

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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ROBERT CENAC AND MR. DAWG COLLIDE
WITH HOUMA TWIN SPAN BRIDGE, IN
HOUMA, LOUISIANA ON MARCH 6, 2022

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Accident No.: DCA22FM012

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Interview of: RENE RITCHIE, Logistics
Sea Level Construction

United States Coast Guard
Marine Safety Unit
Houma, Louisiana

Friday,
March 18, 2022

APPEARANCES:

MARCEL L. MUISE, Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

DEREK JOHNSTON, Human Performance Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

LT [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
United States Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit
Houma, Louisiana

CWO [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Investigating Officer
United States Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit
Houma, Louisiana

MILES THOMAS
(On behalf of Mr. Ritchie)

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I N T E R V I E W

(9:04 a.m. CDT)

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2
3 LT [REDACTED] Good morning. Today is March 18th, 2022. This is
4 Lieutenant [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with Marine Safety Unit Houma. We are
5 currently at Marine Safety Unit Houma in Louisiana. The time is
6 0904 a.m.

7 The purpose of this recording is for the investigation into
8 the bridge allision by the crane barge *Mr. Dawg*, which was in tow
9 by the towing vessel *Robert Cenac* on March 6th, 2022. This
10 interview is going to be of Mr. Rene Ritchie of Sea Level.

11 Sir, with your permission, I'd like to record?

12 MR. RITCHIE: Yes, ma'am.

13 LT [REDACTED] All right. Thank you.

14 And if everybody could just go around the room and identify
15 who they are and their position.

16 MR. MUISE: Good morning, this is Marcel Muise, accident
17 investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board.

18 MR. JOHNSTON: Derek Johnston, human performance
19 investigator, National Transportation Safety Board.

20 MR. RITCHIE: Rene Ritchie, Sea Level Construction.

21 CWO [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] U.S. Coast Guard investigator,
22 Houma.

INTERVIEW OF RENE RITCHIE

23
24 BY LT [REDACTED]

25 Q. All right. Mr. Ritchie, if you don't mind just kind of going

1 into tell me a little bit about yourself, how long you've been in
2 the marine industry, and we'll kind of roll out from there?

3 A. I got into it when I finished college around 2009, 2010 --
4 actually, it was 2010, right when the oil spill happened. I was
5 charter fishing during the summer and going to school, and I
6 actually started running a crew boat at Ground Zero of Deep Water
7 Horizon. We were gathering up oil with fire boom and actually
8 lighting it on fire. It was pretty neat.

9 From then, I went on full-time after that finished up with a
10 company called TK Towing in Morgan City. Just kind of started out
11 as a port captain, kind of worked my way into operations as I
12 learned more and more about the boats, and took a lot of interest
13 in it, especially spending time with the captains, and I just
14 enjoyed, you know, being in the marine -- on the marine side of
15 it.

16 From there, I just kind of advanced and, you know, developed
17 a couple of (indiscernible) maintenance programs for us, little
18 bit more in operations and in sales. And in 2017 -- and I never
19 planned to leave TK Towing. I wanted to stay there for -- I
20 really liked it there, but in 2017, I just -- I had a opportunity
21 come up, and I went to work for GOL, Gulf Offshore Logistics. I
22 knew one of the owners, and at the time, it was the right decision
23 for me and my family. And I worked there till January of this
24 year, you know, 2022, I think the 15th, 16th.

25 And then I came over there to Sea Level just for a little

1 while to do some, you know, marine logistics stuff, and just kind
2 of trying to figure out, you know, what my next step is. I kind
3 of want to find a way to actually start my own marine company, so
4 that's what I'm kind of working on right now. But I have a couple
5 of friends that worked there for a long time, and it -- you know,
6 they've been doing really well, and growing, and they're getting
7 more into the marine industry, on the marine side of it, marine
8 construction. So I went over there to help out and kind of, you
9 know, get them started.

10 Q. Okay. And that's with Sea Level, you said?

11 A. Yes, ma'am.

12 Q. Okay. And what is your current position with Sea Level?

13 A. I guess you can call it marine logistics coordinator.

14 Q. Okay. And what was your position with GOL?

15 A. Business development and sales.

16 Q. So did you start working for Sea Level in January right after
17 you left, or --

18 A. Yeah, I took -- I think I put my two weeks' notice, like,
19 January 15th, and then, you know, February 1st was my first day at
20 Sea Level.

21 Q. Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about company policy with
22 regards to how you, I guess, request bid or contract, go under
23 contract for items like --

24 A. Well, with these guys, I haven't done that yet. I mean, you
25 know, the stuff they all do is all pre-bid stuff that they've been

1 awarded. But before, like, at GOL or when I was at TK Towing, you
2 know, customers would call me and say, "Hey, please submit a bid
3 for, you know, a rig tow, rig tending job." And then so I would
4 map out the miles and, you know, figure out the mileage and the
5 time it would take, and you know how many boats it needs to move
6 the rig, and so forth, and how many barges we would need, and you
7 know, get back with the customer and present them with that. And
8 depending on if we were, you know, the most competitive pricing,
9 we'd get awarded the job.

10 I haven't done any type of, I guess, marine estimating or
11 bidding yet just because it just -- I haven't had that opportunity
12 yet, so, I mean, these guys, like I said, every -- all these jobs
13 that they have been awarded, they're probably awarded, you know,
14 last year or, you know, five or six months ago. And then now the
15 projects are currently starting.

16 Q. Okay. So can you tell me a little bit more about your
17 position with Sea Level, like, what exactly you do there?

18 A. I mean, right now, as I learn, you know, what's going on and,
19 you know, actually what equipment we have and where a project is
20 at, just more of -- you know, the project manager will call me,
21 "Hey, we have a job coming up. You know, we need to make sure we
22 have a boat to, you know, move our equipment in and out and in and
23 around the job site." Or if they are bidding a job, say, you
24 know, like I said before, they'll bid a job that might start
25 beginning of next year or end of this year. Just, "Hey, can you,

1 you know, figure out the mileage, how much fuel we're going to
2 burn, you know, getting there to and from location, our daily fuel
3 burn," stuff like that. Because unlike the oil field, you know,
4 they stop (indiscernible) got to factor all those prices in.

