UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

ADDRESS REPLY TO:
COMMANDANT
U. S. COAST GUARD
HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

MVI
(J. H. REVELS - McDERMOTT
SPUD BARGE NO. 4 a-8 Bd)
12 APR 1960

Commandant's Action

on

Marine Board of Investigation; casualty to the tug J. H. REVELS and McDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 resulting from the explosion of the Union Oil Company Well No. 23, Timbalier Bay, Louisiana, 1 August 1959 with loss of life

1. The record of the Marine Board of Investigation convened to investigate subject casualty, together with its Findings of Fact, Conclusions and Recommendations has been reviewed.

2. On the evening of 1 August 1959 the uninspected towing vessel MV J. H. REVELS and the uninspected spud barge McDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 were involved in a flash fire while attempting to salvage a drilling barge which was in position at Union Oil Company of California Well No. 23 in Timbalier Bay, Louisiana. At the time of the casualty the well was blowing water and gas. As a result of the fire 8 of the 9 persons aboard the two vessels were burned, three fatally. Damage to the tug was negligible. The barge suffered fire damage estimated at $7,000.

3. Pursuant to orders from the McDermott dispatcher the MV J. H. REVELS with the McDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 in tow proceeded to the Union Oil Company Well No. 23 in Timbalier Bay arriving on the morning of 1 August 1959. The tow stood by in the area until late afternoon when an independent surveyor engaged by the insurers of the drilling barge arrived on the scene and conferred with the captain of the McDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 as to possible means of salvaging the drilling barge and the equipment on it. After rejecting several possibilities it was agreed that the best course would be to pass the dragline from the spud barge onto the drilling barge and for the spud barge to spud down and take a strain, thereby acting as an anchor to prevent further listing of the drilling barge until other more suitable equipment became available to assist in the salvage. The dragline was made fast on the drilling barge and the spud barge, with the tug alongside the starboard quarter, was positioned approximately 150' directly astern of the drilling barge. The spuds were then lowered and a strain was taken on the dragline. At approximately 7 p.m. the wind increased and shifted from the southwest to the northwest at the approach of a squall. This resulted in gas and water from the well being blown across the tug and spud barge. On orders from the barge captain the spuds were raised and the tow was moved ahead to slacken the cable in order to let go and move away from the rig. The barge captain was standing on the forward starboard

corner of the barge giving signals to the spud operator. He was in this position when fire appeared to flash in his face and spread almost instantly from the spud barge and the tug toward the drilling barge. After the initial flash the fire was confined to the drilling barge.

4. When the fire occurred all of the persons on both the McDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 and the tug J. H. REVELS jumped overboard; however, before doing so the spud operator dropped the spuds to prevent the tow from moving closer to the drilling barge. The master of the tug, though seriously burned, climbed back aboard his vessel and after pulling two survivors from the water cast the tug off and backed away from the danger area. The other three survivors were rescued by commercial craft on the scene.

REMARKS

1. The Board's conclusion that the ignition of the vapor from the blowing well was caused by the barge captain lighting a cigarette is adequately supported in the record and is considered the most probable cause of this casualty even though other possible sources of ignition such as the spud winch engine, electrical equipment, etc. were present. One witness testified that the fire occurred when the barge captain lit up a cigarette and others stated that they observed the barge captain raise cupped hands to his face and saw the fire begin directly in front of him at that instant. In view of testimony that the barge captain had cautioned some crew members against smoking and had picked up matches belonging to others there can be little doubt that he was fully aware of the hazard. Since he was one of those who died it can only be presumed that the lighting of the cigarette at that time was the unconscious act of an habitual smoker.

2. Since the vessels involved were not subject to inspection by the Coast Guard and there was no evidence of violation of any Federal law, no further action is indicated.

