UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

WI
14 February 1952
(MV AMPHITRITE -
a-7 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; stranding of MV AMPHITRITE off Charleston, S. C., on or about 27 November, 1951, with loss of life

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

2. The MV AMPHITRITE of 82 g.t., built in 1929 as a yacht was purchased by the owner in September 1951. After purchase, the vessel was hauled out and found to be in a defective condition, but no effective action was taken to make the vessel seaworthy. On 27 October 1951 the AMPHITRITE, under Costa Rican registry, departed from Greenport, Long Island for St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, with nine persons on board. Difficulties were experienced at sea and intermediate ports of call were made. On 26 November 1951 the AMPHITRITE departed Beaufort Inlet and encountered strong northeast winds and rough sea. She began making water excessively and changed course for Charleston, S. C. At about 0330, 27 November 1951, the AMPHITRITE stranded in the vicinity of Frying Pan Shoals. The vessel was abandoned and her lifeboat launched, which was without provisions, water, distress signals or other equipment. The lifeboat was adrift until 30 November 1951, when it was sighted by the U. S. Navy minesweeper TOKEN, and by this time seven of the nine persons in the lifeboat had perished. The strong northeast winds and rough sea continued unabated until after the lifeboat was sighted by the U.S.S. TOKEN. Eight persons lost their lives as a result of this casualty.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. The MV AMPHITRITE stranded on or in the vicinity of Frying Pan Shoals, Tuesday morning, November 27, 1951, at 0330 E, and as a result eight persons eventually perished, although all nine persons aboard successfully abandoned the vessel in a single lifeboat.

"2. The MV AMPHITRITE, official number 228691, 82 gross tons, 55 net tons, 85'3" in length, 15' breadth, 7'9" depth, and

powered by two Winton solid injection diesel engines, 300 H.P. each at 720 R.P.M. The hull and superstructure were of wood construction and was built at Nyack, New York, in 1929, for the Amphitrite Shipping Company. The vessel was operated out of New York City as a passenger fisherman for a number of years.

"3. Early in September 1951 the vessel was purchased by Captain Samuel Luttrell, an ex-Army officer, from Mr. Jarko Jaasund of New York. Captain Luttrell purchased the vessel for the Virgin Island Shark Industries, Inc., St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, of which he was part owner. The vessel was under the Costa Rican flag and berthed at Greenport, Long Island, when the change of ownership was consummated.

"4. The complement of the yacht at the time of the casualty were

1. Captain Samuel A. Luttrell, master and part-owner.
2. Mrs. Samuel A. Luttrell, wife
3. Samuel A. Luttrell, Jr., son
4. Lieutenant Andrew B. Hager, U.S.A.F., navigator
5. Gustave Frazer, engineer
6. Edwardo Ramos, Puerto Rican, seaman
7. Jaime Martinez, Puerto Rican, seaman
8. Israil Condelavas, Puerto Rican, seaman
9. Joseph (last name unknown), Puerto Rican, seaman

All of the above persons, with the single exception of Gustave Frazer, lost their lives in this tragedy. The vessel was under the Costa Rican registry at the time of her departure from the United States for St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, on her fatal voyage.

"5. It was the intention of the new owner to load cargo on the vessel and proceed to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Upon the vessel's arrival at this port, she would be used as a freighter between Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, and St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

"6. The log of events that transpired from the time the new owner took possession began at Greenport, Long Island, in early September, when the vessel was hauled out at Sweet's Shipyard. The underwater body was scraped and painted, a new hatch was cut in the main deck aft of the wheelhouse and a new mast and cargo boom was installed. Several minor repairs were made to the main engines and auxiliaries including the installation of two new gasoline bilge pumps. The ship to shore telephone was repaired and also the main generator

on the electrical circuit. Mr. Sheridan, surveyor for the Insurance Company of North America, inspected the vessel on October 17, 1951, while the vessel was being overhauled.

"7. The navigator of the vessel at this time was Francis S. Cantrell of St. Croix, Virgin Islands. While examining the underwater body of the vessel, this gentleman found a loose wooden plug in one of the seacocks and when he attempted to drive the plug up tighter the whole fitting fell off the hull. He noticed several other fittings plugged by this method, but neither he nor apparently anyone examined the others.

"8. On October 20 and 21 the main engines were operated and although some trouble developed it was soon rectified. On the latter date a trial run to the tip of Long Island was made. The sound was choppy and the vessel made considerable water but two gasoline engine driven bilge pumps, which had been purchased by Mr. Cantrell, were able, with the assistance of the pump already installed, to keep the bilges dry.

"9. On October 24, three Puerto Rican crew members quit the vessel because of some unknown grievance and their places were filled by three others of the same race.

