

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

MVI

30 April, 1952

(SOUTHERN ISLES - 2-5  
Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; foundering of SOUTHERN ISLES in position 32°30'N 73°00'W, 5 October, 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, Opinions and Recommendations, has been reviewed and is forwarded herewith.

2. The motor vessel SOUTHERN ISLES of 3,325 g.t., a former U. S. Navy LST which had been converted in 1950 for the carriage of bulk cargo in the merchant service, departed from San Juan, Puerto Rico, on 30 September, 1951, with a full load of iron ore destined for Chester, Pa. On 3 October, a hurricane was in the area between Puerto Rico and Cape Hatteras and the vessel altered course and reduced speed. On the morning of 5 October, 1951, the weather was - wind NW, force 5, sea moderate rough, swells confused and long of 4' to 6' in height. Under these conditions and with a full load of iron ore on board of undetermined distribution, the SOUTHERN ISLES was proceeding on course 335° true at her full speed of 9 knots when at 0315, with little or no warning, she broke in two and sank within a few minutes in position 32-30N 73-00W with insufficient time to launch any lifeboats. As a result of this casualty, of the 23 crew members on board, 17 perished, including the master.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. That the times used are Eastern Standard Time unless otherwise specified.

"2. That the motor vessel SOUTHERN ISLES, official number 259 649 was owned by the Philadelphia and Norfolk Steamship Company of Wilmington, Delaware.

"3. That the SOUTHERN ISLES was the former U. S. S. LST No. 76 built in Jeffersonville, Indiana in 1943 and converted to a bulk cargo carrier in April, 1950 at Norfolk, Virginia by the Norfolk Shipbuilding and Drydock Corporation.



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"4. That the SOUTHERN ISLES 327' 9" length, 50' beam, 25' depth, 3325 gross tons, 2749 net tons, and 1800 horsepower was last inspected at Norfolk, Virginia, September 12, 1951, when she was given a drydock examination at the yard of the Norfolk Shipbuilding and Drydock Corporation.

"5. That a certificate of inspection to expire 26 March, 1952, had been issued to the SOUTHERN ISLES by the Officer in Charge, Marine Inspection, Norfolk, Virginia which certificate authorized the vessel to be navigated on the waters of "Oceans, not to exceed 200 miles offshore, and Gulf of Mexico. The 200 mile limit on the ocean route is extended to permit direct voyages between port in North and South America."

"6. That the SOUTHERN ISLES had two bulk cargo holds, numbers 1 and 2, loaded through hatches 1, 2 and 3 and 4, 5, 6 and 7 respectively.

"7. That forward of #1 hold, occupying space between frames 8 and 13, were 3 cylindrical aluminum liquid cargo tanks 10' 7" in diameter and 30-1/2 to 37-1/2' long.

"8. That aft of #2 hold, occupying space between frames 37 and 41, were 3 cylindrical aluminum liquid cargo tanks 10' 7" in diameter and 30-1/2 to 37-1/2' long.

"9. That #1 hold extended between frames 13 and 22-1/2 and #2 hold extended between frames 22-1/2 and 37.

"10. That the depth of hold in #2 hold between frames 28 and 37 was approximately 60% of that of the forward part of #2 hold and that of #1 hold.

"11. That the pilothouse and living and messing spaces were in deck house aft.

"12. That the main and auxiliary engine rooms were between frames 28 and 35 and below the after part of #2 hold.

"13. That the original scantlings of the SOUTHERN ISLES included 1/4" deck plating and 3/8" bottom and side plating and that there were no extensive renewals of same at conversion in 1950



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"14. That the principal features of conversion included removal of longitudinal bulkheads so that the second deck between frames 13 and 35 could be dropped to and joined to the third deck to form an inclined trim board bulkhead; installation of seven cargo hatches with steel, single leaf, hinged hatch covers; installation of 11/16" steel doubling plates over sheer strakes and main deck stringer plates port and starboard, for 3/4 length of ship; lowering of and removal of part of tank deck; installation of watertight bulkheads at frames 8, 13 and 22-1/2

"15. That the SOUTHERN ISLES was classed as A-1 by the American Bureau of Shipping.

"16. That International Load Line Certificate No. I-10,225 issued by the American Bureau of Shipping on 24 May, 1950, allowed a freeboard of ten feet 3/8 inches, a fresh water allowance of 3-3/4 inches, a maximum draft of 15 feet 3/8 inches in salt water and limited operations to Coastwise, West Indies and coastwise South America Service, or direct voyages between ports in South America and North America; that last annual load line inspection was made on 22 March, 1951, when conditions were reported as satisfactory.

