

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

MVI  
15 May 1953  
(FAIRHOPE - G-11 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; grounding of SS FAIRHOPE,  
West San Benito Island, Mexico, 30 January 1953

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. On 29 January 1953, the SS FAIRHOPE, a cargo vessel of 6,125 g.t., departed Long Beach, California, bound for the Panama Canal. During the evening of the 29th, it was suspected that the chief steward on board was murdered and the vessel reversed course to search the sea for his body. At 0130 on the following day, the original course was resumed. Due to errors in navigation, the vessel grounded on West San Benito Island, Baja California, Mexico, during a dense fog. While no lives were lost or injuries sustained, the damage to the vessel was estimated at \$1,600,000.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. At or about 1637 on 30 January 1953, the SS FAIRHOPE, on a voyage from Long Beach, California, to the Panama Canal, grounded on West San Benito Island, Baja California, Mexico, during dense fog.

"2. The SS FAIRHOPE, official number 244267, of 6,125 gross tons, is an inspected freight vessel of American registry, built at Oakland, California, in 1943. She is owned and operated by the Waterman Steamship Corporation, Mobile, Ala. [REDACTED] was master. The vessel was last inspected on 12 November 1952, at New Orleans, La. The FAIRHOPE was equipped with one magnetic compass on the flying bridge and one magnetic compass in the wheelhouse, a gyro compass with repeaters, a course recorder and a Sperry Gyro Pilot. Other equipment included a Submarine Signal Company fathometer,

registering up to 250 fathoms and a Mackay Radio Direction Finder. She was not equipped with radar. All other navigational and ship control equipment complied with the requirements of existing rules and regulations for vessels of her class and service.

"3. The SS FAIRHOPE arrived from Japan at Long Beach, California, on or about 27 January 1953, to take on approximately 500 tons of MSTC cargo for a Gulf port. During the vessel's stay in Long Beach, the gyro compass was overhauled and serviced by a representative of the Sperry Gyroscope Company and upon completion of this overhaul on 29 January 1953, the compass was reported to be in good operating condition and free of error.

"4. The SS FAIRHOPE left Long Beach on the 29th of January 1953, and took her departure from the Long Beach Harbor Entrance Buoy at 1330. A course of  $158^{\circ}$  by gyro was set to take her an estimated distance of 6 miles to the westward of West San Benito Island, 350 miles distant. The vessel proceeded at her normal full speed of 15.3 knots. Steering was done alternately by gyro pilot and by hand, depending on weather conditions, and a reasonably accurate course was steered.

"5. During the evening of the 29th a disturbance below decks involving the chief steward, Thurmond, and other crewmembers, was quelled by the master. Later in the evening it appeared that the chief steward was missing. A thorough search of the ship was made but the steward could not be located. Inspection of Thurmond's stateroom revealed bloodstains about the bunk and porthole, both on the inside and outside down the side of the ship from the porthole. On the basis of this evidence, the master decided to reverse course and search the sea for the steward.

"6. At 2300 course was reversed to  $338^{\circ}$  by gyro and that course was steered until 0130 on the morning of the 30th, at which time the original course of  $158^{\circ}$  by gyro was resumed. Full speed was maintained at all times during the course reversal. Only a minor departure from the original course line was caused by this maneuver.

"7. At about 0400 on January 30, the second mate, [REDACTED] went on watch. At 0600 he obtained observations of Spica, Antares, and Polaris. The lines of position from these observations when plotted resulted in a relatively large triangle. The position determined by the second mate, and plotted on H. O. Chart No. 5196 was Lat.  $30^{\circ} 49\frac{1}{2}'$  N., and Long.  $116^{\circ} 48'$  W. This position put the vessel  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles inside the course line which was drawn on the chart. This course line, however, was already on the chart from previous voyages and was laid down from the Los Angeles Harbor Entrance, three miles further west than from the actual point of departure from Long Beach Harbor Entrance. This was the first fix established since the vessel departed. At 0714, an azimuth was obtained and indicated that the gyro compass had an error of  $0.9^{\circ}$  west. The vessel continued to steer a gyro course of  $158^{\circ}$ . The master was kept fully informed concerning the progress of his vessel.

