

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
WASHINGTON, D. C.

VI
10 July 1953
(HENRY STILBORNHNER -
a-9 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; foundering of the SS HENRY
STILBORNHNER, off Passage Island, Lake Superior, on 11 May 1953,
with loss of life

1. Pursuant to the provisions of Title 46 C.F.R. Part 130, 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 SS HENRY STILBORNHNER, a bulk freight vessel, built in 1901 of 4,346 G.T., loaded with 6,800 tons of iron ore, departed from Superior, Wisconsin, at 0511, Sunday, 10 May 1953 en route to a port on Lake Erie. After departure, while the weather was favorable, her twelve telescopic type cargo hatches were closed and secured with clamps and the topside otherwise secured for sea. Weather worsened and the first sea was taken on board at 1030. At about 2000 a leaf in No. 11 hatch worked loose but was resecured with difficulty under adverse weather conditions. At no time were tarpaulins fitted in place or battened down on the hatches. Although throughout the night the weather became more severe, the vessel proceeded on its voyage at reduced speed and slightly altered course, evidently making water in her cargo holds due to the nonwatertightness of the hatches. At about 0800 the vessel's movements became sluggish and her pumps could not control the flooding of the vessel. The HENRY STILBORNHNER was abandoned at approximately 0730, 11 May 1953, and sank almost immediately thereafter in approximate position 15 miles south of Isle Royale Light, Lake Superior. Seventeen crew members were lost, evidently due to difficulty in launching lifesaving equipment and an apparent lack of confidence in the lifesaving equipment by some of the crew members who made no effort to abandon the vessel. The HENRY STILBORNHNER received timely weather reports of the impending strong weather conditions from the time of her departure to her foundering.

3. The board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. The SS HENRY STEINBRUNNER, a bulk freight vessel, Great Lakes route, owned by the Kingman Transit Company, and operated by ██████████ ██████████, ██████████, Cleveland 15, Ohio. It is of 3178 net tons and 4345 gross tons, with Official No. 93664.

"2. The STEINBRUNNER was dry docked 11-20 February 1958, at Buffalo, New York, for five (5) year survey for class by the American Bureau of Shipping and her Load Line Certificate was endorsed on 20 February 1958. The Temporary Certificate of Inspection was delivered on 3 April 1958 upon completion of her annual inspection. On 4 May 1958 the Mid-Summer (5) load-line mark was assigned in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"3. The STEINBRUNNER departed Superior, Wisconsin, at 0511 (EST) on 10 May 1958, en route to a Lake Erie port with 6800 tons of iron ore. Her draft forward was 20' 5", aft 20' 8". The weather was calm and clear with no sea; weather forecast at 0500 and 0600 (EST) the 10th, called for southeast to south winds, 30 to 35 miles per hour, with occasional thundersqualls in west half of Lake Superior. Her twelve (12) telescoping type cargo hatches were closed. Cargo hatches were fitted with Mulholland type clamps, twenty-eight (28) per hatch, some of the clamp threads were stripped. Tarpaulins were not used. Routine securing for sea, such as fastening of hawse pipe covers, was carried out. Steering gear and all navigational appliances, with exception of the radar, were operating satisfactorily. The radar was not operating.

"4. About 1500 (EST), 10 May 1958, the wind freshened and the sea increased until around 1630 (EST), the first sea was taken on board. Men were sent to check and tighten the cargo hatch clamps. Latest weather forecasts were still calling for south to southeast winds, with a slight increase in velocity 30 to 40 miles per hour. Shortly thereafter, deadlights were checked for being closed and check and hawse pipe covers better secured.

"5. About 2000 (EST) of the same day, the second hatch leaf from the centerline on the port side of #11 hatch, worked loose and the third mate with three (3) seamen used traveling lines from the lifeline cable to go aft and to secure the hatch leaf. One man, ██████████, a deck watch, was knocked into the cargo hold *leaf*

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opening by a wave. However, he held onto his line, and the others, after recovering from the sea's blow, pulled coils up on deck and took him to the galley-lining rock area. Coils dropped only a few feet and was later able to get about.

"6. The third mate, [REDACTED], and one of the seamen, [REDACTED], then went back and secured the leaf in position; the leaf hatch slaps were tightened by hand. The four (4) deck men remained aft due to the danger of attempting to go forward on the weather deck; there was no unobstructed passage between forward and after ends.

"7. About 2300, 10 May 1953, the ENE wind velocity increased with gusts up to 80 miles per hour during the night; the sea continued to build up. At about 0300, 11 May 1953, one of the observation room doors (forecastle deck) was pushed in by the sea and two men secured it by angling planking against the door and deck; blocks were nailed to deck and door to prevent sliding. About an hour later this door was forced in again and once more secured.

