

**S.S. Morro Castle Disaster-September 1934
U.S. Coast Guard Involvement and Response**

Chronology of Events

Saturday, 8 SEP 1934

- 0245 Fire detected aboard SS *Morro Castle*, which rapidly spreads
Weather deteriorating, with gale conditions
- 0257 Acting Master Warms gives order to stand by the lifeboats
- 0300 SS *Morro Castle* turns west toward NJ coast to bring ship closer to shore
- 0310 SS *Morro Castle* loses all electrical power and hydraulics for steering
- 0321 SS *Morro Castle* shuts down main engines; SS *Morro Castle* anchors approximately 2-5 miles east of Sea Girt, NJ
- 0324 SS *Morro Castle* sends first and only SOS signal via RTT and auxiliary battery power; no local CG units receive the SOS signal
- 0340 Crew abandons *Morro Castle* bridge due to advancing fire
- ~0400 Crew and passengers begin abandonment of ship; only 6 of 12 available lifeboats launched, and only 85 persons were aboard lifeboats, most of them crewmembers including Chief Engineer Abbott
CGC *Cahoone*, already underway and located approximately 25 miles N of *Morro Castle*, was notified by radio of emergency and ordered to respond; transit time about 4 hours due to sea conditions and limited maximum speed of about 10kts.
- 0415 SS *Andrea Luckenbach* first ship to arrive for rescue purposes, on scene; Station Shark River lookout Surfman Stephen Wilson spots ship on fire offshore and notifies OIC; OIC immediately notifies District by phone and orders station's MSB underway (OIC as coxswain), with CPB to follow as soon as possible (station XPO BM1 William Burton as coxswain); at this time, winds were varying Force 5-7, with heavy seas and surf from nearby hurricane
Most *Morro Castle* passengers and crew had abandoned ship by this point in time
- 0430 Station Squan Beach lookout Surfman Charles Austin sees ship on fire, and notifies acting OIC (XPO); station at same time notified via radio by Naval Radio Compass Station of disaster
- 0436 CGC *Tampa*, moored at Pier 18 Staten Island, notified by District of emergency and ordered to get underway and proceed to scene. Majority of crew on liberty and had to be recalled to get ship ready for sea.
- ~0445 Station Shark River MSB underway and proceeding to sea through inlet
- ~0500 SS *Monarch of Bermuda* arrives on scene; Station Shark River MSB on scene, pulling aboard live persons only and transferring full boat loads to SS *Andrea Luckenbach* rather than returning to station to unload survivors (total rescued about 80 survivors); Station Sandy Hook notified and ordered by District to respond; Station Squan Beach CPB underway with station XPO as coxswain (had just returned from another SAR case in inlet)
- 0515 Station Sandy Hook MLB 3702 underway with OIC as coxswain (also tried to launch MSB, but MSB disabled with engine problem)
- 0516 SS *City of Savannah* arrives on scene; accepts survivors rescued by Station Shark River MSB
- 0540 CGC *Tampa* underway from Staten Island, with two hour transit time to scene due to storm seas and limited maximum speed.
- ~0600 Station Shark River CPB underway, and shortly on scene to commence rescue operations (total rescued about 36 survivors)
- 0629 Sunrise
- 0745 Station Spermaceti Cove notified by District over phone; Station Squan Beach CPB returns to inlet due to heavy seas and swamping of boat, never reaching scene but rescued 7 survivors from seas
- 0755 CGC *Cahoone* arrives on scene; asks *Morro Castle* officers on bow status and whether tow needed
- 0757 CGC *Tampa* arrives on scene and anchors about 200yds. seaward of *Morro Castle* and about 2nm. off of Sea Girt; LCDR Rose assumes role of on-scene commander; similar to CWO Bruce, asks *Morro Castle* of their status and whether they need a tow, but is not informed of survivors in water to landward

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Chronology of Events (cont'd)

Saturday, 8 SEP 1934 (cont'd)

