “roger that”. Once that conversation ended, he handed the helm over to the captain, grabbed the logbook and billing logs and went below to complete them. He recalled the accident occurred about midnight.
- When asked if he ever heard any communication from the bridge tender that he would let them know when the bridge is clear to pass through, Mr. Ronchetti said no, the only thing he said was, “I’ll get it open for you cap” which were his exact words, and normally they are his exact words when they go through the Rigolets bridge.
- When asked to clarify that he saw two trains pass on the bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said he did see them. It was no problem to see the trains because they were well lit up. They were both westbound trains.
- When asked of the lighting at the Rigolets bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said the lights are “horrible” because there is a lot of background lighting from the docks and everything on the other side of the bridge. Approaching the open bridge heading north, there are two red lights on the west side (on your port side heading inbound). On the starboard side there is one red light on a dolphin/short fender.
- When you make the approach northbound to the bridge, you have to hold the vessel up into the wind and compensate for the set and drift, and you can’t see the red light on the starboard side, and you can only see one light on the port side. Until you are about 500 to

1000 feet away, that is when you can see the bridge and that is the point where adjustments are made to pass through safely. The lighting is horrible, and you can't see the bridge at night until you are about 500 to 1000 feet away.

- When asked of any range lights, as per the nautical chart, Mr. Ronchetti said the range lights are never used because they are hard to see. Because of the way they set up for the approach, it is not possible to see the range lights.
- When asked if it is normal to use a spotlight when approaching the Rigolets bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said yes, and that when he is approaching the bridge, he will normally use one light until he is very close to the bridge and then turn on the other spotlight so that one light is illuminating one side and one illuminating the other prior to passing through. He noted that from the position where the *Robert Cenac* was drifting in the Rosepoint playback, that most of the time from that position he will have both spotlights on the bridge to see where it is going to open. He basically has to rely on the Rosepoint chart and what he can see using the spotlights.
- When asked if they have deckhands on the barge during the transit through the Rigolets Railroad bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said the opening is “pretty wide”, so there is no need for a deckhand to be on the barge.
- When asked about the *Robert Cenac* drifting 15 minutes south of the bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said the current was setting the *Robert Cenac* tow to the west (looking at the bridge to the north). He would at times have to put the engines in clutch reverse to maintain a speed of 0.2 or 0.3 mph astern to keep from being set to the west. It would not be an ideal position if the tow is set to the west to set up to pass through the bridge after it opens. He recalled trying to stay in the vicinity of mile marker 36.5. That was a safe space where there was time to set up for the bridge.
- When asked based on Rosepoint historical information, if he started making way from drifting, then slowed and drifted again, Mr. Ronchetti said no, he never started to make any approach to the bridge. Once he cleared the buoy line of the ICW, a little way after that, he stopped and drifted. The only thing he did while drifting was clutch in reverse to not drift to the west. The *Robert Cenac* was still drifting when he handed the helm over to the captain. After that he went below to do the logs and grab a bite to eat.
- When asked about hearing the engines rev up when he was in the galley to the time when he heard the engines backing down, Mr. Ronchetti estimated it may have been two to three minutes after he got in the galley that he heard the engines rev up, but not fully. His thought was the captain was making his approach. He recalled hearing the engines come up in speed a little later. He estimated maybe 10 minutes after hearing the engines initially rev up, was when he heard the engines switch from ahead to full astern.
- When asked what door he exited from the galley, Mr. Ronchetti said there is only one galley door which is on the port side. Once he stepped out on the port side, he was looking at the swing bridge. Before he set foot out of the galley door, that is when he felt a “little bump” like a bump you would feel in a lock.
- When asked to explain his comment that the bridge continued to open, Mr. Ronchetti recalled that once he saw the bridge, he ran upstairs to the wheelhouse. When he got upstairs, looking towards the bow, he noticed they had bounced off the bridge and the

captain had laid the barge alongside the fender wall and the bridge continued to swing open. Mr. Ronchetti thought that when the barge hit the bridge, it stopped it from swinging and after backing away, the bridge continued to swing open. When the bridge was fully open, the bridge tender came over the radio and said, “alright cap, the bridge is fully open”.