"17. That the Southern Trading Company of Wilmington, Delaware, a subsidiary corporation of Philadelphia and Norfolk Steamship Company, had contracted in May, 1951, to haul 120,000 tons of iron ore from San Juan, Puerto Rico in a twelve month period and had chartered the SOUTHERN ISLES on a bare boat charter to engage in that trade.

"18. That the SOUTHERN ISLES carried iron ore from San Juan three times previously to the cargo carried on her departure from San Juan on 30 September, 1951, namely; 4058.66 tons, 4018.75 tons and 4174.93 tons; that SOUTHERN COUNTIES carried one such cargo and SOUTHERN DISTRICTS one.

"19. That bulk cargoes carried by the SOUTHERN ISLES included sulphur, phosphate rock, ammonium sulphate, iron ore, bauxite.

"20. That the SOUTHERN ISLES departed San Juan, Puerto Rico for Chester, Penna. at about 1600 San Juan time with approximately 4,000 long tons of iron ore, 37 tons of fresh water, and 72.9 tons of bunkers; that drafts on sailing were 13'06" forward, 17'03" aft, mean draft 15'04 1/2".

"21. That the SOUTHERN ISLES was overloaded on departure San Juan on 30 September, 1951, to the extent that her permissible draft in salt water of 15' 3/8" was exceeded by 3-1/8".



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"22. That the following crew members sailed in the SOUTHERN ISLES on her departure from San Juan on 30 September, 1951:

[REDACTED] Lic. No. [REDACTED] Master  
James L. Midgette, Ek. [REDACTED] 1st Mate, Lic. No. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] 2nd Mate, Lic. No. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] 3rd Mate, Lic. No. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Radio Opr., [REDACTED]  
Simeon J. Delacruz, Jr., [REDACTED] A.B.  
[REDACTED] A.B.  
[REDACTED] A.B.  
[REDACTED] O.S. Deck Maint.  
[REDACTED] O.S.  
[REDACTED] 60 Days Document, O.S.  
[REDACTED] Ch. Engr., Lic. No. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] 1st Engr., Lic. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Ek. [REDACTED] 2nd Engr., Lic. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] 3rd Engr., Lic. [REDACTED]  
William J. Able, [REDACTED] Oiler  
[REDACTED] Oiler  
[REDACTED] Oiler  
Tolon W. Shumake, [REDACTED] Wiper  
[REDACTED] Chief Cook & Steward  
[REDACTED] 2nd Cook, Baker  
[REDACTED] Messman  
Richard C. Meekins, [REDACTED] Messman

"23. That a hurricane was in the area between San Juan and Cape Hatteras and the SOUTHERN ISLES encountered heavy weather which was reason for a change of course to the southward and a reduction in speed on 3 October, 1951.

"24. That on 5 October, 1951, at about 0351 (0445 SOUTHERN ISLES time) in position 32-30 N., 73-00 W. the SOUTHERN ISLES with little warning broke in two and sank within a few minutes with insufficient time to launch any lifeboats.

"25. That immediately prior to foundering the general alarm had been rung.

"26. That at the time of foundering the wind was west-northwest force 5; the sea was moderate rough, with heavy, confused, long swells of 4 to 6 feet in height.

"27. That immediately prior to foundering the SOUTHERN ISLES was proceeding on course 335 degrees true at full speed, 291 r.p.m., nine knots.



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"28. That the SS CHARLOTTE LYKES at 0340 while on course 050 degrees true sighted approximately four miles dead ahead the lights of a vessel which lights suddenly disappeared from view at 0351.

"29. That at 0418 the CHARLOTTE LYKES arrived alongside a ring buoy with burning water light and shortly thereafter heard cries for help from the water; that at 0433 two survivors were sighted and at 0445 one Wilson Deal was taken on board followed shortly thereafter by lowering of #1 lifeboat which removed James L. Midgette from an overturned lifeboat; that between 0445 and 0730 five additional survivors, making a total of seven were picked up and brought on board.

"30. That following members of the crew of the SOUTHERN ISLES were rescued by the CHARLOTTE LYKES:

James L. Midgette, Chief Mate  
[REDACTED] Steward  
[REDACTED] Able Seaman  
[REDACTED] Deck Maintenance  
[REDACTED] Second Cook  
[REDACTED] Oiler  
[REDACTED] Messman

"31. That James L. Midgette when brought on board had a badly mangled right leg and died on board the CHARLOTTE LYKES at 0845.

"32. That at 0614 Commander, 5th Coast Guard District received request from CHARLOTTE LYKES for medical advice on treatment of mangled leg and at 0634 replied that U. S. Public Health Service recommends administer 300,000 units penicillin immediately and again each 12 hours.

"33. That the CHARLOTTE LYKES recovered from the sea two bodies identified as those of Richard C. Meekins, messman and William J. Asble, oiler.

