

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

LVI  
26 February 1953  
(SB 10-D-1604 (OPTICIST)  
a-3 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; stranding of SB 10-D-1604 (OPTICIST),  
on New Jersey shore, on or about 5 December 1952, with loss of life

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

2. On 4 December 1952, the SB 10-D-1604 (OPTICIST), a steel hull, cuop keel, marconi rigged ketch, built in 1951 in Hamburg, Germany, length 56'6", beam 14'5", draft 8'6", equipped with a diesel auxiliary engine, departed from City Island, New York, N.Y. for Baltimore, Maryland, with four persons on board. While en route some bad weather was encountered but none of it severe, and at 0745 on 6 December 1952, the SB 10-D-1604 was sighted aground in Brigantine Inlet at the mouth of Brigantine Channel, New Jersey. The bodies of three persons from this vessel were later found dead and the owner/master has not been found but is presumed to have lost his life. The known dead are:

Charlotte La Barge  
Stephen G. La Barge, 3rd  
John Minshart Ahlberg, Jr.

Missing and presumed dead:

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. At 0745 ST, 6 December, 1952, a sailing yacht, later identified as the auxiliary ketch OPTICIST, 10D1604, which was en route from City Island, New York, N.Y. to Baltimore, Maryland, with four (4) persons aboard, was discovered apparently aground in Brigantine Inlet at the mouth of Brigantine Channel, New Jersey in latitude 39° 26' 30" north, longitude 74° 19' 30" west. The vessel was found to be abandoned, but three bodies were discovered along the beach at the northern end of Brigantine Island.

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"2. Missing and presumed dead is the owner, who has been identified as:

Stephen D. La Berge, Jr. Age [REDACTED]

The known dead are:

Charlotte La Berge, Age [REDACTED] wife of owner  
Stephen D. La Berge, 3rd, Age [REDACTED] son of owner  
John Winhart Ahlberg, Jr., Age [REDACTED] - guest - [REDACTED]

"3. No damage was sustained by the vessel's hull or fittings with the exception of minor damage to the guard rails on deck. Interior appointments and the auxiliary engine were damaged to a limited extent by water that had entered the vessel through the open companionway.

"4. The OPTI IST, Certificate of Award no. 1011604, is a steel hull, deep keel, marconi rigged ketch, built in 1951 in Hamburg, Germany; length 56'6", beam 14'5", draft 8'6" and is equipped with a 45 horsepower twelve diesel auxiliary engine. The owner of record is Stephen D. La Berge, [REDACTED]

"5. At 1130 ST, 4 December, 1952, the OPTI IST was observed to depart from Innesford Yacht Yard, City Island, New York, N.Y. by Philip J. Jones, yard superintendent. To his knowledge the boat was en route to Baltimore, Maryland and those aboard were; Stephen D. La Berge, his wife, a young man and a 10 year old boy. Since there are no known survivors or other witnesses nothing further is known concerning the events of the voyage.

"6. The weather between Sandy Hook and Brigantine beginning at noon on 4 December, 1952 was cloudy with sea early winds 10 to 15 knots, increasing to 20 knots by midnight. Seas were moderate with 8 foot swells reported at Straugat Light Vessel. By noon on 5 December, the wind had increased to nearly 40 knots from the southeast with rain and fog throughout the day. Rough seas were reported during the period and 10 foot swells were recorded at

harmageat light vessel. The weather moderated by 0800 6 December, wind directions were west 15 to 20 knots and seas and swells were slight. Small craft warnings were displayed at 0400, 4 December south of Manasquan, N.J. to Cape Hatteras and at 1100, 5 December from Block Island, N.I. to Cape Hatteras, N.J.

"7. The OPTIMIST was first sighted at 0745, 6 December, 1952 by Petroleum A. C. Jesswein of the Brigantine Police from a position on the beach approximately two miles from the northern tip of Brigantine Island. The incident was reported by radio to police headquarters and relayed to the Coast Guard Lifeboat Station, Atlantic City, N.J. Later that morning three bodies were discovered spread out along the beach from the northern tip of Brigantine Island to a point one mile south. Discovery of the first and southernmost body, which was that of Mrs. La Berge, was made at 1100 by [redacted] while walking up the beach towards the OPTIMIST. [redacted] returned to his home to notify the police and together with them returned to discover the body of Ahlberg 300 yards further up the beach and the body of young La Berge at the northern tip of the island. The vessel's 12 foot dinghy was discovered washed and partly filled with sand near the body of the La Berge boy. A pair of oars and a short boat hook were also found along the beach as were three (3) expended hand type blue rockets of German manufacture.

"8. Ahlberg's body was face up clothed in dungarees and a heavy leather jacket. He wore a yellow "Ine West" type lifejacket of foreign manufacture which required inflating by mouth. The jacket was not inflated when the body was discovered. Inside the jacket was a watertight bag containing two unexpended German hand type red flares and several matches.

"9. Mrs. La Berge and her son were face down and each wore a cork, block type life preserver of foreign make that had slid up over their heads. Both bodies were heavily clothed.

"10. Shallow water prevented the Coast Guard boat from Little Egg Lifeboat Station from going alongside when it arrived on the scene at 1200 on 6 December, however at [redacted] USCG and Lanson, [redacted] USCG, boarded the vessel from a pulling boat brought by truck to the area from Atlantic City. After determining there were no survivors or other

bodies aboard a general inspection was made. The vessel was listing to starboard about 45 degrees and the swells were breaking around but not over the vessel. The binnacle cover was found lying in the cockpit and the compass was observed to be missing. The heading was estimated to be due north and the rudder was hard right. The main cabin hatch was open and a small burned area was noticed on the top of the hatch. An expended blue rocket of the same type as was found on the beach was discovered lying on deck. The jib was full up and close hauled. The mainsail was a little more than half way up, however, the halyard had been cast off but the halyard reel was jammed preventing the sail from coming down. The main sheet was slack. The dizen sail was secured with cover on and the boom cracked. Various articles were found afloat in the cabins and there was some water in the bilges. Before departing the vessel at 1430 the jib and mainsheet were lowered to prevent damage and an envelope and a picture of the vessel were removed for identification purposes.