5 And I have a really good relationship with a lot of other
6 companies around here, marine companies that, you know, we can get
7 our hands onto them when things are tight like they are now. You
8 know, it's -- the (indiscernible) tug, and those guys ran into
9 that situation a lot last year, where, you know, they had big-
10 money jobs held up just because, you know, they didn't have any
11 transportation to get in, you know, to and from the job site.

12 So that's the kind of -- I came on to just kind of help with
13 that, kind of get it established.

14 Q. So establishing those networks, if you will, for transit?

15 A. Right, yes, ma'am.

16 Q. Okay. So when the bids come in, are they usually via e-mail
17 or are they --

18 A. I'd have to ask those guys, but it's all public bid stuff,
19 yeah, yes, ma'am.

20 LT [REDACTED] Okay. And is there any questions from around the
21 room at this time?

22 (No response.)

23 BY LT [REDACTED]

24 Q. Okay. So next we'll kind of talk about the incident itself.

25 A. Um-hum.

1 Q. If you don't mind going into details from -- starting
2 when --

3 A. Start -- yes, ma'am.

4 Q. Yeah, you originally got the notification, I guess, from your
5 project manager?

6 A. Yeah. It was, I guess, March 5th, Saturday. I guess about
7 1800 I was -- I have three daughters. One is three and a half,
8 two and a half, and then six months, so --

9 Q. All right. Congratulations.

10 A. Yeah, so around suppertime, things get pretty hectic around
11 my house. My phone rang. Actually, I didn't see it until about
12 1900. Justin had called. And I texted him. I said, "Hey, man,
13 I'm sorry I missed your call. I'm putting the girls to bed." And
14 then he's like, "No problem." He said, "Give me a call once
15 you're done."

16 And I did. And he let me know what was going on, that the,
17 the marine company that they'd typically been using here for the
18 last three or four years, the boat, in fact, that he had lined up
19 to move these barges ended up being that the draft was going to be
20 too much; it wouldn't be able to get into this locations, and
21 especially with the hurricane. I don't know if you guys are
22 familiar with Galliano, all that. It blew in two or three foot of
23 mud back there, so it's a mess.

24 The conversation went on that Todd spoke to Billy Cenac with
25 Caillou Island. And he said, "Yes, I do have a boat. It's a

1 shallow-draft boat." And Todd said, "Well, Justin, why don't you
2 all just pick up the boat direct instead of having to run it
3 through me?" And Justin said, "All right." Then that's when he
4 called me.

5 So I called -- I actually called Billy first. He was on his
6 way home. Actually, he was sleeping, because he just got back
7 from a ski trip. So I spoke with Al, his son, and told Al what
8 was going on and asked if the boat -- if the *Robert* was available.
9 And I said, "Yeah, let me call and check because we may have a
10 project starting for it Monday or Tuesday." So waited to hear
11 back from him. He said, "Yeah, it's available. We just got to be
12 done by Monday." And I said, "Okay, you know, we should be all
13 right timewise."

14 At that point, I guess probably about 8:00 -- I can't
15 remember my time on my sheet. But I sent to Al the --

16 Q. Could you (indiscernible) too like --

17 A. Yeah, I mean, I could read it word for word. Yeah, 8:00,
18 2000, I called Al and told him, "Yeah, we'll go ahead and secure
19 the *Robert* for this job. We discussed the details on the job, and
20 I provided him with the same information I received from Justin.

21 At that point, Al asked the size of the barges and what we
22 were moving. That's when I told him it was 150-by-60-by-8 power
23 spud barge, and then the HMT 26, which would be a loaded material
24 barge. I told him the 150-by-60 had a crane on it, a 300 turn
25 ringer and that the *Robert* shouldn't have any visibility issues

1 because it's a triple cabin. It's got over a 30-foot eye level.
2 So him being able to see over the counter weights, it would be --
3 he would be fine, which, in fact, he could.

4 Yeah, at 2010, I called Justin to confirm the height of the
5 crane. And he told me that the crane is loaded in the spuds on
6 the barge. I called Al and relayed the same information I
7 received and gave him the current location of the two barges,
8 which was Eagle dry dock. I also sent him a text, again with the
9 job site, the contact number -- and the contact number

10 At 10:00, the boat arrived at Eagle. He had to make the two
11 barges up. The *Mr. Dawg* was spudded down and the HMT barge was
12 side-by-side, so he had to string them out and, you know, build
13 his tow. And --

14 Q. Just real quick. I don't meant to interrupt. If you have
15 dates specifically or times that you need to recall from there,
16 that's fine. If not, I don't want to waste your time here today
17 and have you read through that, because we'll be able to read it
18 when you're done. So just --

19 A. Yeah, no, it's fine.

20 Q. Just as far as timelines go, if you need to reference, that's
21 totally fine.

22 A. Yes, ma'am. I got you.

23 Q. I should have said that in the beginning, so I'm sorry for
24 not clarifying.

25 A. I'm sorry. I thought you wanted me to read that.

1 Q. No, no, you're fine.

2 A. When the boat got there, Al, he actually -- he and I talked
3 again, and he said, "Hey, the guys just finished building the tow.
4 They raised the spuds. And the crane boom looks a little higher
5 than the actual spuds." And that's when I called Justin, like I
6 said, and he said, "No, the crane is supposed to be lower than the
7 spuds."

8 I guess about 11:30 -- yeah, I'm thinking about 11:30, Al
9 actually, in fact, he texted me again, saying, "Hey, the guys are
10 about to take off. And he said, said they just want to confirm,
11 because that crane again looks higher than them spuds." So I
12 texted Justin. I never heard back from him. And I never got back
13 with Al just because I was waiting to hear back from Justin. I
14 assumed the boat was just going to stand by until they heard from
15 us.

