



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary – DCA21FM032

Interview of: Roy Stanley Helmstetter – captain of the towing vessel *Mardis Gras*
Date/Time: July 19, 2021 – 0910 to 1000 CDT
Location: USCG Sector New Orleans Investigations Conference Room
Interviewed by: CWO3 [REDACTED] – USCG, Adam Tucker – NTSB (by phone)
Attendees: Michael Harowski – Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker, LLP (representing *Jalma Topic* interests), Morgan Kelly - Salley, Hite, Mercer & Resor, LLC (representing Crescent towing interests)
Accident: July 12, 2021 Contact of the Liberian flag bulk carrier *Jalma Topic* with the Crescent Towing office barge fleet at mile 93.5 lower Mississippi river, (NTSB No. DCA21FM032). New Orleans, Louisiana.

This interview summary has been compiled based on Coast Guard and NTSB investigator notes taken during the interview of Mr. Roy Helmstetter, the captain of the tug *Mardis Gras*.

- The tug *Mardis Gras* was the most upriver manned tug at the Crescent Towing/Cooper T Smith fleet.
- He woke up at 0300 and relieved the mate so he could go to bed, even though their watch change time was 0400. The *Mardis Gras* was sitting at the fleet with no jobs pending.
- Mr. Helmstetter was in the galley with a training mate, also a licensed captain, on board to train in the operation of azimuth drive boats.
- At about 0320, Mr. Helmstetter heard a call over the VHF radio (the galley radio monitors marine VHF channels 67 and 77) by VTC that said in a commanding voice something like, *any boats at Smiths Fleet there is a ship coming your way*. That prompted him to look at a navigational display they have in the galley, Rosepoint, where they saw a ship in a hard to port turn heading towards the fleet they were at.
- Mr. Helmstetter and the training mate ran outside and saw the ship was going to hit the fleet and he told the mate to go and alert the crew while he went to the engine room to start the pre lube pumps to start the *Mardis Gras*.
- After starting the pre lube pumps Mr. Helmstetter ran up the stairs of the engine room and that was the time the *Jalma Topic* hit the fleet. He had just come out of the engine room and was in the fiddle when it struck. He did not recall hearing any sounds before the *Jalma Topic* struck the fleet. He did not recall the *Mardis Gras* moving much from when the *Jalma Topic* struck the office barge.
- Once awakened, the engineer continued the process to start the boat which Mr. Helmstetter estimated was about 2 to 3 minutes from the time he started the pre lube pumps to the time they threw lines off and got underway.

