



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary – DCA21FM019

Interview of: Briscoe Brown Jr, Pilot of the tank vessel *Bow Tribute*
Date/Time: March 31, 2021, 1015 to 1120 CDT
Location: Telephonic
Interviewed by: Lt. [REDACTED] – USCG and Adam Tucker – NTSB
Attendees: Adam Davis – Phelps Dunbar, LLP (attorney representing Odfjell interests), Mark Pivach and Matthew Pivach – Pivach, Pivach, Hufft, Thriffiley & Dunbar, LLC (attorney for NOBRA), Phoebe Hawthorne – Frilot, LLC (attorney representing ACBL interests)
Accident: March 16, 2021, Contact of the Norwegian flag tank vessel *Bow Tribute* with City of New Orleans Water intakes (NTSB No. DCA21FM019). Nine Mile bend, Lower Mississippi River, mile 104, New Orleans, Louisiana.

This interview summary has been compiled based on NTSB and US Coast Guard investigator notes taken during the interview of Captain Briscoe Brown, Jr, the pilot of the *Bow Tribute*.

- Mr. Brown has the call sign NOBRA 68. He has been working on the river since 1998 on harbor assist tugs that primarily handled ships.
- He was elected to the New Orleans–Baton Rouge Steamship Pilots Association (NOBRA) about 7 years ago and did his first-year apprenticeship and has been working as a pilot since then. He has no limitations on his state issued license. He has a master of towing vessels, is a first-class pilot with NOBRA (Lower Mississippi River (LMR) mile 88 to 234) and a state commission.
- On the morning of March 16, he was called by his dispatch office at about 0600 and informed he was assigned the *Bow Tribute* which had a departure time of 0900. He left early for the ship to get in front of the traffic and boarded the *Bow Tribute* at the LBC Baton Rouge (used to be Sunshine) dock earlier around mile 204.
- On the bridge Mr. Brown met with the master, and a master pilot exchange was carried out. The master told him they had a right-hand turning fixed propeller, so when you come astern the bow goes to starboard. Mr. Brown told the master that for the transit, there always had to be men forward to operate the anchor in an emergency and the engine room had to be manned. He asked the master if he had any questions and he said no. Mr. Brown recalled being told things were in good working order. He read and signed the pilot boarding card and recalled the drafts of the vessel were on the pilot card which was about 39' 1".
- They left the dock a little bit earlier since the ship was ready to go. They departed from the left descending bank and two Z-drive tugs that helped them off the dock. After departing the dock, Mr. Brown tested the whistle. The trip southbound was uneventful until they got down to New Orleans harbor.

- When asked if the master expressed any maneuvering or handling challenges with the *Bow Tribute*, Mr. Brown said he did not.
- When asked about the bridge manning on the *Bow Tribute*, Mr. Brown said they changed the helmsman a lot which is normal on long duration river transits. He recalled the master went down for rest at some point when he was comfortable noting that it was going to be a long day for him. He recalled the second officer relieving the watch at some point.
- When asked of any communication or interpersonal challenges with any of the bridge team, Mr. Brown said there were not. They were a good crew and although there was a language difference, there were no problems with communications.
- When asked if there were any problems or challenges with the helmsmen responding to his helm orders, Mr. Brown said no, and that they were good. He noted that the *Bow Tribute* is in the LMR a lot and they know how things work with the pilots there. When asked if there were any problems with response to propulsion orders requested, Mr. Brown said there were not.
- At around upper 12-mile point, about mile 109/108, Mr. Brown called the towing vessel the *American Way* to touch base with him. He let the vessel know that he was behind them, and they would likely meet or overtake on 9-mile point. He asked the *American Way* if they were going to speed up or slow down, and the response he got was that they could speed up a little bit. He noted the operator of the *American Way* sounded confident. The *American Way* had two empty chemical barges breasted up.
- Mr. Brown called New Orleans vessel traffic center (VTC) just before the mandatory reporting point at the Huey P. Long bridge. VTC informed him that NOBRA 14 was the first northbound ship he would meet. NOBRA 93 was the second northbound who was down around 6-mile point. There was also a tow with two barges strung out downbound in front of the *American Way*.
- After about 5 minutes, somewhere around Avondale shipyard, the *American Way* called Mr. Brown and asked how they wanted to meet below the Huey P. Long bridge. Mr. Brown said he replied with “two-whistles” which the operator of the *American Way* agreed to. He also heard the *American Way* make a two-whistle arrangement with the two northbound ships.
- Coming through the bridge, maybe a little less than a half mile above 9-mile point, Mr. Brown noticed the *American Way* was widening out and sliding, so he called him and asked, “are you gonna make it cap?” but he didn’t get a response. He then heard another pilot on the northbound ship say, “you can come towards me, you got plenty of room” but he didn’t hear a response to that either.
- Mr. Brown then called the *American Way* again and said “you gotta drive on it”, but by then Mr. Brown had to slide into the bend to prevent the *Bow Tribute* from running over the *American Way* and hurting anyone.
- The *Bow Tribute* rode into the bend and ran aground on the shore there. In there, Mr. Brown could no longer see the *American Way*. He kept the *Bow Tribute* on the shoreline so that the *American Way* could get out from under the rake of the *Bow Tribute*’s bow.
- Once he saw the *American Way* come back into his view and was out of the way, he ordered the anchor dropped. The Bisso tug *A.T. Higgins* helped, and he rounded up the

