

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
Washington, D. C.

MVI
27 April 1953
(SEAFORT-USS SITKOH BAY
C-11 Bd)

From: Chief, Merchant Vessel Inspection Division
To: Commandant
Via: Chief, Office of Merchant Marine Safety

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; collision involving SS SEAFORT and
USS SITKOH BAY, approximately 30 miles WSW of Point Loma, California,
9 December 1952

1. Pursuant to the provisions of Title 46 CFR Part 136, the record of the Marine Board convened to investigate subject casualty, together with its Findings of Fact, Opinions, and Recommendations, has been reviewed and is forwarded herewith.

2. On a dark, clear night with good visibility and unlimited room for maneuvering, the SS SEAFORT, a cargo vessel of 7,216 g.t., fully laden, was approaching Los Angeles en route from Panama, and the USS SITKOH BAY, an escort carrier, was en route to sea from San Diego under military orders. The SEAFORT proceeding at approximately 7 knots, sighted the SITKOH BAY off her own starboard side and the SITKOH BAY proceeding at approximately 16 knots, sighted the SEAFORT off her own port side, so that a normal crossing situation existed with the SITKOH BAY being the privileged vessel. The SITKOH BAY made sharp course changes to pass ahead of the SEAFORT and the SEAFORT, the burdened vessel, took no action until a condition of extremis was created and both vessels collided at about 1917, 9 December 1952, approximately 30 miles WSW of Point Loma, California. No lives were lost and apparently only the master of the SEAFORT was injured. Damage to the SEAFORT was estimated at \$450,000 and to the SITKOH BAY unknown.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. At or about 1917½ on 9 December, 1952, the SS SEAFORT and the USS SITKOH BAY collided at sea in a position approximately 30 miles WSW of Point Loma, California. The weather was clear and dark with good visibility and a light NNW breeze and slight W'y sea. There was no moonlight. Captain Schermerhorn Van Mater, U.S.N., was in command of the SITKOH BAY and Captain Dragutin Domac was in command of the SEAFORT.

"2. The SS SEAFORT built in 1944, official number 245680, of 7216 gross tons, is an inspected, Liberty type, freight vessel of American registry, owned by the Southern Cargo Carriers, Inc. and operated by the Orion Shipping and Trading Co., both of 80 Broad Street, New York 4, N.Y. The last annual inspection was at Baltimore, Maryland,

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on 10 March 1952. The vessel is propelled by triple expansion engines of 2,500 horsepower capable of producing a speed of 11 knots when laden. Her steering gear consisted of a Beacon Telemotor and steam engine. All other equipment is of standard types installed in Liberty type vessels and includes a gyro compass and 4 repeaters. She was not equipped with radar. The SEAFORT is classed by the American Bureau of Shipping. Her load line certificate expires on 30 April, 1954, and it was last endorsed on 10 March, 1952.

"3. The SS SEAFORT, with a crew of 36 including the master and laden with 9,457 tons of coal, was on a voyage from Baltimore, Maryland, bound for Japan via Los Angeles, California, for bunkers. On 9 December 1952, she was approaching Los Angeles on the trip from the Panama Canal. An observed noon position placed the vessel in Lat. $31^{\circ}38'$ N. and Long. $117^{\circ}27'$ W. From this position the course steered was 342° by gyro to make 341° true. The SEAFORT had been proceeding at a speed of about 6.8, 50 RPM since the previous day when minor repairs were made to the starboard boiler. The starboard boiler was put in operation again at 0830 on 9 December but 50 RPM were maintained because the master did not desire to arrive at Los Angeles Harbor before daylight on the 10th. The Chief Mate, Charles E. Robert, took over the bridge watch at 1600. At 1700 the master obtained a fix by observations of Vega and Altair which gave the position of Lat. $32^{\circ}11'$ N. and Long. $117^{\circ}41'$ W. At 1730 the course was changed to 344° by gyro to make 343° true. At or about 1730 the SEAFORT was stopped momentarily by a USCG patrol vessel for identification and was allowed to proceed. The navigation lights were lit and at sunset a lookout was stationed on the flying bridge instead of on the bow because of slippery decks from application of fish oil. At about 1800 and for some time after, lights and the firing of tracer bullets from what appeared to be a squadron of naval vessels on maneuvers were observed at a considerable distance away on the starboard bow. At 1900 the chief mate observed the masthead and range lights, but no colored side lights of a vessel broad on his starboard bow and he formed the opinion that the lights were those of a vessel which had separated itself from the squadron and was now approaching the SEAFORT. At this time the master was in the chartroom checking his observation, plotting the 1700 fix and laying the progressive course on the chart.

