Safety Device Would Have Prevented Six Deaths

Had the crew of a barge used a steel pin to secure a spud – a steel shaft used for mooring barges – six lives would have been spared, according to a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation.

A vessel was pushing two deck barges in the West Cote Blanche Bay oilfield in Louisiana on Oct. 12, 2006 when the aft spud on one of the barges suddenly released from its fully raised position and slammed into a submerged, high pressure natural gas pipeline.

Releasing gas ignited, creating a fireball that engulfed both barges and the towing vessel. The master of the towing vessel "Miss Megan" and four barge workers were killed. A sixth worker has never been found.

The NTSB found that Athena Construction's manual contained no procedures mandating the use of the steel pin safety devices on the spud winch except during electrical work. A pin would have prevented the aft spud from deploying.

The NTSB report recommended that Athena Construction and Central Boat Rentals should develop procedures and train the employees of its barges to use securing pins to hold spuds safely in place before transiting from one site to another.