16 And in fact, that's when Mike called me, and I was still up,
17 waiting to hear from Justin. Mike called me at -- right after
18 midnight, and that's when, you know, he informed me that, "Hey,
19 the crane boom just hit the bridge. You all are going to have to
20 send somebody out here in the morning to lower the spuds." I
21 said, "All right." Well, I got up at about five and left my house
22 and came down here early, and that's when I texted Justin about
23 what was going on I guess at about 6:30. And that's when he -- I
24 said, "Hey, you have to send an operator out here, because if not,
25 we're not going to be able to move."

1 So he sent one. And I guess about 8:00, after I spoke with
2 the captain for a while, he was -- he couldn't break off from the
3 tow yet, because he was filling out you all report. He said,
4 "Look, when the crane operator gets here, just let me know. I'll
5 come around and we'll pick you up, and we'll take some pictures of
6 the bridge, barges, and so forth."

7 And I'm trying to figure out. And then same thing. He -- I
8 guess about 9:00, 9:30, he picked us up right there underneath the
9 bridge. We hopped on, talked to him just briefly. He brought us
10 to the barge. I got up on the barge with the crane operator.
11 Crane operator cranked the crane up, lowered it down. We
12 resecured the block. And that's whenever we went back on board to
13 talk to the captain. Again, he was pretty upset. I mean, so was
14 I. I wasn't upset with him. I was just upset with the situation.

15 And we talked, and you know, he -- so every, you know,
16 every -- I don't know. I guess every two minutes his phone is
17 ringing between from his office or, or you guys trying to talk to
18 him. So I was just -- it was a lot going on that morning. So
19 just trying to have a conversation with him was kind of tough just
20 because he, you know, he was upset that, in fact, that it
21 happened. And that's kind of, you know, that's kind of how the
22 events played out.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. And then he and I talked for a little while longer, and he
25 said, "Hey, look, you know, before I can take off, I'm going to

1 need some paperwork on the barge." And I said, "Well, look, let
2 me get to my office." I said, "I don't have anything." It was
3 Sunday, and I said, "I'm about to call Justin" (indiscernible) log
4 into his computer and then find whatever drawings we had on the
5 *Mr. Dawg* and get it to him. So that's what I did. I guess I sent
6 that to him about 11:00.

7 Q. What type of documents was he requesting?

8 A. He just -- he said he needed a actual drawing of the barge or
9 a spec sheet, or something. So I just went back and tried to find
10 whatever we had, and what we had -- what all I could find at that
11 time was the, the drawing of the barge Conrad had provided when
12 they built it. So --

13 Q. Okay. Can we go over, again, the timeline of the calls that
14 were back and forth?

15 A. Yeah.

16 Q. So the initial call -- and if you need to reference that,
17 please, by all means --

18 A. Yes, ma'am.

19 Q. I assume that you looked at your call log for that to get the
20 timelines for --

21 A. Yes, ma'am. It's call log, text messages, and all that. So
22 in PortVision, looking up, you know, when the boat left and got
23 there. So --

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. So it was pretty accurate, like I said.

1 Q. So the original bid came in -- or I guess Justin had called
2 you at what time?

3 A. He called me at 6:00, but I didn't speak to him until 7:00.

4 Q. Okay. So 7 p.m. on the 5th?

5 A. Yes, ma'am.

6 Q. Or the 6th?

7 A. The 5th.

8 Q. Fifth?

9 A. Saturday afternoon, yes, ma'am.

10 Q. And then --

11 A. 8:00 I called Al to ask him if the *Robert* was available.

12 Q. And where was the vessel at and where was the vessel going
13 to?

14 A. Their dock is actually right there in Bayou Lacarpe, just
15 north of where Eagle is. So the boat was probably a mile away, if
16 that, from where the barges were right there at the -- in Bayou
17 Lacarpe and Houma Nav.

18 Q. And where was the final destination?

19 A. They were going to a pump station back at Galliano. I don't
20 know if you're familiar with where Edison Schweizer (ph.) has,
21 like, he has a deer farm there, I mean, right backed up against
22 the levy. He's got some crawfish ponds. I think he keeps a few
23 small boats there, personal stuff, but they have a pump station
24 where that new levy was built, and they're actually adding on to
25 the height of the levy and driving sheet piles to raise it up.

1 Q. What's that levy's name? Do you know?

2 A. I guess it would be in lower Lafourche Parish levy. I could
3 find out for you if you need to.

4 Q. Okay. Yes, please.

5 A. Okay. And Al and I talked. We discussed the details of the
6 job, and I provided him with the same information that Justin gave
7 me. That's when Al, you know, inquired, hey, there is a crane,
8 you know, right -- there's a crane lower down, and I called Justin
9 right back at -- think it's right at 8:00, 2010, you know, 8:10,
10 and that's when Justin, he hung up, and he called his -- I guess
11 one of the guys at the yard that was there on Friday. And he
12 said, "Yeah, yeah, no, the guys lowered the crane below the
13 spuds." And that's when Al said, "All right, we'll go ahead and,
14 you know, kick the boat off." And then at 10:00, that's when he
15 texted me that, "Hey, the boat arrived." Think they started
16 making the tow up.

17 And then -- let's see here -- 2019 -- yeah, actually, in
18 fact, the exact time, at 2327, Al sent a text asking me to find
19 out the height of the boom on the crane. At 2328, I sent a text
20 to Justin asking the same question. I did not receive a response.
21 And then at 0032 on the 6th, that's when Mike called me and
22 informed me of the incident and asked if we could have a crane
23 operator out there in the morning to lower the crane boom.

24 Q. Okay. So when the crane operator came out to the vessel when
25 they were at the Twin Span, you were with him?

1 A. Yes, ma'am.

2 Q. Okay. How is the crane supposed to be stowed?

3 A. Well, right now, quite frankly, as far as a specific height
4 or a rack for that crane, the boom is 180 foot long. So you
5 really can't make a headache rack, because if you did, it would
6 actually be, in fact, you know, too high on the barge. So their
7 policy is typically, you know, make sure it's below the spuds.
8 Again, that's --

9 Q. Their policy meaning whose policy?

10 A. I wouldn't really even call it a policy. I would just say,
11 to my knowledge, their, you know, sea level guys, or whoever,
12 whenever they're preparing a barge, they just -- I guess the basis
13 is, you know, "Hey, guys, you know, always make sure that the boom
14 is lower than the spuds."