"4. The USS SITKOH BAY of 10,390 gross tons, built at Vancouver, Washington, in 1944, is an escort carrier owned by the U. S. Navy Department. She is propelled by two (2) Skinner Uni-Flow engines, each of 4,500 horsepower, capable of producing a standard full speed of 16 knots. Her steering gear is electric-hydraulic and a double ram engine. All other equipment is in accordance with U. S. Navy Standards.

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"5. The SITKOH BAY, under military orders concerning her destination, left San Diego, California, at 1600 on 9 December, 1952. Departure was taken from Seabuoy #1 at 1711 and the vessel proceeded at 16 Knots on a course of 251° true. Ensigns Billy Mathews and W. Blalock were the officers on watch and QM L.R. Naylor was also on the bridge. The vessel was being steered from the lower bridge by a helmsman and with a lee helmsman standing by. Port and starboard lookouts were posted forward. The navigation lights were lit. At 1800 Captain Van Mater went below as all was clear ahead, but he was called and went up on the bridge again at 1845 because of radar contacts with 2 other vessels.

"6. At or about 1900 the SEAFORT and the SITKOH BAY made visual contact with each other at a distance of approximately 4 or 5 miles apart. It appeared to be a crossing situation in which the SITKOH BAY was the privileged vessel. For the next 10 minutes each vessel maintained her course and speed and without appreciable change in the relative bearings. The SITKOH BAY then altered course 40° to starboard, from 251° to 291° true. After a couple of minutes she went back to the original course of 251°. It was claimed that subsequent to this change the red side light of the SITKOH BAY was seen for the first time by the SEAFORT. Two minutes later the SITKOH BAY again altered her course to starboard, this time from 251° to 300° true, steered the latter course momentarily and then started to swing left, back towards her base course of 251° true. In the meantime the chief mate of the SEAFORT had adopted a wait and see attitude although the maneuvering of the SITKOH BAY should have made him apprehensive to the extent of taking some kind of early action or call the master who was available in the chartroom. Before the SITKOH BAY had quite reached the base course of 251° it became apparent that danger of collision existed and the order was given for hard right rudder. No whistle signals were sounded by the SITKOH BAY to indicate any of the course changes she made. First at this belated hour did the chief mate of the SEAFORT take any action. He gave the order for hard left rudder and rang stop on the engine telegraph. This was 2½ minutes before the impact. When the master of the SEAFORT heard the order for hard left rudder and the telegraph being rung he immediately ran out into the pilothouse and sounded two short blasts on the whistle, and then, observing the SITKOH BAY heading for the SEAFORT but swinging to the right a short distance away on his starboard beam he rang for full astern on the telegraph at 1916 and blew 4 short blasts on the whistle. Immediately before the impact the engine telegraphs on the SITKOH BAY were rung on stop. The collision took place at 1917½ SEAFORT time and 1920 SITKOH BAY time.

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"7. The two vessels collided bow to bow, the port bow of the SITKOH BAY striking the starboard bow of the SEAFORT at an angle of about 120° from ahead. The speed and swinging of the SITKOH BAY caused her to draw alongside of and rake the starboard side of the SEAFORT, which vessel sustained considerable damage to the upper part of her sheer strake plates, superstructure and equipment. The SITKOH BAY also sustained considerable damage to the overhang of her flight deck. There was no failure of any machinery or equipment in connection with this collision. It appeared, however, that when the helmsman on the SITKOH BAY received the order for hard right rudder he only used 20° because he had been taught in training camp that the order would be full right or left for 35° rudder.

"8. It was claimed that Captain D. Domac sustained a head injury from being struck by the collapse of the starboard wing of the flying bridge on the SEAFORT during the collision. He was treated by a medical corpsman from the SITKOH BAY shortly after the collision. Otherwise, no persons were injured and no lives were lost in connection with this casualty.

