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Reprint from Volume 19 Number 3

February 8, 2007

Safety reports galore—still awaiting *Queen of the North* report ~ Patrick Brown

BC Ferries is at last talking about safety—and so are others. A second Transportation Safety Board (TSB) advisory relating to the January 9 *Quinsam* incident was released on January 22. Former Provincial Auditor George Morfitt's long-awaited report on safety at BC Ferries was released on January 22. BC Ferries' divisional enquiry report on the *Quinsam* incident was released on January 26.

This sudden flood of information on safety at BC Ferries is a gratifying response to public concerns expressed in January. As yet, there are still no investigative reports on the sinking of the *Queen of the North*: a BC Ferries' enquiry is expected to go on for about two more months.

Quinsam Reports

On January 9, the Gabriola ferry *Quinsam* departed unexpectedly from its Nanaimo terminal while still loading, breaking its mooring lines and dumping a Gabriola resident's pickup truck into the water.

As previously reported (*Island Tides*, January 25, 2007), the TSB's January 16 advisory had recommending that all BC Ferries equipped with RAD (right-angle drive) units be equipped with alarms that would indicate when the RAD units were not assuming the positions indicated by wheelhouse instrumentation. The TSB second advisory suggests that tie-up arrangements be reviewed throughout the fleet and that 'more robust' arrangements be adopted.

BC Ferries' January 26 divisional report on the incident states that after a thorough examination and testing of the machinery and equipment of the *Quinsam*, it concluded that there was no mechanical or electrical fault that caused the unexpected movement of the vessel, but that human factors were the probable cause. An exhaustive and detailed review of the actions of all crew at the time pinpointed the problem as a 'hot transfer' of control over the RAD units from one set of controls to the other on this double-ended ferry.

Normally, the ferry is kept snugged up to the dock and ramp by running the engines forward at a low-power setting. The possibility was that both sets of controls were not perfectly synchronized, and that when the 'hot transfer' was initiated by the crew, it caused an unexpected change in the RAD settings.

The report recommended the installation of alarms and the review of mooring gear (as in the TSB advisories) and also made recommendations on procedures and sound signals.

Morfitt Ferry Safety Report

Initiated by the *Queen of the North* sinking, the Morfitt Report makes it clear from the outset that BC's ferries are safe: '... overall, the company is operating a safe coastal ferry transportation system. The company directors, management and staff are highly committed to operational safety, both for the travelling public and for BC Ferries' personnel.'

But it's not perfect: 'Nevertheless, there are a number of areas identified in this report where safety and related administrative processes and procedures should be strengthened. We have brought these to the company's attention and it has stated its commitment to addressing each of those areas in a timely manner.'

BC Ferries has a Safety Management System (SMS), says Morfitt, but it doesn't have a plan: 'the company should have a strategic goal that pertains directly to that priority, with identified tactics, measures and targets related to achieving that goal.'

Without the plan, he says, implementation of the SMS is uneven, needs a review, and better orientation and training is necessary: 'BC Ferries has not taken the necessary steps to ensure buy-in to the SMS as being fundamental to operational safety.'

'On-Time' Higher Priority Than Safety

He further notes that bonuses for management (right up to the CEO) are predicated on the system's on-time record, and not on safety. This, he suggests, results in an emphasis on keeping to schedule, possibly to the detriment of strict safety procedures. His recommendations include ensuring that there is adequate time for proper watch handovers and exercise of vessel clearance protocols across the fleet.

Risk Assessment and Management

Morfitt also criticizes the 1997 SMS for not incorporating priorities based on risk management principles. These principles would ensure, he says, that areas of greatest risk would receive the most attention.

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'This article was published (February 8, 2007) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

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Clearly, Morfitt's greatest nightmare is Active Pass, where two superferries from opposite directions meet and execute close quarters tight turns many times each day. He notes that alternatives to this simultaneous transit of the pass have been considered, but rejected. He also notes that special attention has been given to both crew procedures and ship's equipment (such as backup steering hydraulics) to reduce the risk. Nevertheless, he recommends a further risk assessment of this practice.

Employee Relations

Morfitt puts considerable emphasis in his report on employee relations. He suggests strongly that safety requires 'an organizational culture that is fully supportive, open, empowering and receptive.' However, he points out that a number of employees 'indicated it was punitive (controlling, closed and impervious).'

There is a process known as Voluntary Individual Safety Observation Reporting System (VISORS) that enables individual crew members and terminal personnel to report any safety issues or concerns; in other words, a procedure for whistle-blowing. However, indicates Morfitt, whistle-blowers must sign their names and there is a perception that they are not protected.

He notes: 'During our review, we observed tension in the relationship between the company and the union.' He continues: 'This situation is, in our view, largely dysfunctional and poses significant impediment to resolving operational safety issues and ensuring continuous improvements to the SMS.'

Casual Staff

Morfitt notes that a very large number of the employees are classified as 'casual' and that, particularly in the summer, there is a large proportion of inexperienced staff, due to high year-to-year turnover. Despite a recently implemented automated crew selection and assignment system, he feels that there are problems making up crews. He recommended attention be given to the criteria for crew selection and assignment to

promote greater cohesion and synergy among bridge crews.

He also raises questions as to the reliability of the human resources database on which the automated system depends: 'the input of personnel information and program controls needs to be improved to ensure that staff are not assigned to positions for which they are not qualified.'

He goes so far as to suggest that the turnover of casual staff would be reduced if there were a larger group of 'regular part time' employees, as recommended in the BCFS/Union mediation agreement. Little progress, he says, seems to have been made on this.

Training

Morfitt said that BC Ferries needs to continue to accelerate the rate of bridge resource management training, and also continue a program of refresher training. He also highlighted other training needs, including crowd management and control for emergencies. (He emphasized, however, that safety and emergency equipment was of the highest quality.)

He recommended 'standardizing routine and critical operating procedures so that, no matter what ship one is on, procedures are undertaken the same way', and the communication and use of 'best practices' throughout the fleet. A problem, he said, was ensuring that staff are made familiar with each new work site and are given appropriate exposure to the intricacies of that site.

Incident Investigation

The number of incidents reported and investigated is declining year-by-year. Morfitt noted that investigations of accidents and incidents took too long, and that some incidents are never reported for fear of fault-finding. He recommended increased training in this area for key personnel. He also suggested that internal safety audit personnel needed to spend less time on paperwork and more time in the field. He criticized the advance scheduling of safety audits, remarking that they lacked the element of surprise.

Finally, Morfitt noted that the company now had a security plan under development. ☞