15 Q. Does someone sign off on that? Maybe --

16 A. No, ma'am. They don't. No, ma'am.

17 Q. So it's just best marine practice to lower it?

18 A. Yes, I guess -- exactly. And then if -- you know, you get in
19 more of the lines of what route they're going to be going. But
20 again, that was never discussed with me or with anybody else. Al
21 and I never talked about what route. I mean, actually, if the
22 boat would have gone down the Houma Nav, we would have been okay.
23 But you know, we weren't.

24 Q. So when these bids typically come in how they normally do, do
25 you discuss the route?

1 A. Sometimes if it's, you know, if it required special access.
2 But a lot of times -- I've always -- I'll leave it up to the
3 captains. I mean, these guys, they know the waterways. They know
4 what they're doing. And ultimately, it's up to him anyway, which
5 I know and I trust them. You know, I don't, I don't like to use
6 boats that I don't know the crews just because of the safety
7 factor, and you know, it only takes one mistake to destroy a
8 really good relationship.

9 So that's kind of how I always base my stuff is that, "Hey,
10 look, the captain is saying this. I got to trust him," because if
11 I don't, then he starts to, you know, think that these guys are
12 second-guessing me, and then he'll start second-guessing himself.
13 So I typically don't recommend routes unless it's special access
14 or if these guys never been, you know, to those locations before.

15 Q. Okay. Do you know where the vessel thought that they were
16 going that day?

17 A. When I spoke to Captain Travis, he was going to go through
18 Houma, through the Rose, and then down the Barataria Waterway,
19 come out right there in Bayou St. Dennis, cross Little Lake, and
20 then come into the back side of LOOP, which is just north of where
21 that pump station is, and he was going to come in through that
22 way.

23 Q. Okay. And would that have taken him the same route that he
24 ended up going?

25 A. No. Actually, the boat got to Bayou St. Dennis and spoke to

1 another boat that was working that had been working there. He
2 said, "Man, look, you're not even going to get back there. You'll
3 probably get back there with a light boat, but with that crane
4 barge and that deck barge, there's no way. It's just -- it's too
5 shallow."

6 So they backtracked. They handed the barge, the two barge
7 back off to a different boat that Caillou Island owned, the *Wilton*
8 *Labeouf*. That boat took it down to Houma Nav, crossed Timbalier
9 Bay, into Southwest Canal, came up into Leeville, up the bayou, up
10 Bayou Lafourche, and then they took a right from there. That's --
11 I guess that would be the Tidewater Canal, I believe, and
12 maneuvered their way back there through that route.

13 Q. Okay. So I know you said there's not an official company
14 policy as far as, like, how low the boom needs to be on the barge.
15 Is there a head point of contact that looks through -- you know,
16 looks at the barge before they leave the shipyard or before they
17 leave location?

18 A. I guess typically, you know, the guys at the yard, say if
19 they were using the crane throughout the week or -- and whatnot,
20 they basically say, "Hey, look, this barge has got to leave on
21 this date, you know, please make sure that it's secured, the block
22 secured and, you know, the crane is in the right position." So I
23 guess it would be the project manager or the foreman at the
24 shipyard that receives a call to, you know, "Hey, look, guys ready
25 to get this barge ready to go?"

1 Q. So Sea Level owns the *Mr. Dawg*?

2 A. Yes, ma'am.

3 Q. Are the employees that operate the *Mr. Dawg*, the crane
4 itself, are they Sea Level employees or are they contracted out?
5 What's that relationship?

6 A. They'll -- they work for Sea Level, yes, ma'am. I'm not sure
7 if it's actual Sea Level Direct, Sea Level Construction. There's
8 several Sea Level entities. So I can't 100 percent confirm that,
9 that it is Sea Level, in fact, they're employed, but they're all
10 under the same, you know, umbrella policy, and I just -- if it's a
11 different, I guess, labor side of it, I'm not sure, but they're
12 all, you know, in fact, at the end of the day, they're Sea Level
13 employees, yes, ma'am.

14 Q. Okay. What type of policies do you have in place at the
15 shipyards or for the Sea Level employees that operate these
16 cranes?

17 A. As far as which --

18 Q. Any type of safety-related company policies or procedures.

19 A. Quite frankly, Jamie, our -- their safety guy, he's in charge
20 of writing all of the policies. That's a question that I can't
21 answer on that, yes, ma'am.

22 Q. Okay. Do you know if they undergo any type of training
23 before they get hired on?

24 A. Yes, yes, ma'am, they do.

25 Q. So Jamie is safety with Sea Level?

- 1 A. Um-hum.
- 2 Q. What's Jamie's last name?
- 3 A. I believe it's Rodrigue.
- 4 Q. And if you have a contact number for him?
- 5 A. Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. It's Jamie Rodrigue.
- 6 Q. How do you spell that?
- 7 A. R-o-d-r-i-g-u-e. And his phone number is [REDACTED].
- 8 Q. He's the safety officer?
- 9 A. Yes, ma'am.
- 10 Q. Okay. You said you know that they undergo training. Do you
11 know how often they undergo training?
- 12 A. No, ma'am. I sure don't. I'm sure whatever is required to
13 keep their certifications up, but Jamie would be better be able to
14 answer that question.
- 15 Q. Okay. And does the crane on the *Mr. Dawg*, does it stay on
16 board there when you --
- 17 A. It is secured to the barge right now. You can pull it off if
18 you need to swap it out or make repairs, but primarily that barge
19 was built for that crane.
- 20 Q. So it's built to be used on the barge itself?
- 21 A. Yes, ma'am, because of that barge being 60 foot wide, and the
22 overall size of that crane, it's -- yes, ma'am. It was built for
23 that.
- 24 Q. And we may have touched on this, but I just want to get
25 clarification. How do you think the drop location got mixed up.