"34. That at about 2015 the CHARLOTTE LYKES transferred six survivors and three bodies to the U.S.C.G.C. CHEROKEE and at 2024 resumed her voyage to London after being released by the CHEROKEE.



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"35. That at 0625 (EST) the S.S. FLORENCE LUCKENBACH altered course, upon receipt of general message sent by the 5th Coast Guard District, to proceed to position of distress; arrived on scene at 1049 and during a ten hour search recovered from the sea one body identified as that of Simeon J. Delacruz, Jr. which body was transferred to the U.S.C.G.C. CHEROKEE.

"36. That at 0504 the CHARLOTTE LYKES transmitted a radio message to the Commander, 5th Coast Guard District advising that the SOUTHERN ISLES had sunk.

"37. That at 0515 Commander, 5th Coast Guard District ordered the U.S.C.G.C. CHEROKEE, then at sea in position 35-17 N, 75-18 W, to proceed and assume on-scene control and ordered Coast Guard Air Station, Elizabeth City to dispatch aircraft to assist in search.

"38. That commencing with the arrival of the CHARLOTTE LYKES on the scene at 0418, 5 October, 1951, the following vessels and aircraft arrived on the scene and engaged in a search of the area for varying periods until the search was secured at sundown 6 October, 1951, by orders of the Commander, 5th Coast Guard District:

U.S.S. FORREST ROYAL  
U.S.S. FINCH  
U.S.S. McCOMB  
4 Navy Planes  
3 Air Force Planes  
2 Navy blimps

U.S.C.G.C. CHEROKEE  
S.S. CHARLOTTE LYKES  
S.S. FLORENCE LUCKENBACH  
S.S. WARRIOR  
2 Coast Guard Planes

"39. That the results of the search were the recovery of 7 survivors and 3 bodies.

"40. That the following members of the crew of the SOUTHERN ISLES on board at the time of foundering are missing:

George F. Sadler  
Linwood J. Gardner  
James A. Pledger  
George M. Wilkinson  
Norman L. Fisher  
Joseph A. Miller  
Hal Edward Williams

Marion R. Capers  
Marion M. Gorvan  
Cecil L. Vaughn  
John E. Carpenter  
Edward J. Brown  
Tolon W. Shumake

"41. That the type of life preserver used by the survivors and found on the bodies of deceased was the cork block jacket without collar.



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"42. That the Southern Trading Company had issued instructions to masters of its converted LSTs limiting the cargo dead weight capacity to 4050 gross (long) tons even though the fuel and fresh water tonnages were low.

"43. That the dead weight tonnage of the SOUTHERN ISLES was 3950 long tons.

"44. That the tons per inch immersion of the SOUTHERN ISLES at water planes above that of 11' was 34.

"45. That the SOUTHERN ISLES departed San Juan on 5 July, 1951, with 1,563 barrels of fuel, 46 tons of water and 4,058.66 tons of iron ore, or an estimated overload of 374.96 long tons of cargo.

"46. That the SOUTHERN ISLES departed San Juan on 1 August, 1951, with 735 barrels of fuel oil, 45 tons of water and 4,018.75 tons of iron ore which ladened her to a mean draft of 15' 06", which indicated an overloading of 5-5/8", or an estimated overload of 223.75 long tons of cargo.

"47. That the SOUTHERN ISLES departed San Juan on 23 August, 1951, with 710 barrels of fuel oil, 55 tons of water and 4,174.93 tons of iron ore which brought her to a mean draft of 15' 07", which indicated an overloading of 6-5/8", or an estimated overload of 386.59 long tons of cargo."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. That the SOUTHERN ISLES was not a suitable type vessel for service as a bulk carrier of iron ore or similarly dense cargoes.

"2. That abnormal strains produced in loading and unloading in her three previous voyages carrying iron ore weakened the structure of the SOUTHERN ISLES.

"3. That at the time of foundering the SOUTHERN ISLES (with a blunt bow) was being operated at too great a speed in a nearly head sea.

"4. That the causes of the breaking of the SOUTHERN ISLES were a weakening of the hull structure by overloading and by unequal distribution of weights during loading of and discharge of iron ore cargoes and the driving of the vessel during heavy weather encountered on her last voyage.



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"5. That the thirteen crew members listed as missing in fact #40 are dead.

"6. That Milton P. Jackson, president of the Southern Trading Company, and W. M. Bradbury, operating manager of the Southern Trading Company had knowledge of and wilfully allowed overloading of the SOUTHERN ISLES.

"7. Search was initiated promptly. All units of the U. S. Coast Guard, U. S. Navy, U. S. Air Force and U. S. Merchant Marine participating in rescue functioned efficiently with good cooperation and results."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. That converted landing ships of construction similar to the SOUTHERN ISLES not be authorized to carry bulk cargoes of densities approximating those of iron ore.