3. Subject to the foregoing remarks, the record of the Marine Board of Investigation is approved.

A. C. Richmond

A. C. RICHMOND
Vice Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard
Commandant

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

ADDRESS REPLY TO
Commander
Eighth Coast Guard District
New Orleans, Louisiana

26 October 1959

From: Marine Board of Investigation
To: Commandant (MVI)
Via: Commander, 8th Coast Guard District

Subj: Casualty to the tug J. H. REVELS and MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 resulting from the explosion of the Union Oil Company Well No. 23, Timbalier Bay, Louisiana on 1 August 1959 with loss of life

Findings of Fact:

1. At or about 7:10 P.M., 1 August, 1959, MV J. H. REVELS, Official Number 273 693, and MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 were involved in a marine casualty at approximately 29° 05' N 90° 25' W in Timbalier Bay, Louisiana, as a result of fire and explosion of the Union Oil Company Well No. 23, resulting in the loss of life of three known dead, and injury to five persons.

2. The vessels involved were:

a. MV J. H. REVELS, O. N. 273 693, is a 52.6 foot, 38 gross ton, steel, uninspected diesel propelled, 400 H.P. American vessel built in 1957. The home port is Morgan City, Louisiana. Revels Marine Towing Service, Inc., Box 861, Morgan City, Louisiana, is the owner of the vessel. Robert Whitington, Star Route No. 1, Box 863, Morgan City, Louisiana, was the master at the time of the casualty.

b. MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 is a steel, uninspected, non-self-propelled American barge built in 1939. This 250 gross ton barge is 100 feet long with a beam of 32 feet. Quarters to berth eight workmen are located in the cabin aft. Electrical power is furnished by a diesel generator which is located below deck just forward of the quarters. Power to operate the spud winches is provided by a diesel engine. J. Ray McDermott and Company, Inc., Post Office Drawer 38, Harvey, Louisiana, is the owner of the barge. Burton Gonzales, 501 Sanders Street, Gonzales, Louisiana, was the master at the time of the casualty.

3. Weather at the time of the casualty was as follows: wind north northwest, 10-15 knots, fair, sea about 1 to 2 feet, good visibility.

4. The following persons from MCDERMOTT BARGE NO. 4 are known to be dead:

a. Burton Gonzales, age 46, 501 Sanders Street, Gonzales, Louisiana. He is survived by his wife, Bertha M. Gonzales, who resides at the same address.

b. Rufus Bourque, age 28, Route 3, Box 5A, Kaplan, Louisiana. He is survived by his wife, Margaret H. Bourque, who resides at the same residence.

c. Wilton Latiolias, age 40, Route 2, Box 167, St. Martinville, Louisiana. He is survived by his wife Julia P. Latiolias who resides at the same address.

5. The following persons aboard MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 were injured as a result of the casualty: Burton W. Gonzales, age 15 years, 501 Sanders Street, Gonzales, Louisiana; Nootsie Barras, Route 2, Box 214, St. Martinville, Louisiana and Clemens Devilliers, Henderson Station, Box 541, Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. Burton W. Gonzales, age 15, the son of the deceased Gonzales, was not a crewmember.

6. The following persons aboard MV J. H. REVELS were injured as a result of the casualty: Robert V. Whitington, Star Route No. 1, Box 863, Morgan City, Louisiana, and Edward Netterville, 907 Clothilde Street, Morgan City, Louisiana.

7. At or about 0700, 31 July 1959, MV J. H. REVELS with MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 in tow departed Bayou Beouf, Louisiana, to work on a pipeline in Timbalier Bay. These orders were changed about 0400, 1 August 1959 when the master of MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 received orders from J. Ray McDermott dispatcher to go to vicinity of Caillou Island, Timbalier Bay, to pull a rig off location. J. H. REVELS and SPUD BARGE NO. 4 arrived in vicinity of Union Oil Rig No. 23 about 0800, 1 August 1959 and stood by. The well was blowing at this time. At about 4:15 P.M., the barge was pushed within 50 feet of the well in preparation to put a line on the rig. John Barras and Nootsie Barras took a skiff and proceeded to the rig where they secured a cable to two bitts. After they returned, the barge and tug backed away until the rig was about 150 feet distant. The barge put her spuds down and a strain was taken on the cable.

8. The wind shifted so that it was blowing from the well toward the barge and tug. As a result of the shift in wind direction, gas fumes from the blowing well were blown over the tug and barge. About 7:00 P.M. the wind began to freshen. The captain of the barge prepared to take in the hawser and let go the rig. The captain was standing on the forward starboard corner of the barge to give signals to the spud operator Mr. Devilliers. The spuds were raised and the barge moved forward about 20 feet to slacken the cable. At that moment the fire occurred. The spud operator, Clemens Devilliers immediately dropped the spuds to prevent the barge from drifting closer to the rig and jumped into the water.

