



U.S. COAST GUARD INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Matter Under Investigation: July 12, 2021 Allision 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.

Interview Of: Mr. Frank Altobello, Tug Dispatcher for Crescent Towing

Date/Time: July 14, 2021 @ 1400 local time

Location: In Investigations conference room, Sector New Orleans

Interviewed By: CWO3 [REDACTED]

Others Present: Adam Tucker, NTSB; Kevin Frey - Salley, Hite, Mercer & Resor, LLC (representing Crescent and Cooper/T. Smith interests)

Interview Summary:

Mr. Altobello stated that he had worked 14 years for the company as a dispatcher and had served the previous 1.5 years as the tug dispatcher for Crescent Towing. His work schedule was a two day on / two day off with sliding weekend duty, meaning he would work Monday & Tuesday / Friday, Saturday, & Sunday of the first week and Wednesday & Thursday of the second week. On the morning of the incident, he was working a 1800-0600 shift alongside Jeremy Claverie, the Cooper T. Smith line-handling dispatcher, who he has always been paired with unless one of them is on leave. He started his shift at 1800 on July 11. Just prior to the incident, they were in the dispatch office on the second floor of the company's office barge, which was permanently moored on the right descending bank of the Lower Mississippi River at approximately mile marker 93.5.

Regarding the incident, Mr. Altobello recalled that it all happened "really quickly". He said that he received a phone call at his desk at around 0320 from a Crescent pilot with caller ID "Warren Nelson". The pilot told him that "You got a ship lost power coming your way. Y'all better get out of there!" At the same time, his work NEXTEL two way radio was going off: The ITV MIRIAM COOPER was calling and said "You need to run out of there now."

Mr. Altobello stated that he made it a few steps from his desk toward the exit before the impact, knocking him first against the wall and then to the floor. He got up and noticed the ship (later identified as *M/V JALMA TOPIC*) was pushing the office barge upriver. Mr. Altobello and Mr. Claverie made it out of the exit door and onto the exterior breezeway between the two office building structures. Mr. Altobello braced himself against the exterior building wall and Mr. Claverie held on to the upper breezeway railing on the shore side of the barge and "rode it out until the barge leveled out" for the next 20-30 seconds as the barge "surfing" up and along the riverbank until it finally settled back down. Mr. Altobello found that he did not have any serious injuries and was sore only at this time and recalled Mr. Claverie saying "It's settling down, I think we're ok now."

After the barge settled, Mr. Altobello stated that he went back into the office to retrieve the NEXTEL two way radio, then exited the office building and went down the stairs to the main deck to assess where the *M/V JALMA TOPIC* was. The ship was not against the barge anymore and was on the levee and he could hear the vessel's anchor being lowered. He went back upstairs and into the dispatch office, retrieved his cell phone and called Ben Morvant (the company operations manager).

Mr. Altobello stated that at that point, there was no way for him or Mr. Claverie to get off of the office barge, as the gangways were damaged and the barge's stern was still up on the riverbank (upper levee) and the bow was pointed into the river, perpendicular to the bank. He and Mr. Claverie walked around the entire office barge on the main deck and second floor to assess the damage. They found that the mooring dolphins were laying over and the gangways were severed and damaged along with the sewer/fiberoptic/phone/electrical lines. In the dispatch office everything was knocked over and the cabinets slid towards the river side of the barge. There were no fires and there was no apparent damage to the barge hull. From the second floor of the breezeway, Mr. Antebello saw water from the river on the main deck from when the barge "tilted". While walking around the barge, they became aware that there was a third person on it at the time of the incident who was an office cleaner. This person told them that he had been thrown against a wall and then onto the floor as a result of the impact; Mr. Altobello did not know if this man had been hurt as a result.