"8. During the day the weather was intermittently foggy and clear. No other vessels were sighted or heard.

"9. At about 1200 on the 30th the third mate, [REDACTED] went on watch. At 1344 he obtained a sun line and, by using  $158^{\circ}$  for a true course and a speed of 15.3 knots from the 0600 fix, he arrived at a position of Lat.  $29^{\circ} 0.5'$  N. and Long.  $115^{\circ} 58'$  W., which he plotted on a plotting sheet. On the same plotting sheet he made a mark to indicate the position of the light on the north end of West San Benito Island. It was testified that this plotting sheet was used for the reason that it was thought that the large scale coastal chart, H.O. 1193, was not aboard. At 1516 the third mate obtained an azimuth which again indicated that the gyro compass had an error of about  $1^{\circ}$  west. Still no allowance was made for this error and the vessel continued on the course of  $158^{\circ}$  by gyro.

"10. At 1527 fog set in and the course was changed to  $170^{\circ}$  by gyro. At 1605 the fog became dense and the vessel's speed was then reduced to slightly more than 11 knots. By this time the master had taken complete charge on the bridge and the fathometer had been put into operation. It was estimated that the vessel would be off San Benito at about 1637. The vessel was now on hand steering and a lookout was stationed on the bow.

Chief, MVI Division to  
Commandant

MVI  
15 May 1953  
(FAIRHOPE - C-11 Bd)

"11. No further reduction in speed was made after 1605. From that time and until the vessel grounded the master and the second mate kept lookout on the port wing of the bridge and [REDACTED], the third mate, was stationed on the starboard wing with instructions to watch for kelp and listen for possible whistle echoes. It was claimed that all of them frequently looked at the fathometer, located on the after pilothouse bulkhead, inside the door on the port side, but no one was assigned to watch the fathometer continuously. Soundings were obtainable within two miles of West San Benito Island. At no time were any depth readings obtained on the fathometer.

"12. At 1637 on January 30, 1953, the SS FAIRHOPE grounded. The visibility then was so poor that no rocks or land could be seen. The engines were immediately put on full speed astern but before the vessel lost her way entirely the master assumed that she had struck the pinnacle rock located about 3/4 mile to the westward of West San Benito Island and he therefore ordered full speed ahead and hard right rudder. Almost immediately the FAIRHOPE ran hard aground and stopped. When the visibility subsequently improved it was discovered that the FAIRHOPE was aground on the east side of the large cove on the north side of West San Benito Island.

"13. At 2121 on 30 January 1953, Coast Guard operations at Long Beach, California, was notified concerning the casualty and the CGC MORRIS was dispatched to the scene at 2340. When the MORRIS arrived on the scene she stood by until salvage tugs and equipment arrived. During salvage operations the Coast Guard maintained a vessel on watch at all times. The following vessels assisted in the salvage operations: VIKING, KANAK, SEA LION, and Derrick Barge No. 5. The FAIRHOPE was refloated at 0155 on 8 February 1953, and brought back to Long Beach, California, where she arrived at 1622 on 11 February 1953. During the towing of the FAIRHOPE back to Long Beach a Coast Guard vessel acted as escort.

"14. The FAIRHOPE was subsequently put on dry dock at San Pedro, California, for survey of damage. It was found that the entire bottom was badly set in and holed. Double bottom compartments were also badly damaged. The stern post and rudder

were lost and the propeller was damaged beyond repair. The amount of damage to the machinery has not been determined. The lowest bid for complete repairs was reported to be \$1,600,000.

