



National Transportation Safety Board  
Washington, D.C. 20594

**Marine Accident Brief**

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Vessel No. 1: Liberian Containership *Columbus Canada*, Lloyd's No.7800162,602.5 feet long, 92.1 feet wide, 32.8 foot draft, 24,080 gross tons, built in 1979

Vessel No. 2: U.S. Fishing Vessel *Black Sheep*, O.N. 1055544,81.7 feet long, 24.0 feet wide, 12.0 foot draft, 147 gross tons, built in 1997

Accident Type: Collision

Location: Gulf of Mexico, Galveston Bay Entrance Channel Buoy "3" (latitude 29° 19.1' N, longitude 94° 39.0' W), near Galveston, Texas

Date: December 21, 1998

Time: 2122 cst<sup>1</sup>

Owner/Operator: *Columbus Canada*: Atlas International, Ltd., Monrovia, Liberia  
*Black Sheep*: Raymond La Force, Mobile, Alabama

Property Damage: *Columbus Canada* - estimated at \$10,000  
*Black Sheep* -total Loss

Injuries: *Columbus Canada* - one  
*Black Sheep* - 1 minor

Complement: *Columbus Canada* - 30 (26 crew and 4 passengers)  
*Black Sheep* - 3

**The Accident**

At 1800 on December 21, 1998, the loaded Liberian containership *Columbus Canada* departed Barbours Cut Terminal, at Morgan's Point, Houston, Texas for Manzanillo, Panama, with 26 crewmembers and 4 passengers.<sup>2</sup> A Houston pilot was in the wheelhouse to conn the vessel to the sea buoy (designated "GB" on the nautical chart of the area) in the Gulf of Mexico at the eastern end of the Galveston Bay Entrance Channel (GBEC).<sup>3</sup> Also on watch in the wheelhouse were the master, the third mate, a helmsman, and a lookout. There was also one seaman on the bow standing by the anchors.

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<sup>1</sup> All times in this report are central standard time, based on the 24-hour clock.

<sup>2</sup> A freight vessel, on an international voyage, carrying passengers is not a passenger vessel unless it carries more than 12 passengers.

<sup>3</sup> Distance from Morgan's Point to the eastern end of the Galveston Bay Entrance Buoy is about 31 miles.

According to the pilot, as the vessel passed between buoys 11 and 12,<sup>4</sup> in the Inner Bar Channel visibility reduced nearly to zero due to fog. The *Columbus Canada's* logbook shows that the vessel passed buoys 11 and 12 at 2057. The winds were light and variable, there was a 3-foot swell from the southeast and the current was ebbing at about 2 knots in a southerly direction. Fog signals were sounded as the vessel continued outbound towards the Gulf of Mexico.

The *Columbus Canada* made good a speed of about 10 knots as it continued outbound in the Inner Bar Channel. The pilot kept the ship in the center of the channel on course of 121°T<sup>5</sup>. At 2115, in the vicinity of buoys 5 and 6 in the GBEC, the pilot acquired a radar contact at a range of 4 1/2 miles. The pilot continued to observe the approaching contact on two separate radars, one set on the 1 1/2-mile range scale and the other on the 3-mile range scale. Meanwhile, the master monitored the contact on the third radar. The contact appeared to be an inbound vessel approaching the *Columbus Canada* in the channel. It was later identified as the U.S. commercial fishing vessel *Black Sheep*.

While observing the contact on radar, the pilot attempted to establish radio communications with the vessel using radiotelephone VHF-FM channels 13 and 16. The pilot stated, and the ship's bridge watch on the *Columbus Canada* confirmed, that he made several calls on the radio but received no response.

The pilot had intended to disembark from the *Columbus Canada* between buoys 5 and 3.<sup>6</sup> However, he decided to remain on board longer because he did not want to disembark while another vessel was approaching his ship and not answering his radio calls. The pilot, therefore, requested the pilot boat *Houston*, which was following the ship to retrieve the pilot when he disembarked, to continue following the ship until he determined it was safe to disembark.

On December 21, 1998, the U.S. Fishing Vessel *Black Sheep* was returning to Galveston because gale warnings (35-45 knot winds) had been forecast for the Gulf of Mexico. The vessel was making good a speed of about 8 knots while inbound in the middle of the GBEC on a course of about 300°T. In the wheelhouse were an unlicensed master<sup>7</sup> and a deck hand. The third crewman was off watch in the galley. The vessel's foghorn was inoperative. The master used a searchlight and had the deck lights on in an effort to increase the visibility of the *Black Sheep* to other vessels. The *Black Sheep's* two radars were operating on the two-mile range scale.

The master of the *Black Sheep* stated that he heard one call from the *Columbus Canada* on VHF-FM channel 16, answered it, but did not receive a reply. The *Black Sheep* master acquired the *Columbus Canada* on radar about 1 1/2 mile ahead, located between buoys 3 and 5 in the center of the channel.

The vessels were meeting in a narrow channel during a period of restricted visibility. The Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (72

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<sup>4</sup> The buoys are in sets: odd numbered buoys are on the right side of the channel and even numbered buoys are on the left side when proceeding to sea.

<sup>5</sup> All courses in this report are true courses, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> These particular buoys are about 1.1 miles apart.

<sup>7</sup> The masters of commercial fishing vessels of less than 200 gross tons are not required to be licensed.

COLREGS)<sup>8</sup> applied and provided guidance on the proper course of action for the vessel operators to follow to affect a safe passing.