Bow Tribute. After that, they heaved the anchor back up and got underway. Mr. Brown was relieved by NOBRA 8 just below upper 9-mile point.

- When asked what the plan was for overtaking the *American Way*, Mr. Brown said he knew that that when he made the turn around 9-mile point the *Bow Tribute* was going to gain speed. When he initially called the *American Way*, he was trying to get a feel for what the *American Way* was doing, which at that point, there was ample time to make any decision, noting that was 20 to 25 minutes before things got dangerous. He recalled at that time the *American Way* said that he could come ahead a little bit, which he took as that he would speed up.
- When asked about NOBRA 14, Mr. Brown recalled that ship was either below or had just made 6-mile point and they were the first northbound ship the *American Way* would encounter. NOBRA 93 was the second northbound ship.
- When asked about the other tug in front of the *American Way*, Mr. Brown said it was a Banta boat that had two loads strung out (barges were single file). The *American Way* had empty barges side by side.
- When asked to confirm what the *American Way* said when it called the *Bow Tribute*, Mr. Brown said the *American Way* called the *Bow Tribute* when they were around Avondale shipyard (about 106 or 107). The *American Way* asked what side the *Bow Tribute* was going to overtake them on.
- When asked to clarify what it meant by “on the two”, Mr. Brown said it means the *Bow Tribute* would overtake the *American Way* on the *Bow Tribute*’s starboard side and on the *American Way*’s port side.
- When asked to clarify where he initially called the *American Way*, Mr. Brown said he was below 12-mile. The *Bow Tribute* was still above the Huey P. Long when the *American Way* called and asked what side he intended to overtake him on.
- When Mr. Brown noticed the *American Way* was sliding, the *Bow Tribute* was about a half mile or so downriver from the bridge. Initially everything looked good, and the *American Way* was tight on the bank and “everyone was going to have their third through there” which is “common”. Mr. Brown pointed the ship towards the bend to open everything up and that is when he noticed the *American Way* had turned the barges, but his heading was not changing and thus he knew the *American Way* was sliding into the bend.
- Mr. Brown said he knew the *American Way* was a Z-drive boat and saw it was pushing two empties, so he didn’t think it was a big deal at the time, but it escalated quickly.
- When asked what “slide in the bend” means, Mr. Brown said that is an occurrence where the compass course of a vessel changes but the actual heading, the direction the vessel is going, doesn’t change.
- Mr. Brown noted they break the river up in sections and “everybody had their third”. The *American Way* had his third of the river but was coming over towards his (the *Bow Tribute*’s) third, which was what made him aware that the *American Way* was sliding into the bend.
- When asked about when the *Bow Tribute* began to round the bend, Mr. Brown said he first called the *American Way* and asked “are you gonna make it cap?”, which means

“hey, do you see what’s happening here?”. He heard no response from the *American Way*, and then heard NOBRA 14 say to the *American Way* that they can head towards them and there was plenty of room towards them. Mr. Brown said he then told the *American Way*, “You gotta drive on it”, and at that point it was “getting interesting”.