"10. Finally on October 27, 1951, the vessel left Greenport, Long Island, and after an overnight stop at Oyster Bay arrived at the Colonial Yacht Club pier, City Island, New York, on October 29, 1951. While here the vessel loaded crated and uncrated furniture in the afterhold.

"11. November 3, 1951, the AMPHITRITE left City Island and proceeded down the East River. While docking the vessel, a delayed signal to the engine room caused the vessel to strike a float, causing damages to the extent of $200. Whether or not the AMPHITRITE suffered hull or other structural damage or weakness is unknown but from all indications there were none. In the evening of this same day Captain Luttrell attempted to use the ship to shore telephone. Conversation between ships was heard, but the marine operator could not be reached. No attempt was made to learn why the phone did not function as it should, although at a later date the phone operated successfully.

"12. November 4, 1951, the AMPHITRITE left New York and afterann overnight stop at Manasquan proceeded to Cape May. While proceeding

from this point on the morning of the 6th heading for Hampton, Virginia, very heavy weather was encountered while off the coast of Atlantic City. Engineer Fraser saw that the vessel was leaking in the forward bilges and reported this fact to Captain Luttrell. The vessel was running in a following sea and the engines were put on slow speed. It appears that no search was made to determine the location where the sea water entered the vessel forward. Apparently the bilge pumps could not take care of the ingress of water and a considerable length of time was spent in the Chesapeake Bay pumping the vessel out. During this voyage the ship to shore radio was used successfully.

"13. November 6th the AMPHITRITE arrived at Hampton, Virginia, and furniture was loaded in the hatch forward. The exact weights placed aboard and the vessel's freeboard could not be learned by the board, but it appears that her draft was 7' when passing through Deep Creek Locks, Deep Creek, Virginia, in the Intra-coastal Waterway.

"14. November 13th Commander Don Cantrell, navigator of the AMPHITRITE since its departure from Greenport, Lon Island, resigned and left the vessel. His reasons were that the vessel was unseaworthy for the proposed voyage to St. Thomas because of the following conditions:

a. Light framing of the AMPHITRITE
b. Seacocks not in safe condition
c. Vessel leaking great deal of water through hull and decks
d. Vessel took 28 hours to pump bilges out in Chesapeake Bay after run down the coast
e. Vessel's hatches were not covered with tarpaulins or canvas and water leaked through
f. Insufficient fuel
g. No ground tackle
h. Engines loose on foundations
i. Insufficient lifesaving equipment
j. Insufficient emergency equipment
k. Vessel tender, especially in a following sea
l. Radio receiver and transmitter not properly calibrated

"15. Captain Luttrell's problem was to secure a navigator to take Commander Don Cantrell's place. Through his Army associates he appealed to the Air Base at Langley Field. Twenty air force navigators were anxious to make the voyage and lots were drawn to select one of a group experienced in celestial navigation. Thus was First Lieutenant Andrew B. Hager selected to make the fatal voyage while on leave of absence from the U.S. A.F.

"16. The voyage from Hampton, Virginia, to Morehead City, North Carolina, which was reached on November 23, was highlighted by the vessel grounding twice in the inland waterway, Dismal Swamp area. There is no indication that the vessel suffered damage due to this grounding.

"17. At Morehead City, the AMPHITRITE took on provisions, water diesel fuel, and gasoline in a deck tank. The vessel departed at 1100 R, November 26, 1951, and her course was set for St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Strong northeast winds and heavy seas were encountered immediately after clearing port and Captain Luttrell ordered only one engine to be run and at 300 R.P.M.

"18. Engineer Frazer noted the water in the bilges was rising at 1500 R and so advised Captain Luttrell. It appears that this first warning was ignored and the vessel kept on her course with only one engine at about half speed. All bilge pumps were in full operation and the water in the engine room bilges increased rapidly. Captain Luttrell did mention to Frazer that Charleston was the nearest port and that would take 12 hours to reach.

"19. At about 1730 R or 1800 R the night of Monday, November 26, 1951, Frazer told Captain Luttrell that the water in the bilges was dangerously high in the engine room and water was now leaking in around the upper section of the shaft log. Captain Luttrell made an examination of the engine room and decided to change the vessel's course for a coastal port. There was approximately a foot and one half of water in the engine room bilge. Frazer, the engineer, suggested to the Master that he send an SOS message.

"20. The course of the vessel was 255° magnetic compass and this was held. At 0130 R Tuesday, November 27, 1951, a lighthouse with a white light was sighted and the navigator, according to Frazer, mentioned that the next light sighted would be the entrance to Charleston, South Carolina, harbor. The vessel continued in towards the coast until 0330 R when she struck

bottom and shortly afterward struck again and was hard aground, with seas breaking over her. All persons were ordered up on the main deck and each put on a life jacket. The weather was cold; strong wind and heavy seas.

