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Asserting our right "...to petition the Government for redress of grievances."

Amendment 1, U.S. Constitution, Dec. 15, 1791

Mariner Fatigue is an Accident Waiting to Happen

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There is a sense of uneasiness on the western rivers and along the Gulf Coast as its commercial mariners await the outcome of the latest disaster to strike the marine industry, namely, the ramming and collapse of the Interstate 40 highway bridge by a towboat on the Arkansas River.

The Captain of the M/V ROBERT Y. LOVE, the vessel involved in the tragic Arkansas River bridge collapse was reported to have only 9½ hours of sleep in the two days before the accident. "That's just not enough time to get a decent rest, especially after driving almost a thousand miles to reach the boat. At 61, he's only a few years older than I am and I just can't stand up to that anymore. It's no wonder the guy blacked out. I don't know him, but his company must think he is some kind of a superman," said one veteran towboat captain. "If he blacked out, its just that his body is reminding him he's not 20 years old anymore. If he fell asleep, he is no different from dozens of CDL truck drivers who crash their rigs every year."

The commercial boat industry is extremely competitive. When an opportunity arises to put a piece of equipment to work presents itself to a dispatcher or a company executive, the first question is how soon and how fast it can be put on the payroll. That puts incredible demands on the working stiff mariners on board.

When a boat is in port, the crew is expected to toil throughout the day doing tasks like cleaning, chipping, painting, making minor repairs, changing oil and a dozen other

comparable tasks to make ready for the next job. Essentially, this 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM schedule picks up regardless of when the boat arrived at the dock. If the boat is called out on another job, a 6-hour-on followed by a 6-hour-off duty watch schedule goes into effect. This is called a two-watch system or simply "6&6". This assumes, usually falsely, that the vessel has two full crews. If this is not the case, any crew member can be called out at any hour of the day or night in an "emergency." It turns out that most "emergencies" are not really emergencies but rather a matter of poor planning and undermanning...things that management could eliminate if it had any desire to do so.

But, reducing costs means increasing profits, and the crew is simply expected to handle any problem that happens to arise. Towing vessels have few if any manning requirements, and the Coast Guard does not feel compelled to become involved in matters that Congress only allows them to regulate marginally. Both dispatchers and company managers tend to push boat crews to the limit of their endurance as pointed out in the Arkansas River bridge collapse and a recent bridge striking in Seattle, WA, where a tugboat Captain was only able to get 5 hours and 40 minutes sleep in the 31 hours preceding the accident.

River pilots express concern about the combination of fatigue and the fact that they pass under many bridges every day. Spectacular towboat accidents like the ones at Bayou Canot and on Lake Pontchartrain in the 1960s are possible

when towing vessel personnel are pushed beyond their human physical limits. Many bridges contain highway approach sections (bents) or sections outside the navigation channel whose piers are not protected by fenders and accessible to damage from tows and barge breakaways that take place outside the navigation channel. The thought of causing such a disaster is enough to make many mariners reconsider their careers in light of their potential liability.

Mariners who work on supply vessels and crew boats that service the massive offshore oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico are subject to the same grueling working conditions. The pattern of excessive working hours, fatigue, and undermanning evident on inland towboats was even more in evidence in the offshore fleet.

Also evident were tales of a massive industry turnover rate where there were very few unlicensed crew members with true maritime experience. Until quite recently, little training was required to enter the industry and to remain in it although this picture had begun to change with the recent introduction of international training requirements for many, but not all, working mariners.

There are reports that many supply boats are so undermanned that engineers are on "24-hour call" to man their engine rooms and are either physically worn out or let their machinery go to hell by the end of their tour of duty.

One of the "excuses" invented by the companies and rubber-stamped by the Coast Guard is that engineers work in