"8. At about the same time, 0430 (EST), the hatch leaf which had been loose the previous evening worked loose again. Because of the dangerous conditions on deck, no attempt was made to send men out to secure it. Suction was taken on No. 4 cargo hold on both port and starboard sides, using both ballast pumps.

"9. Weather forecasts at midnight were broadcast with winds shifting to northeast at 45 to 50 miles per hour; still thunderstorms. Actual weather conditions continued much heavier than predictions-- seas were pounding the ship and covering the hatches. With the ship heading into the wind, sea was pouring on board from both sides, rushing down the spar deck around the after deck house to the fantail area. The STEINBRENNER was proceeding at reduced speed heading into the wind from about 200 (EST), 10 May 1953. She averaged about 4.5 miles per hour during the night.

"10. The ship movements became sluggish about 0600 (EST), 11 May 1953, and toward 0700, other hatch covers began working. The captain brought the ship hard left under full power to the reciprocal heading, hoping to give the after end of the spar deck more protection so that men could work on the after hatches; however, more sea was taken aft and in about ten (10) minutes the ship was brought around and again headed into the wind under hard left rudder.

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"11. At a little past 0700 (.5T), the captain broadcast a call for help on his radio and the crew was alerted to dress and don life jackets.

"12. About 0730 (.1ST) the three (3) after hatch covers, numbers 10, 11 and 12 let go; the general alarm was rung; the captain rang up "Stop" on the engine order telegraph, which was answered, and made a final radio call for assistance. The ship's position was fifteen miles due south of Isle Royale LA. 12, Isle Royale, Lake Superior.

"13. The abandon ship signal was blown about 0736 and the crew at the forward end of the ship gathered around the life raft on the forecabin deck at the bow of the ship. There were ten (10) men, all that were forward on the ship.

"14. The men aft stood by on the boat deck and on signal attempted to launch the lifeboats. The starboard (#1) lifeboat was swung out and prematurely launched with seven (7) men on board, while the remaining crew members were unable to swing out the port (#2) lifeboat for launching. Much conflicting testimony was given by the witnesses who had been back aft as to why they couldn't swing this boat out.

"15. Number 2 lifeboat, still on board, was unhooked from the boat falls as last resort and shortly thereafter floated clear when the STEINBERGER sank. Two (2) men were working in the boat when the ship foundered, one (1) was thrown out and the other, injured, remained in the boat. Two (2) other men later managed to board this boat after the ship sank.

"16. Up forward, the ten (10) men around the raft were dislodged as the ship sank. A short time later, six (6) of them managed to board the raft while it was floating.

"17. Personnel in the lifeboats and on the raft were picked up four to four and a half hours later; the life raft personnel by the SS JAMES H. THOMPSON; personnel in #1 lifeboat by the SS D. M. OLSON; and personnel in #2 lifeboat by the SS WILFRED SYKES. The SYKES proceeded to Duluth, Minnesota, and the OLSON and the THOMPSON continued downbound to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan.

"18. Although given advance warning of the abandoning of ship, some personnel aft did not have life preservers on. The third mate and three (3) deck seamen were marooned aft the previous evening and could not get to their rooms to don their own life jackets. Some of these men put on the life preservers carried in the boats. Then other men from the engine room arrived on the boat deck without life preservers. All men forward at the life raft were wearing life preservers.

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"19. The STEINBRENNER carried a crew of thirty-one (31) men.

A. The following men survived:

Captain [REDACTED] License [REDACTED], [REDACTED] Vermilion,
Ohio
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Huntington, West Virginia
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Olean, N.Y.
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], Dl,
[REDACTED], Manticook, Pennsylvania
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], Dl, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Charleston, West Virginia
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Lorain, Ohio
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Tonawanda, New York
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Minneapolis, Minnesota
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED],
Hennepin, Minnesota
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], DS, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Lockport, New York
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], East Plymouth, Pennsylvania
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Grand Rapids, Michigan
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], Dl, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania

TOTAL: 24

B. The following bodies have been recovered (18 May 1963):

Andrew Kraft, License No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED],
Alpena, Michigan
Arthur L. Morse, License No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED],
Michigan City, Indiana
Earl M. Henningson, Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED],
[REDACTED], Duluth, Minnesota
Leo W. Thomas, Book No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED],
Duluth, Minnesota

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Frank Tomozak, Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
Buffalo, New York
William J. Donahue, Certificate No. [REDACTED], Pearshall,
Texas
Jack Wolfe, Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], East Liverpool, Ohio
Howard W. Chamberlain, Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Buffalo, New York
Kenneth H. Reynolds, Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], South Range, Wisconsin
Robert J. Allen, Temporary Letter (Certificate No.
[REDACTED]), [REDACTED], St. Louis, Missouri.

