



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594  
Office of Marine Safety

## Interview Summary – DCA22FM005

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**Interview with:** John Mitchell – Pilot *Marquette Warrior*

**Date/Time:** December 13, 2021, at 1015 CST

**Location:** *Telephonic*

**Interviewed by:** [REDACTED] USCG, Bart Barnum - NTSB

**In attendance:** Adam Davis – Council for Marquette Transportation Company

**Case:** *Marquette Warrior* – DCA22FM005

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Mr. Mitchell (also referred to in summary as the “pilot”) was interviewed in conjunction with the investigation into the loss of steering and subsequent grounding of the towing vessel *Marquette Warrior* at mile marker 538 on the lower Mississippi River near Greenville, MS on November 21, 2021, at 1215 in the afternoon. The interview was not recorded. Below is a summary of notes taken by investigators during the interview. Quotes by the interviewee during the interview were captured by investigators and are identified using quotations in this summary.

- Holds a Master of inland waters USCG credential.
- Started with Marquette Transportation Company in 1999.
- Designated examiner for the company’s captains and pilots.
- Sails both captain and pilot aboard Marquette boats.
- Said that he is trained on just about every type of vessel Marquette owns and every river they operate.
- Was the pilot at the helm aboard the *Marquette Warrior*, on 11/21/21, during the steering loss and tow grounding.
- For the accident voyage the vessel was coming from Cairo, IL, with a destination of New Orleans, LA.
- Had been onboard the vessel 2 days prior to the accident.
- Said he works between 280-300 days per year.
- Permanent vessel is the *Joshua David Esper* and was only on the *Marquette Warrior* filling in on a non-permanent basis.
- Had been onboard the *Marquette Warrior* several years prior to the accident before it had been refitted.
- He said during the vessel’s refit, it had been completely stripped down to its “skeleton” and overhauled from one end to the other.
- Said it was cheaper to remodel an old hull then buy a new boat.
- Stated that there had been no issues with the propulsion or steering of the vessel in the 2 days since he had been onboard.

### Accident Events:

- On the bridge at 1040 in the morning the day of the accident to relieve the captain.

- Sunday drills held with the crew. Captain and himself remained on the bridge during drills, which were completed around 1120-1130. At which point the captain exited the bridge and went to the galley for lunch.
- 30-40 minutes later he said that the vessel was making its way down to Leland Dikes.
- Running 90% ahead the vessel was pushing 35 loaded barges.
- Engineer called wheelhouse on the intercom system and said that he was having trouble with the lights going on or off (Mr. Mitchell did not know if the C/E said on or off but indicated that the engineer seemed nervous).
- The engineer asked if vessel could pull over so he could troubleshoot what was going on.
- The pilot told the engineer it would “25-30 minutes before he could “back it anywhere safely,” and asked the engineer “if that would be a problem.” The engineer answered that “I don’t know.”
- Mr. Mitchell then informed the deckhands working on the tow to return to the vessel as a precaution and asked the Mate to go back to the engine room to give the engineer a hand.
- Engineer called the wheelhouse again and asked the pilot how long till they could pull over. The pilot said the engineer told him he didn’t know what was going on, the lights were flickering, and he suspected an issue with the online generator. The pilot told the engineer it would be 15-20 minutes before they could safely pull over. The pilot recounted the engineer saying that they “really need to pull over.”
- Pilot said he was still navigating the vessel through the dike field.
- The pilot then called the shore-based port captain to report that they were having issues in the engine room. When the pilot was on the phone, he said that his rudder stopped responding and he determined that the vessel had lost steering. He sounded the general alarm.
- The captain reported to the bridge shortly after and took over communications.
- Mr. Mitchell, from the wheelhouse, attempted to switch steering pumps and switch from follow-up to non-follow up modes to regain steering functionality.
- He ordered over the radio for the crew to stay inside.
- He and the captain communicated with traffic both below and above and told them to be aware of their situation.
- Secured general alarm after 60 seconds, received full POB muster from crew.
- Rudders were hard down to port. He began to back down hard.
- Estimated to be around ½ speed before they began to go around the turn. Then they regained steering.
- Forward port barges began to push up onto the left descending bank.
- Tow and vessel began to top around. He knew that the river was not wide enough, so he decided to break the boat out of tow.
- Once the boat broke free, the tow topped around, ran aground, and broke apart.
- Nearby good Samaritan tugs helped corral barges.
- Spent 1.5-2 days getting barges back in tow.

- River had a 4-5 mph current. It was “very swift,” because it is low water and narrow at that location.
  - From GA sounding till he got steering back he estimated 3-5 minutes, “not very long.”
- Had transited the same section of river on different boats 4 times over the past month.
- He typically steers the point at the accident location. He backed up once during an earlier transit (because the buoys had moved in due to low water – narrower) and the current spun him around so he decided that he would steer the point every time.
- Average speed coming down the river was between 9 and 11 mph.
- No way to stop the tow (35 loaded barges) in that situation (same location on river) with a 4-5 mph current, even with steering. Assumed that if he had a larger boat with more horsepower, he may have been able to stop the vessel.
- He indicated that the accident was 100% an engineering issue and did not know what could have prevented the accident. He said he is an expert at driving the boat not in the engine room.
- Felt his crew did a great job in the response.
- Indicated that there were no other issues with the vessel prior to the steering loss.
- The accident was the worse one he has had in twenty something years in the industry.