

MARINE ENGINEERS' BENEFICIAL ASSOCIATION (AFL-CIO)



"On Watch in Peace and War since 1875"

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M.E.B.A. PRESIDENT: KEY BRIDGE COLLAPSE WAS A SYSTEMIC FAILURE, NOT A SIMPLE WIRING FAULT

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recently issued its final report on the allision of the containership DALI with Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge which subsequently collapsed. The accident occurred on March 26, 2024, when the DALI leaving Baltimore Harbor, experienced losses of electrical power, propulsion, and steering and struck the bridge. A substantial portion of the bridge subsequently collapsed into the river, killing six highway workers on the bridge.

The investigation determined that one of the causes of the accident was loss of electrical power (blackout), due to a loose signal wire connection to a terminal block stemming from the improper installation of wire-label banding, resulting in the vessel's loss of propulsion and steering close to the bridge. As a result of the investigation, the NTSB issued 14 new marine safety recommendations and 4 new highway safety recommendations.

But subsequent press headlines and the NTSB's own tidy news release summary following the report sensationalized the role of the loose wire, without properly highlighting the substantive negligence that spawned the disaster. A deeper reading of the report makes it clear that the accident cannot be blamed solely on a single "loose wire," but instead was a cascading failure rooted in cost-cutting, poor maintenance, and disregard for U.S. maritime safety standards by the foreign owners and operators of the DALI. M.E.B.A. President Adam Vokac argued in a recent editorial that adherence to U.S. maritime laws and American crewing practices would have prevented the blackout, the collision, and the loss of six lives.

Citing findings from the NTSB and a Department of Justice court filing, Vokac pointed out that the vessel suffered multiple electrical blackouts while docked in Baltimore — serious warning signs that should have kept the ship tied up until the root cause was fixed. Instead, no adequate diagnostics or repairs were made, the Coast Guard was not notified, and the ship departed. Shortly after sailing, repeated blackouts caused a total loss of propulsion, steering, and lighting, leaving the vessel unable to stop before striking a bridge pier and killing six workers.

President Vokac noted that investigators found that the operator had disabled or altered critical safety systems, including fuel pumps and automatic power rerouting features, in order to save money. The

anchor was also not prepared for emergency deployment, and the ship's captain allegedly failed to inform the harbor pilot of prior blackouts and mechanical issues — violations of U.S. law.

President Vokac contends that a U.S.-flagged vessel crewed by American mariners would not have sailed under such conditions and would have been legally required to report and correct the problems before departure. “Unfortunately, there is no incentive for non-American operators to properly train their crew or encourage mariners to report unsafe conditions,” he noted in the editorial. “It is my opinion that unscrupulous operators prefer plausible deniability, discouraging safety reports and punishing whistleblowers. American mariners, by contrast, enjoy legal protections that allow them to report safety issues without fear of retaliation.”

He placed blame on the global flag-of-convenience system, which allows foreign operators to evade accountability while U.S. taxpayers bear the cost of catastrophic failures. While a loose wire may have triggered the initial failure, President Vokac concludes it was the underlying culture of negligence — and the absence of American safety standards — that turned a manageable problem into a deadly disaster. “American vessels and mariners may have higher costs, but they are infinitely preferable to outsourcing our maritime economy and safety to the lowest bidder, then standing by helplessly as our reckless foreign counterparts bring it all crashing down around us.”

MARITIME LABOR UNIONS CONGRATULATE NEW MARITIME ADMINISTRATOR

As you read in the *Telex Times* last week, former vessel captain and shipping executive Stephen Carmel was confirmed as the new Maritime Administrator and was subsequently sworn into office. Maritime labor, which has been Carmel supporters from day one, were quick to issue a statement in support of the new MarAd boss. M.E.B.A., AMO, MM&P, SIU, SUP and the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Department released a statement shortly after the confirmation was announced:

“Stephen Carmel brings deep industry knowledge and a lifelong commitment to the U.S. flag fleet. Strong leadership at MarAd is essential, particularly as the Administration is working to develop a Maritime Action Plan (MAP) to restore American maritime dominance, and as Congress seeks to revitalize the maritime sector through legislative efforts such as the SHIPS for America Act, which has received overwhelming bipartisan support. Carmel's experience in shipping and logistics positions him well to lead MarAd during a time when our nation aims to boost its global maritime and shipbuilding capacity, grow its fleet of American-flagged ships, and address unfair competition from countries like China. Maritime labor looks forward to collaborating with Administrator Carmel to enhance American maritime capabilities, create more job opportunities in the maritime workforce, and ensure that the U.S. remains competitive and a leader in global shipping.”

NEW INITIATIVE PAVES WAY FOR FUTURE MSC SHIP ENGINE OVERHAULS

Shipyards have historically been the location for major vessel maintenance, but a new initiative may be the driving force in changing the way Military Sealift Command (MSC) conducts ship engine overhauls in the future. The MSC initiative would remove major engine maintenance and overhauls from being completed while pier-side during in-port availability periods, to being performed while the ship is underway and operational. “It's an initiative to change our engine maintenance from a siloed process of keeping everything in two parts, maintenance and operational, to putting maintenance on a continuum,” said Zach Mauer, MSC's Mechanical Engineering Branch Head. “So, if it's redundant machinery, we can do maintenance anytime, anywhere.”