- 1000 LCDR Rose informed of survivors in water; directs *Cahoone* to patrol landward of *Morro Castle*, and launches *Tampa's* surfboats to attempt rescue; directs Station Sandy Hook MLB to pass towline to *Morro Castle*; Station Squan Beach MLB finally back in order and underway to scene
- 1030 Station Spermaceti Cove ordered by District to send all personnel possible along with boat on wagon to Spring Lake
- ~1100 Towline aboard *Morro Castle* and made fast; Station Spermaceti Cove's truck with crew and PSB in tow departs for Spring Lake
- 1200 *Morro Castle* cuts anchor chain
- 1300 CGC *Tampa* weighs anchor and is underway with *Morro Castle* in tow, with pilot boat *Sandy Hook* tending stern line to help steer
- ~1400 Stern line to *Sandy Hook* burned through and lost
- 1430 Inshore rescue operations by small craft suspended due to worsening weather, by now a whole gale
- 1812 CGC *Tampa* loses tow due to line parting under excess strain; line fouls *Tampa's* propeller, forcing cutter to anchor
- 1934 SS *Morro Castle* runs aground at Asbury Park adjacent to convention pier

During late morning time period, local fishing boat *Paramount* rescues about 67 persons.

Rescuee totals: Station Shark River boats: ~160, Station Squan Beach boats: ~7; total 167; including *Paramount* rescuees, total about 234

SS *Morro Castle* totals: 319 passengers/258 crew

Sunday, 9 SEP 1934

CGC *Cahoone* alongside *Morro Castle*, and checks for any remaining survivors

CGC *Tampa* arrives in New York with SS *Morro Castle* officers

Most station crews and boats had returned, although Stations Squan Beach and Shark River Inlet were tasked with wreck duty (i.e., patrolling wreck site to prevent looting, and to recover additional bodies)

Over the next three days or so, bodies continued to wash up on beaches from as far south as Bay Head all the way up to about Long Branch.

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Identified Shortcomings in USCG Response

Weather/Sea State

-Weather deteriorated from gale to whole gale conditions during rescue operation due to hurricane in vicinity (was to seaward of rescue scene) with rain, high winds, and large seas and swells.

Communications

-Local CG radio communications facilities (ship-based as well as shore-based) failed to pick up *Morro Castle's* SOS signal even though other local stations had, as well as CG Boston.

-Delays in forwarding distress signal and operational orders through official channels to either shore-side lifeboat stations or to cutters.

-CG AirSTA Cape May watchstanders completely failed to properly respond to distress signal, and once a response aircraft was launched, timing was too late to be of effective use in spotting swimming survivors.

-No means of on-scene communication between available aircraft and smaller surface craft to pass survivor spotting reports

-Lack of coordination between afloat OSC *Rose* and shoreside OSC *Yeandle* as to asset assignment and search areas

Response Time

-Most lifeboat station response times were considered appropriate, especially for Stations *Shark River* and *Squan Beach*, although Station *Squan Beach* lost time readying their MLB for use

-Cutter response time was slow, but hindered due to sea state and maximum speed of available cutters