- 1 Was there any confusion as far as where it was actually going?
- 2 A. What location?
- 3 Q. The final destination for --
- 4 A. No, ma'am. There was no mix-up. What it was, when the
5 captain got there -- well, he didn't even make it there yet.
6 That's when he spoke to another vessel and saying, "Hey, you're
7 not going to be able to come in through there, through Little
8 Lake.
- 9 Q. Because of the draft?
- 10 A. Yes, ma'am. Well, the draft of the barges, and back there,
11 those bayous are so narrow especially when the tide drops out. It
12 makes it even worse. And the captain said, "Man, we're never
13 going to make it back there." And that's when they decided to
14 come back around through Houma, which was still a fight. It took
15 four or five days to get into location because the water was so
16 low back there.
- 17 Q. Who was the crane operator that came on board with you the
18 day of the incident?
- 19 A. I don't -- think it was Jeremy Specks.
- 20 Q. Do you have a contact number for him?
- 21 A. Yes, ma'am. Let's see. Justin sent it to me. [REDACTED]
- 22 Q. 803-2365?
- 23 A. Yes, ma'am.
- 24 Q. Okay. And how do you spell his last name?
- 25 A. The contact says "Specks," S-p-e-c-k-s.

1 Q. Okay. Thank you. So when you arrived on board, what was the
2 actual height or angle of the -- let me rephrase that. What was
3 the angle of the boom?

4 A. Angle of the boom? When he got in the cabin, I asked him,
5 and he -- at first, he really didn't -- he didn't give me an exact
6 height. I said, "Man." I said, "Can you see the angle?" And he
7 said -- and finally, when he located it, I think it was at 25, 26
8 degrees. He really didn't give me an exact figure, but it was
9 somewhere in between. It was right below 30. I want to say that,
10 you know, he did say the number 26 degrees, but when we talked
11 after, he said, "No, it was below 30," but he didn't really give
12 me an exact number.

13 And then after the fact, I realized before he started
14 lowering it, I should have asked him, "Hey, do you know what was
15 the exact height?" That way, you know, we can have it. And I
16 should have done that beforehand, but I didn't.

17 Q. And what did he end up lowering it to?

18 A. He lowered it -- he stopped right about 15. And I said,
19 "Man, look, just go ahead and lower it all the way down. I mean,
20 there's no reason not to." So he actually lowered it probably
21 about 4, right at 4 degrees, where it's basically parallel with
22 the barge itself, right above it, and then I guess the block was
23 probably a foot off of the top of the, the steel beams on the HMT
24 26. And we resecured both the fast line and the mainline.

25 Q. Okay. And what type of experience do you have with cranes or

1 have you --

2 A. Not really.

3 Q. No?

4 A. No, no, ma'am.

5 Q. Why did you want to lower it even further past the 15 if the
6 crane operator seemed to think that that was --

7 A. Why not? You know, Travis walked out of the wheelhouse, and
8 he said, "Hey, can you go any lower?" I said -- that's what I
9 told him. I said, "Look, lay that thing all the way down." And
10 that's in fact what he did. I mean, that was my -- why not just
11 lay this thing actually on the deck, you know? Naturally, you
12 don't want just the block laying there, but put it right above it,
13 and that's what we did.

14 Q. And do the crane barges normally get stowed in a cradle?

15 A. Depending on the size of the crane, some of them do, some of
16 them don't. Little (indiscernible) crane barges, yes, they'll
17 have a crane, or you have a crane that, again, that's stationary
18 on a barge, they'll -- and if the angle allows it, it'll -- they
19 could put a rack, you know, for it.

20 Q. What about for the crane on board the *Mr. Dawg*?

21 A. No, not that one. It's got 180 foot of boom, and it would
22 actually -- if you did put one, it would end up being what it was
23 today. You'd have to leave that -- I mean, probably 26 or damn
24 near 30 degrees because of the length of the boom, you know?
25 You'd have to put the -- you have to build the rack on the other

1 barge. It's just too much boom, so it wouldn't be practical.

2 Q. Okay. And was it missing anything else as far as any
3 appropriate tie-downs or anything different than how it is usually
4 stowed for safe transit?

5 A. Uh-uh. Yeah, if you look in the survey, you'll see how it's
6 attached to the barge. It's turn buckled, sitting on 12-inch
7 mats, and it's turn-buckled down to the barge, four point.

8 Q. Okay. And does Sea Level own the deck barge, as well?

9 A. I don't believe, no, ma'am.

10 Q. Okay. Do you know who owns the deck barge?

11 A. I can ask, but I do remember that those HMT barges that
12 Todd -- TK Towing owned them. I can reconfirmed that, but I'm
13 almost positive we had those HMT barges over there.

14 Q. Okay. So Todd is with TK Towing?

15 A. Yes, ma'am.

16 Q. And what's his position?

17 A. He owns it.

18 Q. And who is Billy?

19 A. Billy, that's -- he owns Caillou Island.

20 Q. Caillou Island. Okay. So if you don't mind kind of going
21 over, you had originally mentioned that Todd spoke to Billy about
22 getting the --

23 A. Yeah, I'll go over that again. The original boat that was
24 supposed to do the job was the *Mr. Leon*. But that's whenever they
25 realized that, hey -- the captain called, "Hey, man, look, I'm

1 drawing 8 1/2, 9 foot. I'm not going to be able to get back
2 there." Todd had sent him the location, and that's when Todd
3 started calling around to find another boat, located the *Robert*
4 *Cenac*.

5 Todd called Justin, "Hey, look, Billy has got a boat in
6 Houma." It's 28-foot wide, which make it fairly shallow. He was
7 light on fuel, light on water. So Todd told Justin, "Hey, just go
8 ahead, and you know, why don't we just pick -- why don't you all
9 pick up the boat direct and I won't have to put anything on top of
10 it."

