

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

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NAVIGATION AND VESSEL INSPECTION CIRCULAR NO. 6-74

Subj: Elimination of unsafe conditions on board tank barges

1. Purpose. The purpose of this circular is to alert operators of tank barges to the potential hazards that can develop through poor housekeeping practices and improper maintenance procedures and to direct the attention of Coast Guard Inspectors to conditions affecting safety that should be identified and corrected.
2. Background. A recent Coast Guard investigation into the explosion with subsequent fire and sinking of an unmanned tank barge in the process of loading a cargo of #2 fuel oil and gasoline, disclosed numerous poor housekeeping practices and maintenance procedures that may have contributed to the casualty. Among these was the installation of wiring and electrical appliances, such as an open element space heater, battery charger, cooking equipment and a fan, all of questionable approval for marine use, in a deck house which was used as a "log office." This "log office" also contained a table, desk, cot and miscellaneous conveniences for the tankerman. In addition to the combustibles in the "log office," there were approximately twenty cans of paint and thinner improperly stowed elsewhere on the barge. On deck, the battery powered navigation lights had been jury-rigged to bypass installed system components which had become defective.
3. Discussion. The venting of a certain amount of vapors from petroleum products at or near deck level during cargo transfer operations is unavoidable. An acceptable degree of safety can be attained by the elimination or neutralization of any ignition sources, i.e., heat and spark from the cargo area. To establish and ensure the continuation of a safe environment in the cargo area, tank barges must be designed, built and then maintained in accordance with the applicable sections of Subchapter "J", Electrical Regulations; Subchapter "F", Engineering Regulations and Subchapter "D", Rules and Regulations for Tank Vessels.
4. Action. Owners and operators of tank barges should ensure that equipment under their control is maintained in accordance with applicable regulations in the various Subchapters. Further, they should be aware that although a barge may be Coast Guard certificated as unmanned, a tankerman is required during cargo operations with the resultant hazards that can be created by the introduction of unapproved appliances and other miscellaneous items for personnel convenience and comfort. Marine Inspectors must be vigilant to detect any unauthorized modifications or repairs, jury rigs, the installation of unapproved equipment and unsafe housekeeping practices which must be corrected to insure the continued safety of personnel, vessels and the environment.

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