- When asked what radio frequencies were being used, Mr. Brown said channel 67 and VTC was on channel 12. He was probably using his handheld VHF at that point, but all the radios were tuned in to his various desired frequencies on the bridge.
- When asked what was felt when the *Bow Tribute* was running along the shore, Mr. Brown recalled the *American Way* disappeared from his field of view and he felt the ship go into the shore and it vibrated. Mr. Brown said he could not come to starboard because he couldn’t see the *American Way* anymore, so he breasted in sideways to the shore to not damage the levee. He felt the *Bow Tribute* shimmy and felt the propeller vibrating.
- When asked when the next time he saw the *American Way* was, Mr. Brown said he had been in the bank for a “little bit” before the *American Way* came out to where he could see it again. He wasn’t sure if he had hit the *American Way* or not but was happy to see the *American Way* appear and that it was floating and that everything was ok with the boat.
- After again gaining visual contact with the *American Way*, Mr. Brown requested the starboard anchor let go once he saw it was clear and there was no risk of dropping the anchor on the boat or barges.
- When asked if there was any delay in dropping the anchor, Mr. Brown said there was not.
- Mr. Brown said the whole time the *Bow Tribute* was in the bank, he was blowing the danger signal since he knew there were people working on the bank and at the water intakes.
- The tug *A.T. Higgins* was there, and he was a light boat. Mr. Brown knew it was a powerful and maneuverable tug, so the tug helped flip the *Bow Tribute* around. He recalled there were either 6 or 8 shackles of starboard anchor chain down. Once the *Bow Tribute* was flipped around, they heaved the anchor up and proceeded upriver to just underneath 9-mile point. A damage assessment was carried out on the *Bow Tribute*, and they waited for another tug just in case there were propulsion problems. Mr. Brown was relieved by another pilot there.
- When asked how the *Bow Tribute* was flipped around, Mr. Brown said it was to the starboard.
- When asked where he was located on the bridge, Mr. Brown said since the COVID pandemic he now sits in front of the bridge console. Normally he would position himself behind the console with the bridge team and next to the helmsman. He had his portable pilot unit (PPU) with him, and he could see the rudder indicator from the position he was located. It was a beautiful day with clear skies. When he noticed a problem, he stood up so he could have the best viewpoint of the shore and the water intakes and could keep an eye on the *American Way*.
- When asked if he moved to the bridge wing, Mr. Brown said not while he was in contact with the shore. He needed to see the *American Way* and the shore, and the center of the bridge was the best viewpoint. He went out after to check the clearance.

- When asked about the PPU, Mr. Brown said he was using an iPad app called Safepilot which was connected to a “CAT ROT” sensor. The CAT ROT plugs into the AIS pilot plug on the ship.
- When asked if the Safepilot app had any recording capability, Mr. Brown said that the information may be recorded to a cloud, but he was not sure whose cloud it would be recorded to.
- When asked of the winds at the time, Mr. Brown recalled it was blowing out of the south maybe 15 to 20 knots. No more than 20 knots.
- When asked of the river stage and current, Mr. Brown said the stage was a little over 12 feet off the Carrollton gage and the current depends on where the vessel is in the bend. He estimated between 2 to 4 knots of current in the bend, but noted it varies drastically in different spots. He said he would average it at 3 knots.
- When asked about the naming of the bend where the accident took place, Mr. Brown said they call it “9-mile” because its 9 miles from New Orleans. Everybody calls it 9-mile including VTC.
- When asked about being relieved by the other pilot, Mr. Brown said NOBRA 8 relieved him after the contact with the water intakes which is standard protocol for NOBRA. He was relieved right below 9-mile with a tug fast on the port bow of the *Bow Tribute*.
- When asked to clarify where the current would have been stronger at 9-mile, Mr. Brown said it would be stronger on the left descending bank than on the point.
- When asked if the master was on the bridge at the time of the accident, Mr. Brown said that when it looked like a situation was developing, he told the mate that he needed the captain on the bridge and that he needed men ready with the anchors.
- When asked, based on his experience, if ships masters are on the bridge at 9-mile, Mr. Brown said that if the master was on the bridge for every bend, then he/she would never be able to leave the bridge since the river is winding all the time. He said he would rather have a well-rested mate on watch with him than a worn-out master who has had a long day. It is very common to have the mate up there instead of the master.
- When asked if he recommended to the master any areas or locations where he should be present on the bridge, Mr. Brown said he did not. He recalled the master saying he was going to take rest and Mr. Brown told him they would call him if there were any problems.
- When asked where the *Bow Tribute* was heading, Mr. Brown said it was headed to sea and he had ordered the Crescent pilot for 1600 that day. The plan was to swap out pilots somewhere between mile 90 and 88.
- When asked if he had any other dispatch orders for that day, Mr. Brown said the *Bow Tribute* was his only ship for that day.
- When asked of his experience in handling in ballast tank vessels similar in size to the *Bow Tribute*, Mr. Brown said he has been handling that type of vessel since he has been a pilot.
- When asked if there were any general awareness concerns or issues that pilots have at 9-mile, Mr. Brown said he recalled some incidents there in the past but there was nothing of concern on that day; “everyone had their third of the river”.