11 Basically, you know, boat was 3800 to us, and Todd would have
12 had to, you know, I guess put a 10, 15 percent charge on top of it
13 just to rent it to Sea Level.

14 Q. So the *Mr. Leon* is owned by TK Towing?

15 A. No. I think Todd was just operating that boat at the time.
16 Well, brokering it.

17 Q. Okay. And then he reached out and was trying to find
18 another, another --

19 A. Well, yes, he called around, and that's when he found Billy's
20 boat, and he called Justin. And that's when Justin -- that's when
21 he called me right about 6:00.

22 Q. Okay. Thanks for clarifying that.

23 A. I have -- Billy and I are really good friends, and so is Al.
24 Those guys, they do -- they're first class. I like to have a
25 relationship with people like that, because I -- you know, their,

1 their knowledge is priceless, and it really helps out. And I
2 always tell Billy that, that I enjoy, you know, our relationship
3 because of what I can learn from those guys.

4 Q. So kind of looking back at, you know, hindsight being 20/20
5 with the sequence of events, is there anything that you would have
6 done differently or --

7 A. I guess if, you know, if I'd have been, you know, more in
8 place or more involved AKA not being, you know, second and third
9 week on the job, and knew what was going on and where we were
10 going, and so forth, I would have, you know, done some more
11 homework on it, and then figure out how everything -- I just -- I
12 wasn't familiar with the equipment and what we were doing. You
13 know, basically just a breakdown of communication on both parts,
14 you know? That's all.

15 Q. Do you feel like had there been any specific company policies
16 in place that may have been able to guide you to answer the -- to
17 get the questions that you needed answered so that you have an
18 idea what they're looking for --

19 A. Well, right. The bad thing about policies is that if --
20 somebody may interpret it differently, and whatnot, and when you
21 base assumptions off policies, sometimes you'll end up, you know,
22 being wrong. Don't ever assume anything, basically. That's kind
23 of been the way I look at things. And the captain said the same
24 thing, you know: "I assumed it would be all right, but we
25 weren't." He based his calculations off of the spuds being 40-

1 foot tall, when come to find out, the spuds were 60-foot tall.

2 So his knowledge, knowing the waterways, he figured that the
3 crane boom, the length of the crane was probably 15 foot higher
4 than the spuds, and that would put him at at 65 foot, and the
5 bridge is 72, I believe, or 71. And he, you know, he figured he'd
6 be all right.

7 And then that's whenever -- he said, "You know what? I'm
8 going to wait, and I'll call Al," and that's when Al texted me and
9 I texted Justin. I didn't hear from Justin. And the boat took
10 off right, right after that, and then it's 30 minutes later,
11 that's when it happened. So basically just communication. That's
12 the main driver in all of this, communication on both parts.

13 Q. And what about any type of -- do you think that any type of
14 verification processes should be in place before we
15 (indiscernible) situations?

16 A. That, too, as well, yeah.

17 Q. Because you know that side a little better, what type of
18 verifications --

19 A. If --

20 Q. If you were running the show --

21 A. Right.

22 Q. And you wanted to put something in place that was actually
23 going to be utilized to prevent things like this from happening --

24 A. Yeah, if it had been my captain -- or, actually, you know, if
25 I'd have been more, I guess, involved, typically, that any time a

1 captain would answer a question like that, I would, I would
2 probably get in my car and go down there and then just reconfirm
3 it, you know, just to make sure that, "Hey, look, this, in fact,
4 when you pick the spuds up, they're 60 foot tall, and that crane
5 boom is 180 foot long."

6 You know, it's going to be -- so, basically, if that crane
7 boom is any taller than those spuds, you're looking at over 60-
8 foot air draft alone. To me, that's risking too much anyway. You
9 never know powerlines or anything else, or where you're going,
10 trees, and all that. So, you know, just go ahead and lower the
11 boom all the way. That's how I look at it.

12 But like I said, from the start, if I'd have been more
13 involved and then I guess being part of the decisionmaking, I may
14 have even, you know, told these guys, "Hey, look, you're probably
15 going to have to go through Houma Nav, cut across Bayou Terrebonne
16 and get in there. You know, I guess, like I said, just being more
17 involved is really what kind of upset me about it.

18 Q. By more involved, you're saying in this situation, having
19 actually gone over to the barge and put eyes on it?

20 A. Right. It --

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. Like I said, it -- if I had been more involved from the start
23 and known all the ins and outs of it and that size of -- been
24 familiar with the equipment and then familiar with the job site
25 and where we were going, that's all. Typically, that's, that's

1 what I've always done. No matter what, I'm hands-on. And if
2 company man or guy -- if, you know, my captain has ever had any
3 questions, I'll be, "Hey, look, I'm coming out there, and we'll
4 figure this out together." That situation, I didn't do it.

5 Q. I think, too, a lot of times, you know, in different jobs you
6 go into, a lot of it is on-the-job training, so you don't know
7 what you don't know --

8 A. Right, right. Yes, ma'am. Again, I should have dug more,
9 into it more, I guess, just starting out as -- it's like, "Hey,
10 you know, these guys, they've been doing this for a while, and it
11 should be, you know, good to go." I mean, I trust Justin, and he
12 trusts me, and I'm not saying it's his fault. It's just -- it was
13 a breakdown of communication -- that's all -- between, you know,
14 whoever loaded the boom and secured it to relaying to Justin,
15 "Hey, look, no, these guys secured it, they looked at it, it's
16 good to go." That's basically --

17 Q. Okay. Thank you.

18 LT [REDACTED] I don't have any further questions at this time if
19 you guys want to --

20 BY MR. MUISE:

21 Q. I have a few about the crane. You mentioned you had drawings
22 of the barge from Conrad. Do we have -- and I haven't seen the
23 report either. Is there a sketch of the crane itself?

24 A. Sketch of it?

25 Q. Like, any specks on the crane? I know you said 108-foot

1 boom.

2 A. 180-foot boom. It's a 300-ton ringer crane. If you look at
3 it -- it'll give you a better idea.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. I haven't seen this so -- well, I just received this back
6 yesterday, so she's been waiting on it, as well.