-Aircraft response time was unacceptable

Procedure

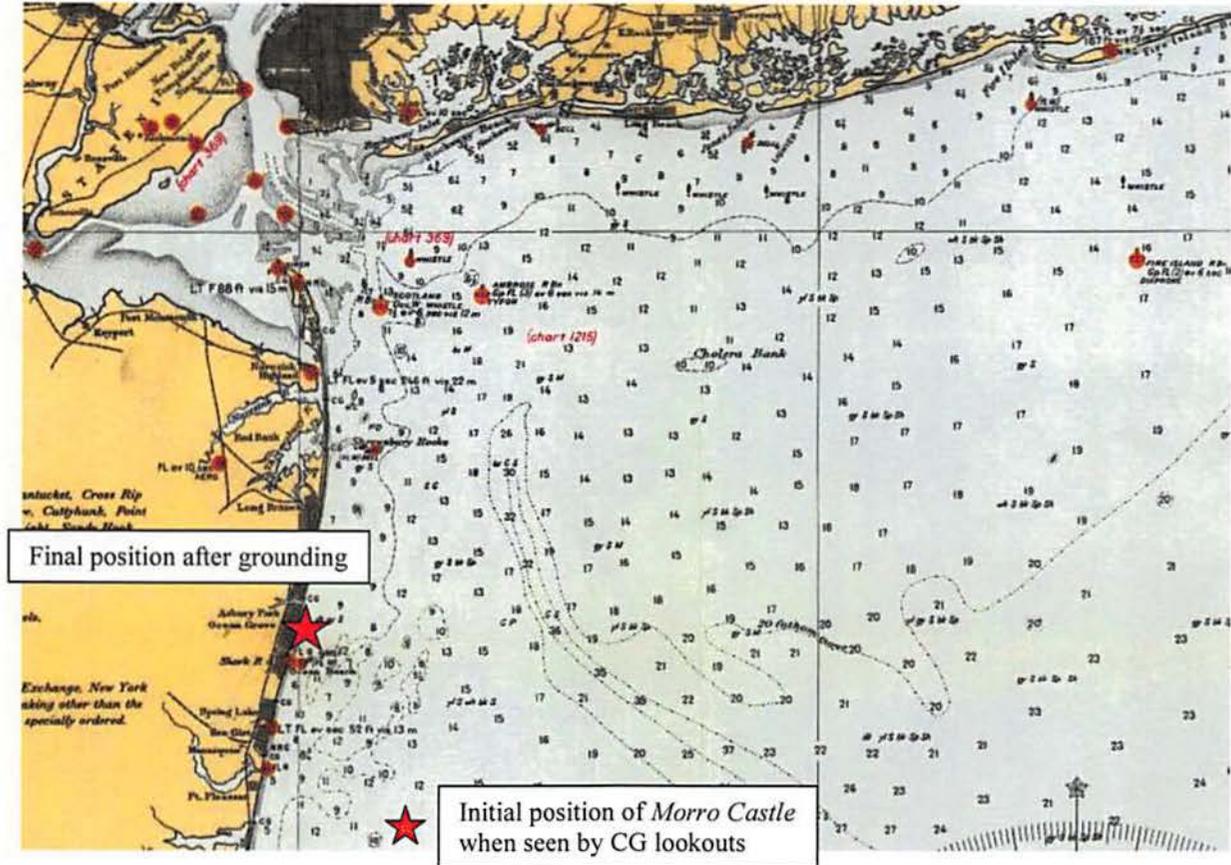
-Upon arrival, OSC (LCDR *Rose* onboard CGC *Tampa*) made no determination of whether or not *Morro Castle's* passengers had been safely evacuated, assuming that this had already happened when, in fact, it had not, which had the result of delaying the addition of CGC *Cahoone* to the CG units positioned inshore of *Morro Castle* searching for and rescuing passengers and crew that were in the water.

-Possibility of rigging a second bow towline to another towing ship seems to have not been considered .

-Lifeboat stations utilized available craft appropriately, but were hindered by sea state and lack of visibility to detect survivors in water; had Station *Shark River* been assigned a motor lifeboat (as they ultimately were following this disaster), more survivors could have been rescued per trip compared to either the MSB or the CPB; some stations had engine casualties to their motor surfboats that prevented their use; 38ft. CPB proved too susceptible to higher seas, and resulting in them not being useable for offshore rescue work under these conditions (unlike the MLB)

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(first USCG mass rescue operation)

Area of Events



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Key Reference Documents

-USCG Board of Inquiry into USCG Response to Morro Castle Disaster, October 1934; NARA RG 26, File 123/651/318/231.

-U.S. Senate, Committee on Commerce "Morro Castle" and "Mohawk" Investigations: Preliminary Report [Additional Preliminary Report. Index to Preliminary Report and Final Report] of the Committee on Commerce Pursuant to S. Res.7 (74th Congress) a Resolution Relating to the Investigations of the Steamships "Morro Castle" and "Mohawk" Disasters and the Adequacy of Methods and Practices for the Safety of Life at Sea; US GPO 1937.

Marine Fire Prevention, Firefighting and Fire Safety, A Comprehensive Training and Reference Manual; DIANE Publishing, 1994.

List of Involved Units

Stations

Station Squan Beach (OIC: CWO Hubert Tuttle, who was away at the time of the disaster; acting OIC was BMC Lawrence Bowden; station was still at old location, with separate dock facility at Point Pleasant inside of inlet) Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type H MLB No. 1951, Type H MSB No. 2893, Type H PSB No. 1882, and CPB No. 2390

CPB was initial response craft (rescued 7) as MLB was under repair, but was severely affected by high seas and had to return to station (later went out when seas subsided); MLB later launched but was too late on scene; station role in rescue efforts included surf rescues by personnel on beach; 4 rescued; station used as temporary command center by LCDR Stephen Yeandle USCG, who drove down from District HQ to take charge of inshore rescue efforts, and as temporary morgue for bodies that had washed ashore.

