

Crash at the Riverwalk

On Saturday, December 14, 1996, a 763-foot Liberian-registered freightliner, the *Bright Field*, was heading down the Mississippi River at New Orleans when it lost control, veered toward the shore and crashed into a dock housing Riverwalk Mall and a hotel complex. The vessel, piloted by Ted Davisson, was loaded with 56,000 tons of corn bound for Kashima, Japan, via the Panama Canal.

The crash, which happened about 2:30 p.m. when the mall was crowded with some 1,000 shoppers, injured 116 people. The impact of the freighter demolished parts of the wharf, which is the site of 200 shops and restaurants, as well as the adjoining Hilton Hotel.

The ship had lost control at the stretch in the Mississippi that is considered the most dangerous to navigate. As the *Bright Field* was going downriver, it had just cleared the Crescent City Connection (a bridge) and was unable to make the hard turn right after the bridge.

After investigating the accident for a year, the Coast Guard reported that the freighter had lost control because the engine had shut down. The engine had shut down because of low oil pressure. The oil pressure was low because of a clogged oil filter. And the oil filter was clogged because the ship's crew had failed to maintain the engine properly.

Furthermore, this failure was not out of character. According to the lead Coast Guard investigator, the ship's owner and crew had failed to test the ship's equipment and to repair long-standing engine problems.

Sudden disasters frequently have a long history behind them. Consequences develop when we fail to follow time-honored principles of caretaking -- for people or equipment. It is a principle that we must understand clearly in the everyday business of Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home.

--Beecher Hunter