LAFAYETTE — Thursday's commercial boating accident on Freshwater Bayou was a near-tragedy — and an illustration of how hazardous water transportation can be.

The accident happened while employees of Trico Marine were doing what experts say crewmen must do. They were updating their training with a weekly safety drill, a mock rescue of a crew member who had fallen overboard.

As a crew boat lowered five men in a small rescue boat into the bayou, the smaller boat came loose. The up-ended rescue boat spilled the men into the water.

The most severe of the three injuries was a broken ankle — a lucky break, in this case.

Information compiled from Louisiana death certificates shows that between 1990 and 1996, water transport accidents were the biggest single cause of Acadiana deaths identified as having occurred at work.

Twenty-three people died in water transport accidents. Those accidents account for 19 percent of the 122 Acadiana workplace fatalities during the seven-year period.

Those deaths do not include work-related highway crashes, which are listed in a separate category on death certificates. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration says about 42 percent of the nation's workplace fatalities are related to transportation of all kinds.

Acadiana's extensive water transport system and its cargo and offshore energy industries generate heavy volumes of boat traffic — and contribute to the risk. In the coastal parishes of Vermilion and St. Mary, the rate of non-highway workplace deaths is higher than the state's overall rate.

Edwain Collins, with Seabulk Offshore Ltd., secures supply boat Seabulk Florida to a dock in Morgan City. The company's new employees undergo eight days of orientation to help them avoid the risks that make water transport one of the region's most hazardous occupations.

Work-Related Deaths in Acadiana, 1990–96

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drowning (Not related to water transport)</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explosive Materials</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aircraft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electrical Accidents</td>
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<td>Falling Objects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Transport</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Death certificate statistics, Louisiana Office of Public Health
about three times higher than the Louisiana rate.

But three people who study Louisiana’s commercial shipping industry say that factors besides the amount of traffic contribute to the danger.

Lt. j.g. Raymond Lechner investigates shipping accidents along Louisiana’s coast for the U.S. Coast Guard in New Orleans. Lechner found it hard to generalize about the many different causes of commercial boat accidents.

But one recurring theme is fatigue.

“It’s very subtle, and we can’t prove it, but when crews are overworked, the first thing that goes out the window is judgment,” Lechner said.

The investigator said his experience also makes him believe that boats should be engineered to fit humans, rather than trying to make people adapt to engineering.

One example: An August 1997 offshore collision between a supply vessel and a well head. Lechner said the vessel’s radar screen was located behind the master’s chair. So the pilot was forced to look away from the boat’s path to check the radar.

“If engineering could be updated, some of those problems wouldn’t exist,” Lechner said.

Another problem: a tendency among young, inexperienced crewmen to take risks without considering the consequences. “Sometimes they have a bulletproof attitude,” Lechner said.

That’s one reason he thinks training is important. So does attorney James Roy of Domengeaux Wright & Roy in Lafayette, whose practice includes injury litigation involving commercial boat traffic.

“Most of the time you see deaths involving water craft, it’s the result of someone’s rush to get something done or through carelessness,” Roy said. “There is virtually no serious injury or death that is not preventable if the supervisors and the vessel’s operators are properly trained.”

At Seabulk Offshore Ltd. in Lafayette, newly hired employees undergo eight days of training and orientation before they go to work, said Seabulk operations manager Ken Helms.

“We give them everything from firefighting to water survival to basic seamanship,” he said. “A lot of it is safety-oriented. Training and education are the secrets.”