"21. The crew being inexperienced, extreme difficulty was experienced in launching the single lifeboat. Fraser was washed overboard and all others jumped in the boat from the deck of the AMPHITRITE. All nine members of the crew finally got in the lifeboat, which was half full of water, and pulled clear of the wreck. An old felt hat and an ice cube tray were used as a bailer in getting the water out of the lifeboat. This lifeboat did not have water, provisions, or any of the required equipment, with the exception of 6 oars and oarlocks. In their haste, the crew did not take the time to stock the boat from the supplies aboard the AMPHITRITE.

"22. The inexperienced crew attempted to row towards the lighthouse but no progress was made and the lifeboat was carried out to sea by the current. That same evening the tide and current swept the boat close to the beach again, the distance estimated by Fraser was a 30-minute row, if experienced oarsmen had been in the lifeboat.

"23. The four Puerto Ricans drank salt water, although warned not to by Fraser, and Tuesday night they died in the lifeboat. A vessel passed close by Tuesday night, although all hands shouted they were not seen by the passing vessel.

"24. All day Wednesday the lifeboat drifted with her cargo of four dead Puerto Ricans and the five persons still alive. In the evening a ship passed close by and all yelled but they again were not seen. Lieutenant Hager, the navigator, started screaming and jumped overboard and was not seen again. He had complained shortly before of the intense cold.

"25. Thursday, November 29, 1951, at 1400 R, the bodies of the four Puerto Ricans were thrown overboard. On this same afternoon, Captain Luttrell died, and shortly after Mrs. Luttrell also passed away. A vessel passed close by again during the night but again the lifeboat was unseen.

"26. On Friday, November 30, 1951, the U. S. Navy Minesweeper TOKEN sighted the lifeboat approximately 78 miles S.W. of Frying Pan Shoals, Lt. 32 47.7 N Long. 78 58 W. The bodies of Captain and Mrs. Luttrell were in the boat. Samuel Luttrell, Jr., and Gustave Frazer were still alive and given first aid immediately. First aid arrived too late, however, to save young Luttrell and he died when brought aboard the TOKEN. Frazer was hospitalized and fully recovered."

4. The Board expressed the following conclusions:

"1. It appears that the AMPHITRITE departed Beaufort Inlet (USC&GS Chart 1110) at or about 11:00 a.m. 26 November 1951, and slowed to 5 knots with one engine running due to strong NE winds and rough seas, which weather conditions continued until the survivors were sighted on November 30, 1951. True course to St. Thomas was 147° and it can be assumed that a more southerly course was steered to clear Cape Lookout Shoals.

"2. At or about 1800 R the course was altered to 255° compass because of the dangerous leaking of the vessel. Without deviation this would have made a true course of 251°. At or about 0130 R, 27 November 1951, a flashing light was sighted on the starboard bow and 2 hours later the vessel grounded, lightly first then in a few minutes hard aground.

"3. From the above it can be assumed that the vessel steeered in a southerly direction for 35 miles, then 251 true for 47.5 miles and allowing for a SW set of approximately 1 knot for 16½ hours the vessel could be expected to ground on Frying Pan Shoals at or about 0330 R, 27 November 1951. If Frazer's testimony that only one engine was used at half speed is true, it would have been impossible for the vessel to ground in the vicinity of Georgetown Light, which is about 165 miles from Beaufort Inlet and would have required a speed of ten knots.

"4. At 1420 R on 30 November 1951, the USS TOKEN sighted the lifeboat in Lat. 32 47.7 N Long 78 58 W, which is about 78 miles SW of Frying Pan Shoals. Thus the boat had drifted 78 miles in 82 hours and 50 minutes or at a rate of 0.94 knots, which is not considered excessive considering drift and leeway caused by the strong NE winds which prevailed during this time.

"5. Evidence indicates that the AMPHITRITE was not seaworthy at the time of her departure from Morehead City, November 26, 1951,

for St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. No attempt had been made to repair the leak up forward, reported by Frazer to Captain Luttrell during vessel's voyage off the coast of Atlantic City. On this leg of the voyage the leak up forward allowed more sea water to seep in the bilges than could be pumped out by the full capacity of all bilge pumps aboard.

"6. It appears that both hatches had been provided with canvas covers when leaving the final port of departure.

"7. The crew appeared to be inexperienced and further jeopardized the safety of the vessel.