9. The captain of the barge raised his cupped hands to his face and the fire started at that instant. The fire started right in the captain's face and spread from the barge to the rig.

10. When the fire started, it initially enveloped the barge and tug and spread to the rig, which was approximately 120 feet away. The fire was then confined to the rig.

11. When flames enveloped the barge and tug, the witnesses testified that they jumped into the water. The three deceased persons, Burton Gonzales, Rufus Bourque and Wilton Latiolais jumped into the water.

12. Life preservers were aboard the barge and tug and were readily available.

13. Robert V. Whitington, master of MV J. H. REVELS, though badly burned on his arms, back and face, climbed back aboard his vessel. He then pulled Edward Netterville and Burton Gonzales, Jr., out of water onto the tug. When these two men were safely aboard, he then unmoored the tug from MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 and backed away from the danger area.

14. The other three survivors, John Barras, Clemens Devilliers, Nootsie Barras were rescued by commercial craft on the scene.

15. Coast Guard aircraft from Coast Guard Air Detachments at Biloxi, Mississippi and New Orleans, Louisiana were directed to proceed and assist at 9:18 P.M., 1 August 1959 by Commander, Eighth Coast Guard District. U.F.I.G. 1313 from CG Air Detachment, Biloxi, Mississippi and HO 4S 1331 from CG Air Detachment, New Orleans, proceeded to the scene. The search was secured at 11:13 P.M. to await daylight. HO 4S departed at 5:07 A.M., 2 August 1959 to conduct daylight search of area for survivors. The air search was secured at 7:51 A.M. with negative results. Coast Guard surface craft were not ordered to the scene due to shallow water.

16. The body of Burton Gonzales was recovered shortly after the casualty on 1 August by a commercial vessel.

17. A searching crew boat recovered the body of Rufus Bourque on 2 August 1959.

18. The body of Wilton P. Latiolais was recovered by a commercial vessel about three weeks after the casualty.

19. Death in each case resulted from first, second and third degree burns of the entire body.

Conclusions:

1. There was a heavy accumulation of gas vapor around MCDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 and J. H. REVELS.

2. The fire was caused by Burton Gonzales when he lit a cigarette.

3. It is concluded that Burton Gonzales was negligent when he lit a cigarette causing the gas vapors to ignite, with the resultant fire.

4. It is concluded that it would be appropriate to take no action against Burton Gonzales since he is dead.

5. The fire started at the barge and spread to the rig.

6. Burton Gonzales, Rufus Bourque and Wilton Latiolias died of the burns they received as a result of the fire.

7. There was no actionable negligence on the part of any licensed or documented personnel.

8. There was no failure of inspected equipment.

9. The assistance rendered by the Coast Guard was timely and adequate.

Recommendations:

1. It is recommended that this case be closed with no further action.

JAMES McINTOSH
Captain, U. S. Coast Guard
Chairman

JOHN F. KETTLER
Captain, U. S. Coast Guard
Member

RUDOLPH E. ANDERSON
Lieutenant, U. S. Coast Guard
Member and Recorder

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A17-6 (Marine Board - J.H.REVELS)
NOV 12 1959

FIRST ENDORSEMENT on Marine Board of Investigation Report of 26 October 1959

From: Commander, 8th Coast Guard District
To: Commandant (MVI)

Subj: Casualty to the Tug J. H. REVELS and McDERMOTT SPUD BARGE NO. 4 resulting from the explosion of the Union Oil Company Well No. 23, Timbalier Bay, Louisiana, on 1 August 1959, with loss of life

1. Forwarded.

2. The conclusion that the cause of the fire was the lighting or attempted lighting of a cigarette by Burton Gonzales is obviously not supported by any detailed findings of fact, but rather on the direct testimony of Clemens Devilliers(R-16-12), which was uncontradicted circumstantially by the testimony of other witnesses. Under all the circumstances existing at the time of this case, it is more probable than not that some type of open flame would have been required to ignite the gas-air mixture present.

R. T. Alexander

R. T. ALEXANDER
Acting