"9. Immediately after the collision all necessary actions and precautions were taken on the SEAFORT for the protection of life and property, and the SITKOH BAY, being less severely damaged, stood by until preliminary surveys indicated that no underwater damage existed. Hence both vessels proceeded under their own power to the port of San Diego for further examination. From there the SEAFORT proceeded to Los Angeles for repairs as per inclosed specifications, the cost of which was estimated at \$450,000. The SITKOH BAY went to San Francisco to carry out necessary repairs, the details and cost of which are not known.

"10. There was no failure of machinery or equipment which contributed to the cause of the collision."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. That the collision between the SS SEAFORT and the USS SITKOH BAY, which occurred in a crossing situation upon the high seas on a dark, clear night with good visibility and unlimited room for maneuvering, can only be attributed to failure of the officer in charge of the watch on the SS SEAFORT to be alert to the situation and, to the ill-advised and in-effective maneuvering on the part of the Commanding Officer of the USS SITKOH BAY.

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"2. The SITKOH BAY, being the privileged vessel, was required by Article 21, to keep her course and speed. She clearly violated Articles 21 and 28 and waived her rights as a privileged vessel when she made several radical course changes and without giving the required whistle signals solely for the purpose of trying to cross ahead of the burdened vessel, the SEAFORT.

"3. When the SITKOH BAY was first sighted by the SEAFORT the two vessels were at least 4 miles apart and because no colored side lights on the SITKOH BAY were visible at that time, no immediate action by the SEAFORT was considered obligatory. At 1912, however, when the SITKOH BAY had completed the first of her radical course changes to the right and her red side light became visible, Charles E. Robert, the Chief Mate, who was in charge on the bridge of the SEAFORT, should have become apprehensive of the situation and should have altered course to the right or stopped in compliance with Articles 19, 22, and 23 of the International Rules of the Road. Instead, he took no action until the vessels were in extremis when he ordered hard left rudder and rang stop on the engine telegraph. It should also have been obvious to him that danger of collision was apparent several minutes before the impact and, under the circumstances, he should have called the master, who was readily available in the chartroom."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. Upon completion of the taking of testimony by the Board of Investigation it was recommended by the members that Charles E. Robert, License #93647, be served with a charge of Negligence under Title 46 U.S.C., Section 239 (R.S. 4450). Hearing was held in Room 1114, Times Building, Long Beach, California, on 5 January, 1953 (See File P13/S-2290).

"2. It is further recommended that wide publicity be given to mariners concerning the importance and necessity to obey the Rules to Prevent Collisions of Vessels and to be alert at all times. The booklet CG 169 is widely distributed among the Maritime industry. The following warning in large red block lettering printed on the front cover or on the blank page opposite page 1 of this booklet may be helpful.

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BE ALERT

OBEY THESE RULES

PROTECT YOUR LICENSE AND YOUR CAREER

ACT EARLY

SOUND WHISTLE SIGNALS

SLOW DOWN, STOP OR REVERSE AS PRUDENCE DEMANDS

The above warnings could also be printed in loose leaf form for attaching to booklets presently on hand but not yet distributed."

REMARKS

6. Recommendation 2 of the Board that wide publicity be given to mariners concerning the importance and necessity to obey the Rules to Prevent Collisions of Vessels and to be alert at all times, is concurred with. Every action practical in this direction is taken and should be continued by every means possible under the jurisdiction of the District Commander. The printing of the specific warning on publication CG 169 containing the Pilot Rules, as recommended, would be inadvisable. The warning is addressed to licensed officers of merchant vessels to the apparent exclusion of all other navigators who must comply with the rules and would thus be misleading. Further, recommended wording "Sound Whistle Signals, Slow Down, Stop or Reverse as Prudence Demands" may be misinterpreted to conflict with the actual statutory rules and regulations thereunder in the publication.

7. Subject to the foregoing remarks, it is recommended that the Findings of Fact, Opinions and Recommendations of the Marine Board of Investigation be approved.

/s/ P. A. OVENDEN
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FIRST ENDORSEMENT to MVI memorandum of 27 April 1953

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From: Chief, Office of Merchant Marine Safety
To: Commandant

Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/H. C. SHEPHEARD
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APPROVED: MAY 11 1953

/s/ MERLIN O'NEILL
MERLIN O'NEILL
Vice Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard
Commandant