TOTAL: 10

C. The following men are missing (15 May 1953):

[REDACTED], License No. [REDACTED],
Pennsylvania
[REDACTED], License No. [REDACTED]
South Range, Wisconsin
[REDACTED], License No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Jefferson, Ohio
[REDACTED], License No. [REDACTED]
Duluth, Minnesota
[REDACTED], License No. [REDACTED], Aurora, Minnesota
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Conneaut, Ohio
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Toledo, Ohio

TOTAL: 7

"20. The following persons were questioned by the board:

Captain [REDACTED], License No. [REDACTED],
Vermilion, Ohio
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Huntington, West Virginia
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Olean, New York

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[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Charleston, West Virginia
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Hennepin, Minnesota
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Nanticoke, Pennsylvania
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Lockport, New York
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Grand Rapids, Michigan
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Lorain, Ohio
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], Minneapolis, Minnesota
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], East Plymouth, Pennsylvania
[REDACTED], Certificate No. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], North Tonawanda, New York

TOTAL: 15"

4. The Board made the following Conclusions:

"1. The cause of the STEINBRENNER's foundering was heavy seas dislodging the after three (3) hatch covers, numbers 10, 11 and 12, and permitting flooding of the cargo holds. The adverse weather conditions with mountainous seas combined to make this foundering an act of God.

"2. The STEINBRENNER was seaworthy. This is indicated by the American Bureau of Shipping's endorsement of the Load Line Certificate and issuance of the Midsummer Draft Certificate. The Coast Guard Annual Inspection book (CG-840A) stated the ship was seaworthy and her Inspection Certificate was issued. The captain also testified that they had been in previous blows this spring, loaded with grain and coal, and light, during which times they took seas on board. Routine scouring of the ship for sea was carried out on this trip.

"3. Some conflicting testimony exists as to the number of hatch clamps with stripped threads. However, it is the opinion of the board that [REDACTED], although short in sailing experience,

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was the most reliable and level-headed man to testify on the condition of the clamps. The recent harrowing experience of the witnesses, plus considerable newspaper attention, caused a tendency for exaggeration.

"4. [REDACTED] indicated that only a couple clamp threads were stripped and by wrapping with marlin, they drew up as tightly as the others.

It is the opinion of the board that these few stripped threads among 836 clamps did not contribute to the casualty. Testimony did not indicate that the stripped threads were on the after three hatches.

"5. It was a general loosening of clamps with the ship working in a heavy sea, metal to metal, metal clamps turned down on metal hatch covers, that aided the heavy seas in loosening the clamps. The sea swirling around the hatch coverings knocked over the loosened clamps.

"6. It is the opinion of the board that the use of tarpaulins would have reduced general loosening of the clamps and would have prevented free ingress of water between the hatch leaves.

"7. In connection with the decision not to use tarpaulins, the board concluded that any reasonably prudent master could have used the same judgment under the same conditions with erroneous weather forecasts and the favorable weather conditions prevailing at the start of the voyage. Failure to batten down the tarpaulins while underway and while conditions still permitted appears to be a situation where experienced seamen underestimated the force of the sea.

"8. An adverse list and a very heavy sea combined with an alarmed crew, who realized the possibilities of the STEINBRENNER's foundering, were responsible for failure to properly launch #2 lifeboat. Dubious, conflicting stories as to why the boat was not swung out for launching pointed out that regardless of whether the blocks had become tipped or one of the guys fouled, that no one was thinking too clearly. Since no evidence has been adduced indicating subsequent damage, it must be assumed that this boat was punctured when the STEINBRENNER sank. Later examination of the boat by a Duluth, Minnesota, Marine Inspector, revealed an open fracture in the starboard side of the boat six (6) feet forward from the stern, in line with the after thwart. The fracture,

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14 inches long, is vertical and graduates from one-half inch at the lower end to about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the upper end. This boat, at still a later date, was observed by members of the board at Tower Welding Company Dock in Cleveland, Ohio.

"9. Two (2) men were in #2 lifeboat at the time the ship sank. They were removing the fall hooks from the boat shackles and inserting the boat plug in the hope that the boat would float clear and be available for use when the ship sank. One of these men was thrown clear out of the boat and the other seriously injured, if not fatally, when slammed across the boat as the ship foundered. Shortly thereafter, two (2) other men were able to board this holed and water-filled, floating lifeboat.

"10. From the testimony, it appears that there was no panic forward at the life raft. However, aft on the boat deck no one licensed man appears to have taken charge of launching operations and some confusion reigned.

"11. The Third Assistant Engineer, Arthur L. Morse, mentioned by all of the survivors from the boat deck, appears to have been in the thick of launching activities. Certainly, his actions in releasing the painter of #1 lifeboat saved the lives of these seven (7) men, although it lessened his own chances of escape.