- When asked if there were any restrictions or special rules for overtaking vessels at 9-mile, Mr. Brown said that there were none at that location noting that 9-mile is also within the VTC control area.
- When asked if there were any Coast Guard marine safety information bulletins in place for the accident location and time, Mr. Brown said he was not aware of any.
- When asked to clarify what northbound ship called to say there was plenty space, Mr. Brown said that NOBRA 14 called the *American Way* to tell them there was “plenty space”.
- When asked about the person who joined the *Bow Tribute*, Mr. Brown said his name was Ethan and he was the captain of a Marquette towing vessel who was trying to get some trips in because he was interested in becoming a federal pilot. They must cross train in industry before becoming a pilot. They picked him up at Grandview anchorage and he was just an observer.
- When asked if the observer was any sort of distraction, Mr. Brown said they of course spoke because the purpose of the trip was for him to learn, but it was not a distraction. It is not uncommon to have people ride with them.
- When asked if the observer disembarked with him after the accident Mr. Brown said that he did.
- When asked if he was engaged in any cell phone activity, Mr. Brown said NOBRA 14 called him on the phone right after he initially called the *American Way*. That was well above the Huey P. Long bridge. The call didn’t last long since he told NOBRA 14 he needed to get off to watch the *American Way*.
- When asked where he first contacted the *American Way* Mr. Brown said it was after passing 12-mile point. The call was to notify the *American Way* that he was southbound behind them and they would either meet or overtake at 9-mile. He asked if the *American Way* was going to gain or lose any speed.
- When asked if he would normally overtake a vessel at 9-mile, Mr. Brown said yes because everyone had their third of the river there and he didn't see anything wrong with it. The operator of the *American Way* seemed confident and alright with it. The *American Way* was a Z-drive boat with empties and Mr. Brown did not foresee any problems. A Z-drive boat would have been able to drive his way out of anything.
- When asked to confirm where he asked the *American Way* to increase speed, Mr. Brown said that it was when they were in the bend and he told the operator of the *American Way* that he needed to “drive on it” to get away from him.
- When asked about the location of the *Captain JW Banta*, Mr. Brown said that he was pretty far ahead of the *American Way* and not in any position where the *American Way* would have run him over. The *Captain JW Banta* was nowhere near the *Bow Tribute*.
- When asked if the *Bow Tribute* ever did overtake the *American Way*, Mr. Brown said no and that when he struck the shore the *American Way* was very close, and he couldn't see them from his viewpoint. The *American Way* was under the rake of their bow.
- When asked about what speeds the *Bow Tribute* was doing southbound in the river, Mr. Brown said that after passing 12-mile point they lost a bit of speed, but he recalled the

speed being about 15 knots and that the ship was pretty maneuverable at that speed noting the faster you go the better it maneuvers.

- When asked if they decreased speed before 9-mile point, Mr. Brown said no. That was because everyone had their third of the river. Even if he had a sixth of the river, the outcome would have been ok. In this situation he did not have that opportunity and had to give way to the *American Way*.
- Mr. Brown noted that at the time of the accident, he had been handling the *Bow Tribute* for six to seven hours and had a good feeling for how the vessel handled.
- When asked what type of rudder the *Bow Tribute* had, Mr. Brown said it was a regular rudder.
- When asked if there are any special inland rules with respect to overtaking another vessel, Mr. Brown said there were no rules in that area. It's a traditional point bend system. He was the give way vessel, and he gave way.
- When asked to clarify what he meant by “everyone had their third”, Mr. Brown said the river is about 2000 feet wide, maybe a little more, in that bend and they break it into thirds. The *Bow Tribute* would have gotten his third on the left descending bank overtaking “on the two” and the *American Way* would have had the center third. The northbound ship would have had the right descending bank third. Even if the *Bow Tribute* would have had a sixth of the river, they could have made it but, they had nothing.
- When asked if looking back at the situation, if there was anything that could have been done to prevent the accident, Mr. Brown said not really because he called the *American Way* in ample time. If the *American Way* would have maintained their third of the river, this accident would have not occurred. Mr. Brown said based on his communications with the *American Way*, there was ample opportunity for the operator of the *American Way* to communicate if he was not confident in the overtaking agreement noting that that was why he called him so early.

End of summary