"8. Inexperience is indicated in the operation and also the navigation of the vessel. The age and general construction of the vessel made a voyage such as that attempted a risk of the greatest magnitude. The safety of the vessel was in continual jeopardy as a result of the inexperience of her crew. Preparations for the voyage also proved that those in charge were not familiar with the operations of a vessel of this class, as (a) the lifeboat was not properly prepared for an emergency and lacked nearly all equipment; (b) storm shutters were not installed over the large windows in the pilothouse and cabin spaces, which would have been installed for such a voyage by one more experienced in the dangers likely to occur; (c) an experienced mariner would most likely have traveled as far south as possible through the inland waterway before setting his course for St. Thomas from the coast of the United States.

"9. The vessel grounded in clear weather and aids to navigation were in plain view, which indicates a lack of knowledge or experience on the part of the persons directing the navigation of the vessel. This is further indicated by the statement made by the navigator to Frazer that the vessel was approaching Charleston, South Carolina."

5. The Board made the following recommendations:

"1. The Board suggests that vessels of small tonnage carrying American citizens and flying a foreign flag be required to pass an inspection before clearance is granted by Custom officials.

"2. As an alternate to the above suggestion, it is proposed that a check-off list relative to the physical condition of the vessel and equipment be required to be filled in under oath by the owner or operator before clearance is granted."

Chief, VI Division to
Commandant

VI
14 February 1952
(SV AMPHITRITE - 8-7 Bd)

REMARKS

6. Recommendations 1 and 2 of the Board suggest that vessels of small tonnage carrying American citizens and flying a foreign flag be required to pass an inspection before clearance is granted or in lieu thereof that a check-off list relative to the seaworthiness of the vessel be executed by the owner or operator before clearance is granted. The recommendations, when analyzed, would logically require the extension of marine safety statutes and require the inspection and certification or alternative equivalent effective arrangement with respect to all uninspected vessels departing from any port in the United States or its territories or possessions for a voyage at sea. Recommendations for corrective safety action should be based on a thorough knowledge of the facts of the casualty and existing applicable safety statutes and regulations in the light of previous experience and efforts to prevent similar casualties and the logical probability between the recommendation and the possibility of its effectuation. Recommendations for the extension of marine safety statutes, to be informative or helpful in the enactment of legislation, should be confined to or at least include the specific requirements of existing marine safety statutes or regulations that would or could have prevented the casualty under investigation. General recommendations to extend marine safety legislation which would have the effect of increasing the number of vessels to be inspected and certificated several hundred percent without a clear demonstration of the necessity for such general legislation, are also of little or no value. For these reasons the recommendations of the Board in their full import are not approved.

7. In connection with improvement in the standard of safety of motor vessels, the following bills for the extension of marine safety statutes and regulations to motor vessels are now before Congress for consideration:

(a) H.R. 1762 - A bill for the safety of life and property by making all commercial fishing vessels subject to the rules and regulations of the United States Coast Guard Marine Inspection.

(b) S. 1286 - A bill to amend the Act of June 20, 1936, so as to broaden the application of laws governing the inspection of steam vessels to vessels propelled by internal-combustion engines.

(c) H.R. 7710 - A bill to provide that certain vessels shall be subject to the laws relating to steam vessels, and for other purposes.

(d) H.R. 2316 - A bill to extend the requirements for fixing the minimum number of deck officers on steam vessels to certain additional vessels of the United States, and for other purposes.

Chief, VI Division to
Commandant

VI
14 February 1952
(V [illegible] - a-7 Bd)

(e) H. R. 2317 - A bill to provide that certain vessels shall be subject to the laws relating to steam vessels, and for other purposes.

(f) H. R. 3646 - A bill to provide that certain vessels propelled by gas, fluid, naphtha, or electric motors shall be subject to certain laws relating to the inspection and personnel of steam vessels.

(g) H. R. 3657 - A bill to provide that certain vessels be subject to the laws and regulations relating to the inspection, safety, and navigation of steam vessels.

(h) S. 647 - A bill to provide that certain vessels shall be subject to the laws relating to steam vessels, and for other purposes.

8. A review of the record of investigation indicates that Form 2692 and the original precept convening the Board are not included in the record and that a copy and not the original of the letter from the Officer in Charge, Marine Inspection, San Juan, Puerto Rico to the Officer in Charge, Marine Inspection, Charleston, S. C. containing the report of interview with Francis S. Cantrell was included in the record. Form 2692, the original precept and the original of the above report are to be forwarded to MK for inclusion in the record.

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

/s/ P. A. OVENDEN
P. A. OVENDEN

18 February 1952

Ind-1

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/ R. A. SMYTH
R. A. SMYTH
Acting

APPROVED 20 February 1952

/s/ MERLIN O'NEILL
MERLIN O'NEILL
Vice Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard- 10 -
Commandant