7 Q. Okay. This makes more sense. Thank you.

8 A. I have some pictures in my phone, as well, of it.

9 LT [REDACTED] If I can get you to e-mail those to me?

10 MR. RITCHIE: Okay.

11 LT [REDACTED] Thank you.

12 BY MR. MUISE:

13 Q. Was there any mechanical issues with the crane at all
14 beforehand?

15 A. Come to find -- beforehand?

16 Q. Beforehand.

17 A. No.

18 Q. Is there any reason that they would have left it up? Like,
19 because the further you lower it down, the more stress is on that,
20 on the top of the lift --

21 A. Well, that's actually -- that's at the job site. That's why
22 the boom is that high.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. Yes, sir.

25 Q. But if you lower it down too far, you're just adding stress,

1 so I'm curious if there was any maintenance issues that would have
2 been a reason not to lower it for this job for the transit?

3 A. No, sir.

4 Q. Okay. Safe working load? Is that in here somewhere, the
5 safe working load of the crane?

6 A. I'm not familiar with that.

7 Q. How about is there, like, an event load, a (indiscernible)
8 log of --

9 A. On the crane itself?

10 Q. Yeah.

11 A. I'd have to ask those guys as far as, you know --

12 Q. Okay. Does Sea Level have any kind of management
13 certification like ISO 9000 or some SEM certification?

14 A. Um-hum.

15 Q. You get audited by a third-party for your clients or --

16 A. Yes, sir, I'm assuming they do. I mean, they do a lot of
17 refinery work, plant work, stuff like that. Again, that'd be a
18 question for Jamie to answer as far as what audits they've gone
19 through.

20 Q. Okay. And lastly, can you -- we talked about where we were
21 going, and stuff, yesterday, and I'm a little confused, so can you
22 show me on the map where exactly we were going --

23 A. If you get a satellite view --

24 Q. Satellite view?

25 A. Yeah.

- 1 Q. And for the record, we're looking NOAA chart 11365 and 11355.
2 So you want to turn that off?
- 3 A. Yeah, there you go. If you zoom in right there.
- 4 Q. Yeah, let's see if I can drag it. No, no, no. In here
5 somewhere?
- 6 A. Yeah, keep going. Right there, that's the pump station.
- 7 Q. Okay. So that was the destination all along?
- 8 A. Yes, sir.
- 9 Q. That's where we were headed?
- 10 A. Um-hum.
- 11 Q. Let's just drop a pin there. Okay.
- 12 A. Zoom back out. You want me to show you how they got in
13 there, eventually ended up getting in there? That's good. So the
14 boat came in along the levy, took this little bayou, came all the
15 way up down here to this -- I guess, was that a pipeline right
16 there? Zoom, can you zoom back in? Yeah, this, this long canal
17 right here.
- 18 Q. I can turn the (indiscernible) up if you want.
- 19 A. No, it was just that one right there. He came in through
20 that way.
- 21 Q. In here?
- 22 A. Yeah, and if you zoom back out --
- 23 Q. That was the plan or just the way they did go?
- 24 A. That's the way they ended up going. That's where they
25 found -- what they did was they -- once they kept getting held up,

1 they spudded the barge down and went on light boat to, basically,
2 you know, find their route.

3 Q. Okay. All right. Well, thank you.

4 A. Yup.

5 Q. Appreciate that. That's all I have --

6 BY MR. JOHNSTON:

7 Q. Just had a couple questions about the barge and some of the
8 planning. Can you talk about the spuds on the barge just for my
9 understanding, how many, the arrangement?

10 A. There's two spuds. They're on the starboard side of the
11 barge. The barge has a rake in the front, and it's boxed in, in
12 the back, and it's got a spud unit that, you know, a hydraulic
13 spud unit you crank up to lift the spuds up and down.

14 Q. Okay. Are they the one on each side or are they --

15 A. Yeah, no --

16 Q. Are they forward or are they midships or --

17 A. They're both on, on the same side, and one is forward, and
18 one is astern.

19 Q. They're both on the -- if you're looking at it --

20 A. Starboard side, starboard side.

21 Q. Yeah, if you're looking -- there we go --

22 A. Oh -- yeah.

23 Q. Got you. So you don't need the crane to pick the spuds up
24 and down?

25 A. No, not these, uh-uh.

1 Q. All right.

2 A. They have -- they don't have spud towers on it. It's just
3 spud wells. Cables run through the bottom of the spud, comes back
4 up and on the side, connects it to a ship, and you just lower it
5 up and down.

6 Q. So when they picked up the barge on the *Robert Cenac*, the
7 spuds were all the way up?

8 A. Yes -- no, they were down. They had to lift --

9 Q. They were all the way down. And then when they pick them all
10 the way up, when they -- tow --

11 A. To -- yeah, yes, sir.

12 Q. Okay. And how high are they when they're all the way up?

13 A. It'll be probably right at 60 foot.

14 Q. Sixty feet?

15 A. You know, you have the -- the barge is -- it's an 8-foot
16 barge, so you have, what, 8 foot of spud in the barge itself and
17 when that spud is sucked up into the well, depending on how it's
18 built, sometimes it will go probably 6 inches to a foot inside
19 that spud well.

20 Q. Right.

21 A. But typically, they'll stay, you know, flush at the bottom of
22 the barge.

23 Q. Okay. So it's about 60 feet from the deck up?

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. Okay. Is that, in your experience, is that standard across

1 barges or is that --

2 A. That particular barge is -- they put those longer spuds for
3 doing dockside work in the Mississippi River. Most spud barges
4 around there, especially power spud units, are 40 to 45 foot.
5 Some are 50, but very rarely. Most of them are 40, 45 foot.

6 Q. Okay. So the captain -- you said the captain said that he
7 thought the spuds were -- he thought they were 40?

8 A. Yeah, he --

9 Q. Why would he think they were 40? Do you know? I mean --

10 A. I guess because it's the standard height, you know? I
11 wouldn't say height standard.

12 Q. Right.

13 A. But again, when he did that, that's when he called and said,
14 "Hey, look, I want to doublecheck this to get the actual height of
15 everything."