"2. That all converted landing ships and craft certificated for oceans or coastwise waters be re-inspected to determine condition of hull structures and that reports of these conditions be forwarded to the Commandant for review.

"3. That the Commandant direct that the Merchant Marine Technical Division make a study of the structural strength and weakness of converted LSTs and recommend structural improvements for LSTs certified for oceans or coastwise waters.

"4. That the case be referred to the Department of Justice recommending prosecution of Milton P. Jackson, president of the Southern Trading Company and of W. M. Bradbury, operating manager of the Southern Trading Company for violation of 18 USC 1115.

"5. That the Commandant, U. S. Coast Guard, initiate steps to amend Title 46 USC Section 85g, paragraphs (c) and (d) to provide a penalty of \$10,000 in lieu of the \$500 now stated. Also, to amend Title 46 USC Section 85g, paragraph (e) to provide a penalty of \$10,000 in lieu of the \$1,000 now specified."

REMARKS

6. The Opinions of the Board, in effect, state that the SOUTHERN ISLES was not a suitable type vessel for the carriage of iron ore in bulk, that her structure was weakened by previous loadings of such cargo, and that her foundering was caused by her weakened condition coupled with overloading, unequal distribution of cargo, and the driving of the vessel during heavy weather.



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7. Following World War II and in anticipation of conversion of surplus Naval vessels for service as merchant vessels, serious consideration was given to the standard of safety which such vessels would have to meet for the various services in which such vessels might be employed on the different classes of waters. As a result of such studies, standards were developed and instructions issued for compliance with necessary safety requirements as a condition to the issuance of certificates of inspection to such vessels.

8. The SOUTHERN ISLES was converted to a bulk cargo carrier in 1930. She was originally constructed as an LST, a combatant vessel, and accordingly not in conformance with established principles and requirements for the construction of merchant vessels. In her conversion, however, known experience with respect to any inherent deficiencies was considered and corrective measures taken to insure that the vessel could be operated in her proposed service with safety.

9. Due to the suddenness of the foundering of the SOUTHERN ISLES, the cause for such foundering is incapable of exact determination. The foundering of the SOUTHERN ISLES may be attributed to:

- (a) Nonexistent operating experience with respect to the characteristics and suitability of LSTs for conversion as bulk cargo carriers;
- (b) Consequent inability to effectively assess the suitability of the vessel for specialized services;
- (c) Probable overloading plus a possible poor distribution of the dense cargo on board;
- (d) The driving of the vessel in heavy weather.

The evidence indicates that possible overloading may have been a contributing cause of the vessel's foundering, but does not provide any indication as to whether or not the vessel would have survived if not overloaded, all other conditions being the same.

10. The Board recommended that the standard of safety of former landing vessels be reviewed and necessary corrective measures instituted, and that former LSTs not be authorized to carry bulk cargo densities approximating that of iron ore.

11. As a result of the foundering of the SOUTHERN ISLES, the standard of safety of former LSTs operating as merchant vessels has been reviewed



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and all such vessels so operated have been required to be strengthened and where necessary the density of cargo carried has been restricted to not heavier than bauxite. These requirements are calculated to prevent a casualty similar to that which overtook the SOUTHERN ISLES.

12. Although the Board is of the opinion that the president and operating manager of the Southern Trading Company both had knowledge of and wilfully allowed overloading of the SOUTHERN ISLES, it is not considered that the evidence available is sufficient to substantiate this view. Accordingly, there is no legal basis for criminal prosecution of either the president or the operating manager of the Southern Trading Company as being liable for negligent destruction of life.

13. Recommendation 5 of the Board suggesting that the penalty for the violation of the Load Line Acts or regulations thereunder be increased to \$10,000 will be considered in any proposed amendment of such Acts.

14. The record does not indicate any negligence with respect to the Coast Guard's responsibility for developing safety standards, reviewing and approving conversion plans, and the inspection and certification of the SOUTHERN ISLES in conformance with existing statutes and regulations. The record does, however, indicate that there is some misunderstanding as to the responsibility among the various components in the Coast Guard concerned with the administration and enforcement of the marine safety statutes and regulations thereunder. It is the recommendation of this Division, therefore, that the record of subject casualty be further appropriately reviewed for the purpose of effecting a clarification of the respective responsibilities of the components concerned.

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



Chief, MVI Division to  
Commandant

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M  
16 July 1952


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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; foundering MV SOUTHERN ISLES in  
position 32°30'N 73°00'W, 5 October, 1951, with loss of life

Forwarded, recommending approval.

  
Acting

APPROVED: July 21 1952

  
MERLIN O'NEILL  
Vice Adm., U.S. Coast Guard  
Commandant