"15. During the time that the FAIRHOPE was aground and until she returned to Long Beach, the crewmembers performed their duties satisfactorily although some tension existed among them because of having an apparent murderer at large on board the vessel.

"16. As soon as the FAIRHOPE was refloated and she was outside the territorial waters of Mexico, F.B.I. agents were transported to the vessel by the Coast Guard to investigate the possible murder of the steward and the disposal of his body upon the high seas. A subsequent investigation was made by the Federal Grand Jury in Los Angeles, California. No indictment has been returned to this date."

4.

The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. That when the FAIRHOPE departed from Long Beach, the course of 158° true was taken from the charts used on previous trips from San Pedro without taking into consideration the fact that the same course when departing from Long Beach would take the vessel only three miles to the west of San Benito Island.

"2. That when the FAIRHOPE backtracked to search for the missing steward during the night before grounding the vessel did not depart materially from her base course.

"3. That when on the morning of 30 January, it became apparent that the gyro compass had an error of 1° west due allowances should have been made for this error and course altered accordingly.

"4. That the position by sunline obtained by the third mate at 1344 was at best a running fix and therefore of doubtful accuracy, particularly because no noon latitude was obtained. If maximum safety had been taken into consideration, a true course of 157° should have been applied in establishing this running fix which would have placed the vessel 5.5 miles inside the course line used. It should have been apparent by

Chief, MVI Division to  
Commandant

MVI  
15 May 1953  
(FAIRHOPE C-11 Bd)

this time that the FAIRHOPE could not clear the island on her present course of  $150^{\circ}$  by gyro and the master, being fully aware of the situation, should have taken appropriate action, particularly since an azimuth obtained by the third mate confirmed the  $1^{\circ}$  westerly gyro compass error.

"5. That the use of the small scale plotting sheet instead of the proper large scale coastal chart, H.O. 1193, was contrary to good navigational practices.

"6. That when the course was changed to  $170^{\circ}$  by gyro at 1527 the master failed to make a sufficient allowance for safety, considering the doubt as to the correct position of the vessel at that time.

"7. That after dense fog set in shortly after 1600 the speed should have been materially reduced to comply with Article 16 of the International Rules of the Road. Furthermore, had the vessel approached the island at a moderate speed and with the fathometer in operation there would have been sufficient time to detect the shoaling water and appropriate action could have been taken in time to avoid the grounding.

"8. That, with the master and two officers on the bridge, prudence should have dictated that one of the officers be stationed at the fathometer for the sole purpose of taking continuous readings as the vessel approached the island.

"9. That, when the vessel first struck, the master used poor judgment in assuming that she had struck the pinnacle rock to the westward of the island. He should have stopped his vessel dead in the water and taken soundings all around and otherwise have determined his exact position before attempting to proceed any farther.

"10. That all machinery and equipment was in good operating condition and no failure of machinery or equipment contributed to the casualty."

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 Board that Harold T. Hallman, master, License No. [REDACTED] be served with a charge

Confidential

MVI  
15 May 1953  
(FAIRHOPE C-11 SA)

of negligence under Title 46, U.S.C., Section 239 (RS 1450).  
Hearing was held in Room 1114, Pines Building, Long Beach,  
California, on 19 and 20 February 1953. (See File #13/S-2345).

"2. Because this casualty was caused entirely by human error  
and no failure of equipment contributed to the grounding, no  
further recommendation is deemed necessary."

REMARKS

6. It is assumed that a separate investigating officer's narrative report  
will be submitted with respect to the disappearance of chief steward Thurmond of  
the SS FAIRHOPE on 29 January 1953.

7. It is recommended that the Findings of Fact, Opinions, and Recommenda-  
tions of the Marine Board of Investigation be approved.

/s/ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

FIRST ENDORSEMENT TO MVI memorandum of 15 May 1953

M  
20 May 1953

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

APPROVED: May 21, 1953

/s/ [REDACTED]

A. G. RICHMOND  
Rear Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard  
Acting Commandant