- When asked to recall what the captain responded to the bridge tender’s communication, Mr. Ronchetti recalled the captain saying “yeah, I hit the bridge”. That led Mr. Ronchetti to believe the bridge tender didn’t even know they had hit the bridge until after the captain announced it.
- When asked if he was aware of where the bridge tender was located at the Rigolets bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said if he didn’t know that they the tow hit the bridge, that is an indicator to him that he is not anywhere near the opening of the bridge. He thought the bridge tender may be on the bank and noted that it did not look like there was anyplace for someone to be on the bridge. He did not recall seeing a “doghouse” on the bridge.
- When asked, based on his experience only, if he has ever had a Rigolets bridge tender contact him and question as to why he was approaching the bridge prior to being advised it was not yet fully open and clear to pass through, Mr. Ronchetti said no. He has never heard anything like that with him or over the radio with another vessel. Mr. Ronchetti recalled on more than one occasion, not being able to get a hold of the bridge tender over the radio. When that happened, he has had to call the bridge tender by phone which sometimes the phone is not even answered.
- When asked with respect to the night of the accident if there were any communication issues or challenges between the *Robert Cenac* and the Rigolets bridge tender, Mr. Ronchetti said there were no communication problems.
- When asked of the speed to make to pass through the bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said they have been doing that job for a while, so they know the bridge well. When going with the current as it was on that night, they would be making about an average 8 mph and once through the bridge they must slow down because they have a near 90 degree turn to starboard into Little Lake. When the current is rolling out, they are sometimes making 4 to 5 miles per hour. If the current is running hard, they drive on it with the engines so that the current doesn’t catch them. He noted that when you start making the approach to the bridge, you are committed. That is why they call the bridge so far ahead of time, because they need the time to make the approach.
- When asked about the second train he saw pass on the bridge, Mr. Ronchetti said that was about 10 to 15 minutes prior to the captain coming up to the wheelhouse to begin the handover. With respect to his second call to the bridge tender, Mr. Ronchetti said that he has in the past had to call them to remind the bridge tender he is waiting. Usually then they will come back and say they would get the bridge open for him. Mr. Ronchetti said he will sit and wait until he has confirmation the bridge is open before he starts making way to begin his approach.
- After the second train passed, Mr. Ronchetti was expecting a call from the bridge tender which never came. That is why just before handing the helm over to the captain he called the bridge tender to remind him they were still waiting.

- When asked to recall the red navigation light location on the west fender wall, Mr. Ronchetti said if heading northbound, the west fender wall has two red lights in a horizontal line. They are about 80 to 100 feet apart. On the east side, short wall/dolphin, there is one red light which they can't see until they are heading towards the west side of the bridge, because when the current runs, they must set up on the east side of the bridge which prevents them from seeing it. Once they see the gap, they let the barge fall to the west so they can drive right through it. If you are looking at the fender wall, approaching to the north, you will only see one red light and you must look to the right to see the other red light. The lights are on top of the fender wall.
- Mr. Ronchetti, said that on a prior trip they had documented damage to the west fender wall on the north side of the Rigolets bridge, where there is wood sticking out from the wall. They did this just in case anyone came back at them trying to blame the *Robert Cenac* for the damage. Part of the fender wall was floating, but still attached. The previous captain took a picture of the damage on the boat phone for their records. When asked if that damage to the fender wall was relevant to the accident, Mr. Ronchetti said there was no contact with that damaged section whatsoever.
- When asked about the lighting in the wheelhouse at night, Mr. Ronchetti said the lights are always off inside the wheelhouse, so when the captain came to the wheelhouse, there was time for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.
- When asked about his times passing through the Rigolets bridge, post-accident, if communications from the bridge were the same or not, Mr. Ronchetti said that once the bridge was repaired, the communications were maybe a little better than just saying "roger" or "I'll get it open". It sounded like some of the Pearl River bridge tenders were working the Rigolets Bridge post-accident. He noticed this because the Pearl River bridge tenders are very communicative and communicate well. At the Pearl River railroad bridge, they will call the *Robert Cenac* and announce they are going to open the bridge because they see the boat coming. As soon as the boat turns into the Pearl River, the bridge tender calls and says, "I see you coming cap, I'll get the bridge open for you". They will then call back, and say, "we are fully open". He noted the doghouse is right there at the bridge, which they must get there by boat, so the bridge tenders see everything.
- When asked while the bridge was closed postaccident, how they got back and forth, Mr. Ronchetti said they took the Pearl River all the time.
- When asked of the visibility the night of the accident, Mr. Ronchetti said it was clear with no moon. It was dark. They could see the background lights on the north side of the bridge.
- When asked about tidal and current reference stations related to the current running inbound or outbound, Mr. Ronchetti said they noticed that the current in that location runs inbound before midnight. They use the Rosepoint system connected through the boat phone hotspot to get the nearest tidal information for that area. A lot of times the Rosepoint is not accurate but it will give them the knowledge that the current is on the flood or ebb. Also, they have apps on their phones to help see what the current is doing.

- Postaccident, after the Rigolets bridge was repaired, Mr. Ronchetti noted that the bridge is “well lit up now”. You can now tell where the opening is with the new lighting that is there. They are white lights that show where the opening is.

**End of summary**