"12. The fact that some people aft on the boat deck coming from the engine room did not have life preservers on was probably due to the circumstance that most of their rooms were on the spar deck level and opened on the weather deck where boarding seas made passage hazardous. There were four (4) men regularly assigned to the engine room watch with the Chief and one or two other assistant engineers standing by there also. According to testimony there were four (4) life preservers in the engine room telephone booth, two of which were regularly kept in the engine room. The four (4) life preservers from the boats were not enough to take care of all the people who could not get their own jacket. It is probable that if every man had had a life preserver on, more men would have had a better chance to escape the near freezing water and climb on board a boat.

"13. The fact that the ship's radar was not operating did not contribute to this casualty.

"14. Failure of material:

- a. Hatch clamps worked loose and failed to hold hatch covers in place. This failure probably could have been avoided if personnel had been able to go on deck to tighten them.
- b. Heavy work panned in the 2-inch wooden door on the observation room, taking door, hinges, and hinge pin intact.
- c. Heavy work cracked in through the port chock in the wheelhouse roof and the plates had to be wedged along with tightening of clamps to prevent the water from coming in too badly.
- d. The port (#2) lifeboat could not be swung out to launching position because of an adverse list and a jammed block which prevented hoisting of the boat so it would clear the side of the ship. This vessel had radial type davits.

"15. There is no evidence that any licensed or certificated personnel of the vessel committed any act of incompetence, inattention to duty, or negligence or willful violation of any law or regulation.

"16. No personnel of the Coast Guard or any other government agency contributed to the casualty.

"17. The use of tarpaulins to cover cargo hatches could probably have prevented this casualty.

"18. No laws or regulations relating to vessels have been violated.

"19. No aids to navigation, uncharted or incorrectly charted areas or objects were involved."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. The board recommends that in addition to the life preservers presently required for this type Great Lakes' vessel that the following be required:

- a. At least three (3) life preservers to be carried in an overhead rack in the pilot house.
- b. At least four (4) life preservers to be carried in the engine room.
- c. At least six (6) life preservers to be carried in a watertight box on the boat deck.

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"2. The board recommends that tarpaulins be required to be used at all times except during the mid-summer period, 16 May through 15 September.

"3. The board recommends that a letter of appreciation be issued for Arthur L. Morse, Third Assistant Engineer, deceased, to his next of kin.

"4. The board recommends that letters of congratulations be issued to the masters of the merchant ships who rescued personnel of the STEINBRENNER.

"5. The board recommends that the file be closed and no further action be taken."

REMARKS

6. Conclusion paragraph 1 of the Board states that the adverse weather conditions with mountainous seas combined to make the foundering of the HENRY STEINBRENNER an act of God. This conclusion is not concurred with. Conclusions paragraphs 6 and 17 of the Board, in effect, state that had tarpaulins been battened down on the hatches of the HENRY STEINBRENNER she in all probability would not have foundered. Conclusions paragraphs 6 and 17 of the Board are concurred with, particularly in view of the requirements of 46 CFR 97.15-20 (a) which provide that "It shall be the responsibility of the master to assure himself before leaving protected waters that all exposed cargo hatches of his vessel are closed and made properly tight." Failure to comply with this regulation very largely contributed to the foundering of the HENRY STEINBRENNER and for which failure appropriate action is to be instituted against the license of the master.

7. In conformance with R.S. 4450, as amended, (46 USC 239) and regulations thereunder, two duplicate copies of the record of investigation of subject casualty are to be forwarded to Headquarters for transmittal to the U. S. Attorney General, as such record contains evidence of probable criminal liability on the part of the master of the HENRY STEINBRENNER at the time subject casualty occurred.

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8. In connection with Recommendation 2 of the Board concerning tarpaulins, it would appear that such requirement now exists in regulation form, 46 CFR 97.15-20, which among other things specifically places the responsibility upon the master to ensure the watertightness of exposed hatches under all conditions of operation.

9. The Recommendation of the Board paragraph 1 that additional life preservers be carried in the pilot house, engine room and on the boat deck also appears appropriate for further consideration.

10. The record does not indicate that any personnel performed any acts of heroism above and beyond the call of their duty. Accordingly, it would appear that specific citation of any persons involved in the foundering of the HENRY STEINBRENER or in the rescue of personnel therefrom is not warranted under the circumstances.

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

[REDACTED]

FIRST ENDORSEMENT TO MVI memorandum of 10 July 1953

H
29 July 1953

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

[REDACTED]

APPROVED: JULY 31 1953

[REDACTED]

HERLIN O'NEILL
Vice Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard
Commandant