- Mr. Helmstetter maneuvered the *Mardis Gras* to the top end of the office barge where the tug *Angus Cooper* was. The *Angus Cooper* did not have a full crew and it had only a standby engineer on board.
- Mr. Helmstetter had the mate and deckhand board the *Angus Cooper* so they could perform checks that everyone was ok on the boats and the office barge. The training mate remained on board the *Mardis Gras*.
- The office barge had come away from its moorings with the bow of the barge out in the river about a few hundred feet. Mr. Helmstetter did not want to push the office barge back into the bank because he was not sure of what debris was on the inside, so he just held the boat there in position. The bow of the office barge did not move which led him to believe it was stuck in the mud. Based on that, he determined the best course of action was to wait for daylight and let it sit where it was.
- Mr. Helmstetter heard back from the mate and deckhand that no one was hurt on the barge. The deckhand had made contact with the two dispatchers that were on board.
- Mr. Helmstetter had the engineer on the *Angus Cooper* start the boat up and disconnect from shore power. He had the mate, who was licensed, and the deckhand standby with the *Angus Cooper* to monitor the office barge in case it moved. He told the mate not to push on if there was no movement and wait for daylight.
- Mr. Helmstetter then brought the *Mardis Gras* down to the *Jalma Topic* where he went alongside the ship. He did not put a line on the ship and noted that was because he wanted to be able to leave quickly should the office barge begin to move off the bank. He was in contact with the pilot on the *Jalma Topic*, NOBRA 11. NOBRA 11 requested the assistance of the *Mardis Gras* wanting it to hold the *Jalma Topic* along the bank. Mr. Helmstetter noted, the *Jalma Topic* couldn't put out much anchor chain because there was a tow tied up aft of them at the old navy foot ferry pier.
- Mr. Helmstetter said he saw that the port anchor was out to three shots. NOBRA 11 told Mr. Helmstetter he was trying to put his bow below the fleet to not hit it. After the contact, the pilot was very worried about people on the barge and if they were OK.
- Mr. Helmstetter contacted VTC to inform of his decision not to do anything with the office barge until daylight. VTC informed him that traffic had been stopped in the area so that nothing would pull the barge away from where it currently was.
- Mr. Helmstetter called the dispatchers and directed them to notify the appropriate company representatives.
- Mr. Helmstetter said that things happened "very quickly" and that everyone responded well. He was proud of the way his crew handled the situation.
- Mr. Helmstetter said he had a nearby crew boat work to ferry people to and from the office barge since the gangways to the barge were missing.
- Mr. Helmstetter kept the *Mardis Gras* alongside the *Jalma Topic* with the vessel's searchlight on the barge so he could monitor any movement.
- There was another boat tied up at the fleet, the *Ervin Cooper*, that had an engineer on board. Mr. Helmstetter noted that they knew the engineer was not injured and the boat was not damaged.

- Beyond that, they didn't do much and stood by to ensure things didn't move until daylight came and more people arrived to assess the damage on the inside of the barge.
- Mr. Helmstetter recalled he had the crew boat pick up the training mate about 0430 and bring him from the *Mardis Gras* to the *Angus Cooper* so that he could relieve the mate there. The reason being was the mate at that point had been awake since his watch the afternoon on the previous day and he needed to get some sleep.
- On the *Mardis Gras*, there was normally a crew of four on board. They have a mate, engineer, and deckhand in addition to him. The training mate was licensed and had operated conventional powered tugs. The *Mardis Gras* was primarily engaged in assistance towing. They only move barges in an emergency.
- There is a CCTV system on the *Mardis Gras* which is recorded. At the time they were in the galley, the camera display was on the port stern of the *Mardis Gras*, and they did not see the approaching *Jalma Topic* from that camera angle.
- At the time of the accident, Mr. Helmstetter said the weather was clear and there was no precipitation. The winds were light.
- The *Mardis Gras* is a 5600 horsepower Z drive boat. The dimensions were 92 feet long, 37 feet wide and 19.5-foot draft. There is a wired VHF radio in the galley and that is the radio where Mr. Helmstetter and the training mate heard the initial communication from VTC.
- The watch schedule on the *Mardis Gras* between the captain and the mate, is 12 hours on and 12 hours off. The mate works the 1600 to 0400 watch and the captain works the 0400 to 1600 watch.
- When asked if he took any cell phone video at the time of the accident, Mr. Helmstetter said he did not.
- When asked what he recalled of the river velocity for the time of the accident, Mr. Helmstetter said did not know. He said the current is different in that area. Where they were located, at mile 93.5, the current is less than on the left descending bank noting it can run twice as hard on that bank.
- When asked of what kind of lights the *Jalma Topic* was displaying, Mr. Helmstetter said he did not see the lights because the ship was so close to them.
- When asked where the other boats were relative to the *Mardis Gras*, Mr. Helmstetter said the *Ervin Cooper* was closest to the *Mardis Gras* and the *Angus Cooper* was below (downriver) of the *Ervin Cooper*. The *Mardis Gras* and *Ervin Cooper* were tied up to the maintenance barge, and the *Angus Cooper* was tied up to the office barge.
- When asked if he was aware of any injuries on the *Mardis Gras*, Mr. Helmstetter said no. He was not aware of any injuries to anyone else on the boats or barge.

End of summary