Ship Report Transcript
Thursday, May 23, 2024
By Joanne Rideout

It's time for the Ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. It's Thursday, May 23rd, 2024.

Well, I thought today that I'd give you an update on a story that was a huge maritime news story back in March. On March 26, in fact. Because this week we have seen some serious developments in this story for the better. This is a story about the container ship Dali, which hit a bridge in Baltimore Harbor, causing that big bridge to collapse. That led to the deaths of people in a road crew on the bridge and the closing of the harbor to all vessel traffic. The bridge is gone and will have to be rebuilt.

Now, since then, there's been a multi agency effort involving lots of coordination between skilled experts, people who have done amazing work in a relatively short period of time, less than two months.

They've cleared much of the debris that was blocking the ship channel, opened up some secondary channels to allow vessels to get in and out of the harbor. And this week, they made some incredible progress when they managed to move the ship and remove more debris. And now the deep water navigation channel is open.

So I thought we could talk about that today and how some things have changed since that ship came through the harbor and that incident caused so much damage. So let's start with Monday of this week when crews were able to successfully refloat the container, ship Dali and move her to a dock in the port of Baltimore. I'll take a guess that once the ship is stabilized there at the dock, they'll probably start removing those containers that have sat there on that ship all this time and need to be rerouted to customers who have been waiting for them all this time. After that, the business of getting that ship repaired will be the next big thing.

Now, moving the ship from the place where the bridge collapsed was quite a saga unto itself. Since it hit the bridge, the ship had remained in the same position aground, weighed down by big, heavy bridge sections, including a four lane section of the bridge roadbed that was draped across the ship's bow crushing containers under it. A big portion of the bridge was still attached and was hanging overboard in the water.

Demolition experts decided that the only safe way to remove that big portion of the bridge assembly was to treat it almost like a building demolition in that they placed a series of small, very carefully placed charges in various locations on that bridge section and detonated them in a precisely timed way so that they would explode in such a way that the truss would collapse in place and fall in the water and not further damage the ship or anyone nearby.

This was essential since the ship needed to be taken elsewhere in the harbor for unloading and repair, so they needed to get it out of there in one piece. And also the crew was still on board the ship. What I mean by building demolition is you've probably seen videos of the controlled demolition of like a building in a city block where the building has to come down, but they don't want to damage the buildings around it. And when done properly, the building sort of collapses on itself with no surrounding damage.

Well, this bridge section demolition was similar. And in the video that was posted about this, a bunch of small explosions happened all along the bridge truss and it just collapsed and fell neatly into the river just as they needed it to.

So after that, they were able to refloat the ship, which had been aground with the heavy weight of that bridge section pressing down on it. The dolly was refloated at high tide just before 7 a.m. on Monday with the support of five tugboats and various other vessels. The ship was then towed and pushed two and a half miles to a marine terminal at a dock in Baltimore Harbor. So you can appreciate the important role of tugboats in this situation. And it's kind of amazing to me, at least, that the ship withstood all the force that landed on it when that bridge collapsed and it remained seaworthy enough to move it to the dock.

One kind of eerie aspect of this is that in the videos of the bow of the ship, it has this big section of four lane roadbed just lying across the bow with one orange plastic safety cone. It must have been there from the road crew that was working on the bridge. And somehow that orange cone stayed in place and was just sitting there on the bow on top of the asphalt all this time through bad weather and everything else that happened.

So the ship is out of the way and no longer blocking the channel. With that gone on Tuesday of this week, the Captain of the Port of Baltimore announced that a deep draft channel for large ships is once again open to ship traffic. The channel now has a depth of 50 feet, 400 feet wide and a vertical clearance of 214 feet, which is enough to accommodate deep draft vessels like the dolly. Now, the protocols for moving ships through that area have changed since the incident. Vessels will need a Maryland State Pilot, which they needed before, and two escort tugs to make that transit now. The Maryland pilots have also mandated a three foot under keel clearance requirement.

Container ships exceeding 1000 feet in length and over 125 feet wide will only be permitted to transit when winds are under 15 knots. Other vessels are allowed transit when winds are under 20 knots. Smaller vessels are asked to use three temporary alternate channels that are shallower.

So they certainly put some serious caveats in place in order to allow vessels to transit that deep draft channel area. Some of that is, I'm sure, under the category of lessons learned from what happened. But also, there is still debris on the bottom from the bridge collapse. And there probably is not a lot of wiggle room for any vessel transiting in that area right now. So they are certainly exercising great caution, as they should in this situation.

So a little bit about some terms. You heard there the “captain of the port” in this case, of Baltimore. What is that? So the captain of the port is a U.S. Coast Guard term, used to refer to an officer that is designated to handle law enforcement activities for the Coast Guard in a designated area. In this case, the Port of Baltimore.

In our case locally here we have a captain of the port for the Columbia River sector, and they are empowered by the Coast Guard to make decisions relative to this area.

And that term, Maryland State Pilots. These are the licensed marine pilots who work on waterways in the state of Maryland. All harbor areas that serve ships have pilots who are licensed by the state where they work here on the Columbia. We have Columbia River pilots and Columbia River Bar pilots. Both pilot associations work together to cover the navigable portions of the river system and are licensed and trained to work in their own specialized areas of responsibility, which each contain significant and

different hazards and challenges. So Marine pilots are generally trained to handle vessels in their areas of specialty, and their strengths are that they are maritime experts in ship handling and related skills. And also they have the local knowledge of their areas waterway that makes them uniquely qualified to guide ships whose captains are unfamiliar with the quirks and challenges that each waterway presents to vessels transiting those waters. So it's a very specialized job that is considered the top of the maritime professions.

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