Mr. Altobello stated that a marine surveyor was able to get onto the barge at around 0500 via an extension ladder laid across to the barge from the riverbank. The first time he was able to get off the barge was between 0600-0615, using a ladder laid over between the barge's stern and the riverbank. Shortly after, the operations manager came onto the barge with one of the company's "safety guys". At some point in time later in the morning, Mr. Keith Kettering (from Cooper T. Smith) called him for an assessment of the situation.

When asked about the use of the NEXTEL radios, Mr. Altobello stated that he and Mr. Claverie each had one and there were two calling groups (one per radio), one for the Cooper T. Smith line-handlers and one for the Crescent Towing standby and working tugs.

When asked about the Crescent Towing tugs that were working in the area at the time of the incident, Mr. Altobello stated that there were three in the area: the *ITV MARDIS GRAS* was crewed and working in the area, and its master (Captain Roy) called him on the NEXTEL shortly after the incident to let him know the vessel was alongside the barge to hold it in position. The tugs *ITV ANGUS COOPER / ERVIN COOPER* were both moored alongside the office barge complex, not working and both crewed with only a duty engineer. He stated that when not in service, the company keeps an engineer on the boats as patrolman. He also stated that *ITV MIRIAM COOPER* was not working; he wasn't sure of the location of the vessel at the time of the incident.

When asked if he was aware of any previous vessel allisions with their barge fleet or the office barge, Mr. Altobello stated that he had never seen an allision with their fleet.

When asked when he had last participated in a fire drill and/or emergency egress drill on the office barge, Mr. Altobello stated that it had been "a long time" since he had participated in a fire drill and had never participated in an emergence egress drill, however he stated that the company safety director does do a safety orientation for new employees. He said the barge had an EPIRB, a safety locker, fire extinguishers and emergency lighting.

When asked about the location of the tugs tied up to the barge, Mr. Altobello said the ITV MARDIS GRAS was at the upper end of the other barge. The ITV ANGUS COOPER was tied up on the office barge and the ITV ERVIN COOPER may have been at the other barge.

When asked about any other sounds he remembered hearing immediately preceding, during, or after the incident, Mr. Altobello stated that he did not hear any sounds beyond the phone calls, rumbling during the impact and subsequent barge movement, and the sound of the *M/V JALMA TOPIC*'s anchor letting go. The first communications with the ITV MARDIS GRAS was when it was at the JALMA TOPIC.

When asked if the barge lost power, Mr. Altobello said he did not recall but noted the generator kicks in quickly. He recalled the phones on the office barge were out after the contact.

When asked about the tools available to him in the office, Mr. Altobello stated that there were no other communications besides the office phone and NEXTEL radios. They have a MRTIS display on a 50" television screen mounted on the office wall that is visible from his desk.

When asked about how many times he fell, Mr. Altobello said he fell three times. Once in the office, once in the hallway, and then in the breezeway. When he first was outside in the breezeway, he slipped again and went up against the wall; the same wall that he braced himself on. Mr. Altobello recalled the barge getting pushed up on the high side of the bank before it moved away and began to spin. He saw that the gangway was gone.

When asked about what happened to the other barges and vessels that were tied up alongside the office barge complex, Mr. Altobello stated that the only one he knew for sure about was the *ITV ANGUS COOPER*, which was still tied up alongside the office barge after the incident and he couldn't see the ITV ERVIN COOPER.

When asked to recall when he was notified to evacuate the office barge, Mr. Altobello said they had no communications directly with the ship and before he hung up with the pilot that called, the NEXTEL went off which was the ITV MYRIAM COOPER. He knew he had to make tracks out and he had the NEXTEL in his hand and when he fell on the floor, the NEXTEL fell out of his hand.

When asked if he had taken any pictures, videos, or sent any texts with his personal cell phone, Mr. Altobello stated that he had not, but noted that there was a port camera located near the bank across the river from Algiers Point that faced downriver that may have captured something. The office barge also had security cameras that may have captured something

//s// [REDACTED], CWO3, USCG

MSSD3 [REDACTED]
Marine Casualty Investigator, USCG Sector New Orleans
July 27, 2021