According to Mauer, the initiative derives from standard commercial methods where commercial shipping and cruise ship industries contract teams from the diesel engine's original equipment manufacturer (OEM), Everllence, to conduct engine overhauls while at sea. "It's common practice for commercial industry to fly in one lead engineer and the ship's force works alongside them," Mauer said. "In doing engine maintenance this way, it reduces time spent in shipyards and expands their maintenance efficiency." Mauer said that because MSC's combat logistic force ships are built to commercial shipping standards and powered by the same commercial marine diesel engines, implementing best commercial maintenance practices on MSC ships would bring major benefits. "One of the biggest benefits is the amount of technical development the crew gets from interacting and engaging with the OEM experts that come to the ship," Mauer said. "You build a crew that become experts in the machinery that run the ship, not just operators."

Andy Busk, MSC Engineering Director, said it also builds professional development for the crew, and in turn can help towards advancement and personal growth. "It provides the crew the opportunity to obtain certifications, and enhance professional and personal development," said Busk. "This combines the training with the operational side where you are building those professional skillsets at your job, while doing your job." Mauer said conducting at-sea overhauls would reduce shipyard delays, citing internal MSC statistics from 2023 where he said there were a total of seven shipyard extensions with a combined 191 days of delay, specifically related to engine maintenance or repair. "This out-to-sea maintenance process would eliminate engine-associated delayed shipyard extensions and allow for better mission readiness," Mauer said. Busk said the biggest difference is being logistically prepared, resulting in the transfer of risk for an at-sea overhaul being extremely low. "There isn't any transfer of risk from the technical side to the operational side," Busk said. "It becomes a risk reduction because you are in a highly controlled environment with leading OEM engineers."

This past July through September, Mauer and his team were able to implement "proof of concept" aboard the Lewis and Clark-class dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS WILLIAM McLEAN when a team of Everllence technicians boarded the ship and conducted an overhaul on two of the ship's diesel engines and a major overhaul on a third.

M.E.B.A. Chief Engineer aboard the WILLIAM McLEAN Paul Snyder, who has been working for MSC since 1997, said he had never done anything like this before and was highly impressed with the process. "Having the opportunity for the crew to engage with the OEM technicians while conducting the overhauls, was a great benefit," said Chief Snyder. "To be able to accomplish what we did while underway and to also remain on mission, puts into perspective of how valuable this maintenance process is."

Snyder said the first two engine overhauls took just over two weeks to complete, and the third major overhaul was completed in about a month. He added "the same maintenance combined and completed in a shipyard would take twice as long. "It would be my desire to do all my engine overhauls in this manner with the OEM technicians because the level of professionalism and proficiency they displayed, greatly exceeded any other overhaul that I've been a part of in the past, by a substantial margin," said Snyder. "The knowledge, efficiency, professionalism, price - everything about doing it this way was a benefit to MSC." Mauer's vision is to expand the at-sea engine maintenance and overhaul process to other MSC vessels on a class-by-class basis where it is safe and appropriate, while advancing the crew's technical skills. "A corrective maintenance item becomes a casualty when the crew isn't given the parts, tools, or professional training needed to fix an issue without requiring

industrial assistance,” said Mauer. “By giving our crews the opportunity to gain on-the job training while working alongside the OEM, we empower them to become experts of their trade. This will drive a significant upward trend in both self-sufficiency and reliability.”

U.S. WILL KEEP SEIZED SHADOW FLEET OIL, SHIPS

President Donald Trump said the U.S. will keep or potentially sell crude oil seized aboard tankers intercepted off Venezuela, along with the vessels themselves, as Washington intensifies pressure on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Speaking in Florida, Trump said the oil could be sold or added to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, adding, “We’re keeping the ships also.”

The US military has seized two sanctioned shadow fleet oil tankers so far. Caracas has condemned the actions as piracy, while Washington claims Venezuelan oil revenues fund drug trafficking. The administration has also ordered a blockade of sanctioned tankers entering or leaving Venezuela and designated Maduro’s government a foreign terrorist organization. Venezuela, which relies heavily on oil exports, has requested an emergency UN Security Council session, calling the actions “ongoing U.S. aggression.”

HAVE A SAFE AND HAPPY HOLIDAY SEASON

The M.E.B.A. wishes all our members, applicants, retirees and their families a Merry Christmas, happy holidays and a prosperous new year. M.E.B.A. halls and offices are closed today (Christmas) but will open again on Friday, Dec. 26. Please follow up with your local Union hall concerning holiday closings to make sure you can complete your Union business.

NEXT MONTHLY MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS *(All times are local)*

Monday, January 5 – **Boston@1200. Seattle (Fife)@1300.**

Tuesday, January 6 – **CMES@1430; Charleston@1400; Houston@1315; Oakland@1230.**

Wednesday, January 7 – **Jacksonville@1300; New Orleans@1315; Online HQ “Town Hall” Meeting@1300 (No Voting) – Register by emailing mebahq@mebaunion.org**

Thursday, January 8 – **L.A. (San Pedro)@1230; NY/NJ@1300; Norfolk@1300; Tampa@1300.**

Friday, January 9 – **Honolulu@1100**

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***M.E.B.A. does not tolerate assault, or harassment of any kind.
If you see something, say something – The M.E.B.A. Emergency Hotline
can be reached at 1-888-519-0018.***

The M.E.B.A. is the nation's oldest maritime labor union, established in 1875. M.E.B.A.'s expertise and demonstrated track record of readiness, safety, and loyalty in answering America's call to action in times of both peace and war is unrivaled in the world. M.E.B.A. HQ – Phone: (202) 638-5355; mebahq@mebaunion.org. Website: www.mebaunion.org For publication and related inquiries (and to send photos & hot news tips) contact Marco Cannistraro, M.E.B.A. Special Projects & Communications – marco@mebaunion.org Visit us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter and check us out on Instagram. The Calhoun M.E.B.A. Engineering School can be contacted at (410) 822-9600 or www.mebaschool.org. M.E.B.A. Plans is at (410) 547-9111 or www.mebaplans.org