Station Shark River (OIC: BMC Melvin M. Hymer)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type H MSB No. 3396, Type H PSB 1676, and CPB No. 831 (ex-rum runner Bill); motorized craft kept at separate mooring inside inlet away from station site.

Initial responding unit from CG, rescued about 80 survivors with MSB, and about 36 survivors with CPB, total about 160 rescued; CPB later employed for wreck patrol duties. As a result of *Morro Castle* disaster, was assigned its first motor lifeboat, a refurbished Type H No. 1951 in 1936, which was later replaced by a more modern Type TR.

Station Sandy Hook (OIC: BMC George F. Morin)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type T MLB No. 3702/CG36338, Type H MSB No. 2892/CG26347, Type H PSB No. 3598/CG25348, and CPBs Nos. 8029 and 34ft. Wheeler CPB No. 2293

Responded with T MLB 3702, which passed towline from CGC *Tampa* to SS *Morro Castle*, and rescued *Morro Castle* ship officers from bow area. CPB attempted to tow PSB to scene, but heavy seas swamped CPB, and had to return to station. MLB 3702 later used to assist salvage firm Merritt, Chapman, and Scott with placement of salvage barge alongside beached *Morro Castle*.

Station Monmouth Beach (OIC: BMC C.B. Styron)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type H MSB No. 2019 (kept on Shrewsbury River side) and Type H PSB No. 1680

Role in rescue efforts limited to station personnel assisting with surf rescues in vicinity of Spring Lake; 16 rescued. Loaned MSB to Station Squan Beach.

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List of Involved Units (cont'd)

Station Spermaceti Cove (OIC: BMC Ernest Hulse, who was away at time of disaster)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type H MSB No. 2891 (which was OOC at time), and Type S PSB No. 3861.

Provided personnel for beach rescue duty in vicinity of Spring Lake. Later provided PSB 3861 on boat wagon and additional crew to Station Shark River Inlet, but PSB was dropped off at Shark River, and crew continued on to Station Squan Beach to assist in beach rescue efforts.

Station Bay Head (OIC: UNK)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type S PSB No. 4036 and Jersey type PSB No. 2998

Role in rescue efforts limited to station personnel assisting with surf rescues in vicinity of Spring Lake; 5 rescued.

Station Deal (OIC: UNK)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type H PSB No. 1974

Role in rescue efforts limited to station personnel assisting with surf rescues in vicinity of Spring Lake.

Station Seabright (OIC: UNK)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type H PSB No. 3589

Role in rescue efforts limited to station personnel assisting with surf rescues in vicinity of Spring Lake.

Station Long Branch (OIC: UNK)

Assigned rescue craft in 1934 included Type S PSB No. 4516 and Type H PSB No. 1675

Role in rescue efforts limited to station personnel assisting with surf rescues in vicinity of Spring Lake.

Station Spring Lake was in caretaker status by 1934, although the area around Station Spring Lake was where most of the beach surf rescues took place. Station was re-opened for this purpose. Other NJ area stations sent additional crew to this area by vehicle for the purposes of beach patrol and rescue.

Cutters

USCGC *Tampa* (240ft. class; CO: LCDR Earl Rose): attempted tow, but hampered by high seas and lack of power (only 2600SHP), with towline parting under strain and fouling propeller; took *Morro Castle* ship officers onboard from T MLB 3702, but participated minimally and too late in other survivor rescue attempts

USCGC *Cahoone* (125ft. class; CO: CWO Michael Bruce): after delay, moved inshore of *Morro Castle* to attempt survivor rescue

USCGC *Sebago* (CO: UNK): role unclear, but reportedly aided CGC *Tampa* to keep clear of shoal areas while *Tampa's* propeller was cleared of parted towline

Other

CG AirSTA Cape May (CO: LCDR R.L. Burke): did not launch until too late amphibious planes *Acrux* and *Adhara* due to storm and mechanical reliability problems

District 4: LCDR Stephen Yeandle, USCG assigned role of shoreside rescue operations direction, and travels by car from HQ to Stations Squan Beach and Spring Lake to be on-site. LT Hodges, USCG remains at District HQ to man phones and pass information/orders to stations.