16 Q. Okay. So the spuds on the *Mr. Dawg* are a little bit bigger
17 than most other ones?

18 A. Yes. I mean, they're 60 foot.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. Like I said, they use that barge a lot in the Mississippi
21 River, and 40-foot spuds sometimes just doesn't cut it.

22 Q. Okay. I understand. And silly question, what color are the
23 spuds? Are they --

24 A. They're black. They're just steel.

25 Q. Just black the whole way up?

- 1 A. Yeah, um-hum.
- 2 Q. Okay.
- 3 A. There's no -- what it is, there's a pin. Once you raise it
4 up to a certain height.
- 5 Q. Yeah.
- 6 A. There's a pinhole cut in it, where you stick the pin through
7 it and you rest the spud on the actual spud well. There's no
8 towers on those, and there's no height markings on them.
- 9 Q. Okay. It's just black all the way up?
- 10 A. Um-hum.
- 11 Q. Yeah. Okay. Sorry. I'm picking through some things here.
- 12 A. No, that's all right. Ask away --
- 13 Q. So prior to taking on the job, you talked to Al?
- 14 A. Um-hum.
- 15 Q. What information is exchanged? Is there anything on paper or
16 through e-mail or is it --
- 17 A. Since it was a weekend -- you know, during the week, work
18 orders will be sent.
- 19 Q. Yeah.
- 20 A. You know, start fuel and lube, inventories, stuff like that.
- 21 Q. Right.
- 22 A. They actually -- what I like about Caillou Island is that
23 they'll -- they use HELM -- I don't know if you're familiar with
24 that, HELM Live, and basically, they'll send you the daily log
25 each day, and they'll send you a morning report and an evening

1 report of the boat's location.

2 Q. What information are they providing on the barge as far as
3 are they providing information like how high the spuds are, you
4 know, how high -- how big the crane is or --

5 A. Right. Well, Justin and I spoke about that, and he told me
6 it was a 300-ton ringer. He gave me the size of the barge. We
7 didn't discuss spud height. For the life of me, I don't know why.
8 But I did ask, you know, the overall air draft of the crane, and
9 he said the crane is, you know, supposed to be below the spuds,
10 and that's the same information that I pass along to Al along with
11 the size of the deck barge.

12 Q. So it's the kind of thought that if the, if the crane boom is
13 below the spuds and the air draft is below 60 -- or it is 60?
14 Would that be right?

15 A. Right.

16 Q. Okay. How did Justin verify the height of the crane. He
17 said he -- it was --

18 A. Called Russell at the yard, at Eagle dry dock, and Russell
19 then spoke to the crane operator and I guess the rigger that was
20 in the yard that lowered the crane and secured it, secured the
21 block.

22 Q. So he called a guy at the yard, and --

23 A. Well, he called a guy that was at the yard on Friday. I
24 mean, it's --

25 Q. Okay. It was on Saturday night.

1 A. Yeah.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. This was probably about 8:30, I guess, 9:00, whenever Justin
4 called Russell.

5 Q. Okay. So nobody really -- it was the Cenac guys that saw the
6 crane? Nobody actually saw it?

7 A. Right. No, they got there at, like I said, 10:00 Saturday
8 night. Yeah, in the dark. The spuds were still down.

9 Q. Okay. Right. So in the information you all exchanged, does
10 Sea Level look at the route at all when, you know, when you have
11 your pickup destination, or your pickup location and the
12 destination? Does Sea Level look at the route and account for any
13 sort of obstructions or, you know, like a bridge or special
14 considerations for the route?

15 A. Right. I brought that question up, as far as, you know, do
16 we ever talk about a route? No route was instructed to me. And
17 like I said, I left it up for the captain for him to decide, and
18 that's, that's what we went with.

19 Q. Okay. You used the word -- pardon me if I don't understand,
20 but what does special access mean?

21 A. If it's -- say, it's private property, you know, and the, the
22 landowner, you have to basically gain access to be able to bring a
23 tug and barge on his property or across his property, that type of
24 stuff.

25 Q. So it doesn't have anything to do with hazards or

1 navigational issues?

2 A. No.

3 Q. It's more of a property rights thing?

4 A. Some of them will be, you know, oyster beds, or something
5 like that, you know?

6 Q. Right. I think that's all I got. Thank you.

7 BY CWO [REDACTED]

8 Q. As far as you're aware, do you know if the captain on the
9 vessel was ever told the height of the spuds?

10 A. Uh-uh. That was -- you know, all the things we talked about,
11 that's the one thing that, like I said, we didn't go over.

12 Q. Okay. And then because of this incident, are you aware of
13 any changes to the company policies --

14 A. There will be.

15 Q. Nothing in place yet --

16 A. No, sir.

17 Q. But it's all still (indiscernible) review --

18 A. Yes, sir. Yeah.

19 Q. All right. That's all I have.

20 LT [REDACTED] Any last alibis?

21 MR. MUISE: No.

22 LT [REDACTED] Okay. The time is 9:58 a.m., and the interview is
23 concluded.

24 (Whereupon, at 9:58 a.m. CDT, the interview was concluded.)

25

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

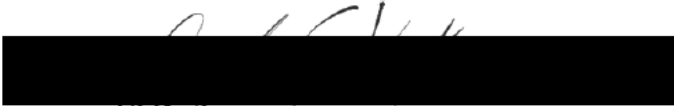
IN THE MATTER OF: *ROBERT CENAC AND MR. DAWG COLLIDE
WITH HOUMA TWIN SPAN BRIDGE, IN
HOUMA, LOUISIANA ON MARCH 6, 2022*
Interview of Rene Ritchie

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA22FM012

PLACE: United States Marine Safety Unit,
Houma, Louisiana

DATE: March 18, 2022

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.



Danielle S. VanRiper
Transcriber