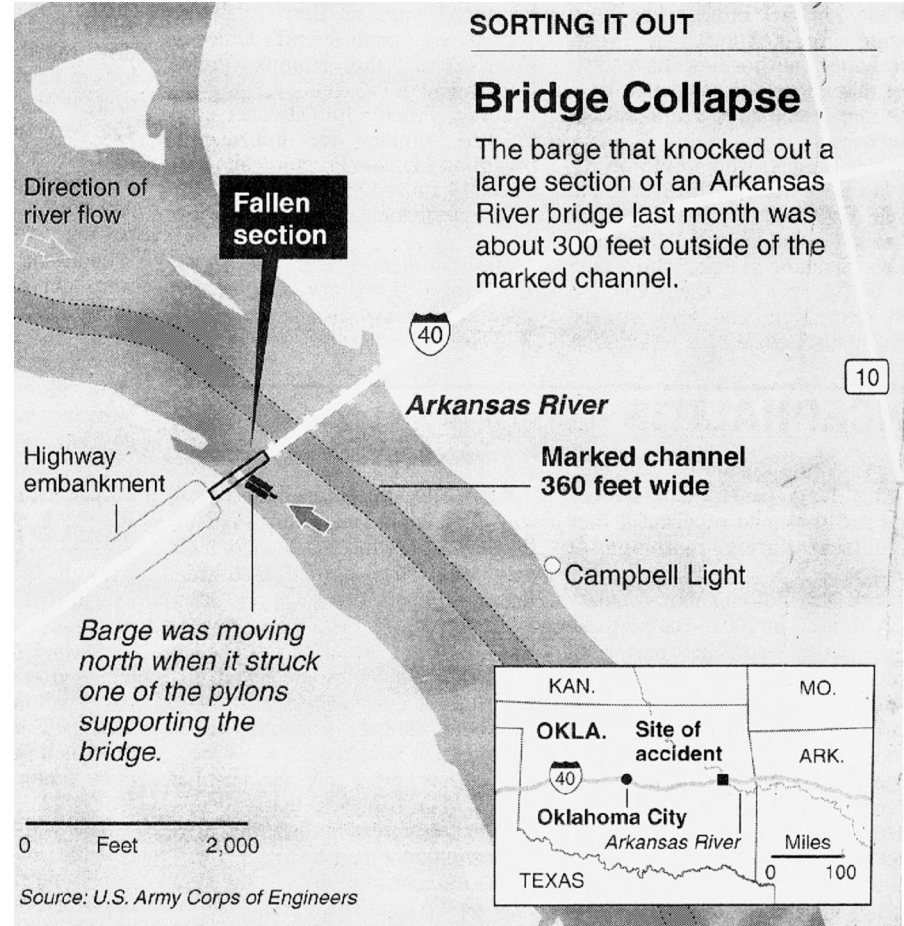
"automated" engine rooms and that they do not have to remain in these hot and noisy engine spaces when they don't have to fix anything. Anyhow, who wants to stay in a space that is between 110 and 135 degrees? But, what is seldom mentioned is that this "automation" constantly sets off alarms 24 hours a day that require the engineer to go into the engine room and check them out and reset the alarms. Simply ignoring alarms can lead to disaster for the vessel and its machinery.

But after tending to these problems day and night, many engineers either silence the alarms, pull their cards or learn to ignore them regardless of the risk to men or equipment. This happened to one supply boat that sank after its bilge high-water alarm and open-hatch alarms failed to sound after the engineer failed to secure his engine room before heavy weather hit. Two crewmen died when that vessel sank.

Offshore mariners have thousands of stories of working in the oil patch. The universal complaint is that support vessels are grossly undermanned and their crews are expected to work endless hours. Nobody seems to care or to even keep track of the hours toiled on these demanding vessels.

The Coast Guard cannot be relied upon to enforce existing safety regulations since they are responsible for the vessels being undermanned in the first place. The "Certificates of Inspection" issued by the Coast Guard to offshore supply vessels clearly do not provide enough trained crewmen for these vessels in domestic 24-hour service in the Gulf of Mexico.

Most mariners believe the boat companies and the Coast Guard conspire with each other to keep the crews small. One mariner recently told me of a 220-foot OSV" operated by a company that was well-connected politically was permitted to operate with a crew of only 5 men...as if you could really expect to tie a monster of almost 3,000 tons up to an offshore platform using only one



deckhand.

This could be cited as an "emergency" when you had to wake the other deckhand and rouse the engineer to go out on deck and "help" in the middle of the night or in the middle of a storm. It is a good chance to lose either life or limb and holds little appeal for most mariners.

The marine industry is at the crossroads and significant changes are needed and needed now. These changes include the need for a comprehensive federal whistleblower law that will protect and even reward mariners that report violations of safety regulations and workplace hazards.

Better working conditions are necessary and involve scrapping the current "two watch" (6&6) system for a

4-on and 8-off watch system for vessels in 24-hour operation with optional "overtime" work that may not exceed time on duty of more than 12 hours in any 24 consecutive hours. These work-hour regulations need to be extended to all crew members on inland waters where there are currently no effective work-hour restrictions and great abuses are reported. This would provide for an extra man readily available for lookout duty in the pilothouse, especially during periods when most human beings "nod off." And reasonable inspection standards must be established and enforced for every "uninspected" towing vessel in operation today.

Without these changes, we'll just keep waiting for bigger and bigger accidents to happen.