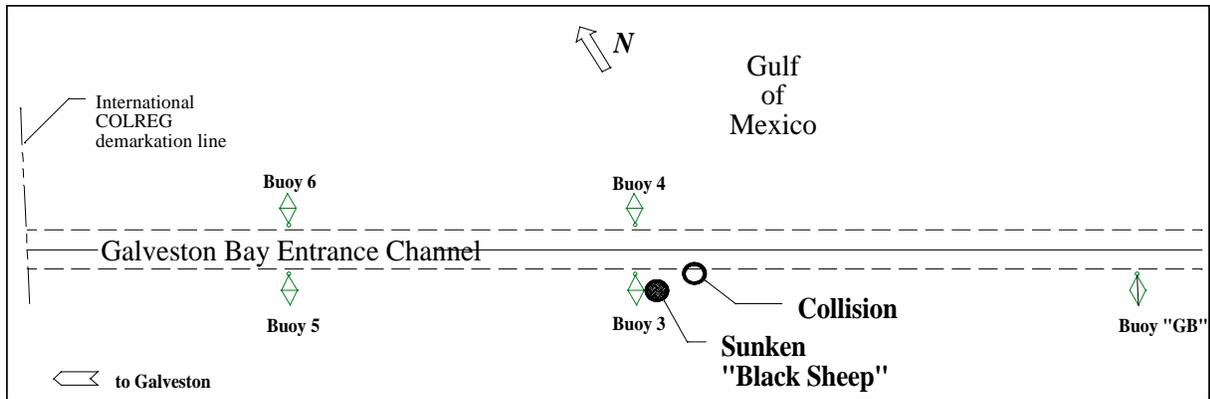
The pilot on board the *Columbus Canada* stated that he initially observed the *Black Sheep* on radar and that it appeared to be on the inbound right-hand side of the channel and then moved toward the center of the channel. Between buoys 5 and 3, the pilot on the *Columbus Canada* momentarily changed course to the right about 7° to allow more room for the expected port-to-port meeting and then returned the vessel to its outbound course of 121°T. The master of the *Columbus Canada* stated that the vessels were about 1/2 mile apart at that time.

As the two vessels converged, the radar contact on the *Columbus Canada's* radar screen merged with the own ship display at the center of the scope and the pilot ordered the rudder hard to starboard to avoid the approaching vessel. Upon sighting buoy 3 ahead at the extreme right hand side (outbound) of the channel, the pilot ordered left rudder to avoid colliding with the buoy and to remain in the channel. Shortly, thereafter, the pilot sighted the *Black Sheep* come out of the fog immediately ahead of his vessel and the vessels collided. The pilot stated, that although he had ordered left rudder, the bow of the *Columbus Canada* was still moving to the right at the time of impact.

According to the master of the *Black Sheep*, when the *Columbus Canada* was about 1 1/2 miles away, he believed that there was a risk of collision. As the vessels converged, the master of the *Black Sheep* stated that the image of the on-coming radar contact appeared on the radar scope to be crossing into the *Black Sheep's* side of the channel. To avoid collision, he turned the *Black Sheep's* rudder hard to port and passed ahead of the bow of the on coming ship. However, at 2122, the *Columbus Canada* struck the starboard quarter of the *Black Sheep*. The location of the collision was on the outbound starboard edge of the channel, just past buoy no. 3. (See Figure 1.) At impact, the *Black Sheep's* hull was breached and immediately began to flood.

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<sup>8</sup> Rule 9 governs navigation within a narrow channel and states that a vessel proceeding along the course of a narrow channel or fairway shall keep as near to the outer limit of the channel or fairway which lies on her starboard side as is safe and practicable. Rule 19 provides guidance for vessels not in sight of one another when navigating in restricted visibility. Every vessel shall proceed at a safe speed adapted to the conditions of restricted visibility. A vessel, which detects by radar alone the presence of another vessel, shall determine if a close quarters situation is developing and/or risk of collision exists. Avoiding action shall be taken in ample time and if a change of course is taken, alteration of course to port (left) should be avoided in a meeting or crossing situation. Or, if a close quarters situation cannot be avoided with a vessel forward, the vessel shall reduce speed to a minimum at which it can be kept on course. If necessary, take all way (movement of the vessel) off and navigate with caution until the danger of collision is over. Rule 6 describes safe speed as the speed at which a vessel "can take proper and effective action to avoid collision and be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions." Factors to be considered for safe speed are: state of visibility, traffic density, maneuverability of the vessel, draft in relation to the depth of the water, operational radar, and limitations of the radar.



**Figure 1.** Sketch of Galveston Bay Entrance Channel Showing Location of Collision and Sunken Position of the *Black Sheep*.

The *Black Sheep's* master stated he had not heard any fog signals sounded by the *Columbus Canada*. Neither vessel's crew visually sighted the other vessel until moments before the collision. Also, neither vessel reduced speed before the collision.

Immediately after impact, the pilot on the *Columbus Canada* stopped the main engine and steered to the left to remain in the channel. At 2123, the pilot notified the Coast Guard Vessel Traffic Center in Houston of the accident and anchored to await orders from the Coast Guard. The pilot on the *Columbus Canada* also notified the operator on the pilot boat *Houston* of the collision and directed him to render assistance to the *Black Sheep*. At 2123, the operator on the *Black Sheep* notified the Coast Guard Group Galveston on channel 16 of the accident. The pilot boat arrived alongside the sinking *Black Sheep* within 1 to 5 minutes and took the three crewmembers aboard. The three crewmembers were transferred to a 41-foot Coast Guard rescue boat at 2210 and brought to shore.

The *Black Sheep* continued to flood until 2348 on December 21, when it sank in the vicinity of buoy 3. Salvors later recovered the *Black Sheep* and brought it to Port Bolivar, Texas, for repair.

## Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board has determined that the probable cause of the collision between the *Columbus Canada* and the *Black Sheep* was the decision by the master of the *Black Sheep* to turn directly into the path of the on-coming ship.

**Adopted: August 22, 2001**