"11. The three bodies found on the beach, having been removed to a mortuary by the Brigantine Police, were examined at 1700, 6 December, by Dr. [REDACTED] County Physician, Atlantic County. According to the Certificates of Death, issued by the State Department of Health of New Jersey, Ahlberg died by drowning and Mrs. La Berge and her son died from exposure and exhaustion.

"12. Efforts of the Coast Guard to refloat the PT-187 on 6 and 7 December were unsuccessful. On 8 December, [REDACTED] took charge of the vessel under authority of [REDACTED], father of the missing owner. At 1245, 9 December, 1952, the PT-187 was refloated by tug S. L. SLOAN and towed to Atlantic City.

"13. Inspection of the vessel by the Board disclosed her to be fully equipped for offshore navigation and piloting, including all necessary charts and publications for the route from New York to Baltimore, however no record of navigation was found either on charts or in the vessel's log.

"14. [REDACTED], friend of Stephen La Berge, testified that the La Berges and Ahlberg arrived at his home from California on 29 November, 1952. On 30 November, the previously arranged purchase of the

OPTIMIST was completed and on the evening of 1 December, the party moved aboard the vessel intending to depart for Baltimore, Maryland at 1000, 2 December. [REDACTED] did not see or hear from them again. From discussions of the intended voyage, [REDACTED] understood that La Barge planned to stay 10 miles offshore while proceeding under power to Baltimore where he would engage a crew member. [REDACTED] was unable to testify to La Barge's ability as a seaman, but was aware that he had served in the "Seabees" during the war and had sailed in small sailboats on the California coast.

"15. The Board also heard testimony from fisherman [REDACTED], who claimed that at 1630 4 December, while fishing in Great Bay, 1 mile south of Fish Island, he sighted the masts and sails of a vessel in a position approximately 1/2 mile south of Little Egg Inlet Buoy "P" (LL 1460). At 0730 on 6 December, while navigating the sloughs north of Brigantine Island Merrill claimed further that he sighted the OPTIMIST aground in Brigantine Inlet and recognized it as the same vessel whose masts he had seen on 4 December, 1952."

The Board made the following conclusions:

"1. In the absence of any known survivors or of any records of the voyage the cause of the casualty cannot be determined.

"2. From the evidence adduced, however, it is considered that the vessel stranded some time during the morning hours of 5 December, 1952, at or near the position in which it was found and further that the three persons whose bodies were discovered on the beach lost their lives by drowning or exhaustion and exposure in an attempt to reach the shore after the stranding occurred.

"3. In establishing the time of stranding it is considered that the maximum average speed of advance possible in the light of weather conditions and design characteristics of the vessel would be eight knots. Since the distance from the point of departure is no less than 97 miles, the earliest possible moment of stranding would be 2330, 4 December, 1952.

"4. It is considered unlikely that anyone would trade the comparative safety of the vessel for that of the dinghy unless threatened with impending destruction. There being no evidence of any other danger such as fire or foundering it is presumed that the fear of the vessel breaking up on the shoal prompted those aboard to abandon.

"5. The relative positions of the bodies on the dinghy as found on the beach tend to support a conclusion that those three, at least, left the vessel together in the dinghy and such is the belief of the Board. In this connection the opinion of the County Physician that Ahlberg's death occurred 24 hours prior to the other two was rejected since it was apparently based solely on the fact that the bodies of the woman and the boy showed no evidence of having been attacked by animal life as in the case of Ahlberg. The record discloses, however, that Ahlberg's body was found face upward, so that the eaten and decomposed areas lay exposed whereas the bodies of the other two were found face downward, heavily clothed and with the life preservers in both instances covering the head.

"6. There is no evidence to indicate the fate of the owner, but it is the belief of the Board that he was lost prior to the stranding. Under the circumstances it is considered unlikely that the vessel would have been abandoned had the owner been present. If, on the other hand the vessel was abandoned under his direction, he would undoubtedly have accompanied his wife and child and his body would probably have been recovered with the others.

"7. The absence of the compass suggests it was taken in the dinghy when the vessel was abandoned. The presence of more valuable articles aboard the vessel when it was found precludes the possibility that the compass was stolen by an unknown person and the construction of the binnacle would have prevented it from being thrown from the vessel by heavy seas.

"8. The position of stranding was considered an unfortunate trick of fate. Although desolate, it lies only four miles from the Coast Guard lookout tower at Little Eg. Lifeboat Station and just

two miles from the populated outskirts of Brigantine, N.J. While normally visible in clear atmosphere, the weather such as prevailed throughout 5 December would completely obscure the area.

"9. For the OPTIMIST to have been in Little Egg Inlet at 1630, 4 December as suggested by the testimony of the fisherman would have necessitated an improbable average speed of 18 knots and the possibility was therefore rejected.

"10. The assistance rendered by the Coast Guard following the casualty was considered satisfactory in all respects. Although the time between the receipt of notice thereof and the arrival of the first Coast Guard unit on the scene was considered to be excessive, it in no way affected the ultimate result.

"11. It is further considered that the owner of the OPTIMIST exercised poor judgment either in failing to avail himself of weather forecasts, or, having done so, for departing on an offshore voyage in an unfamiliar vessel knowing such weather to exist along the route."

5. The Board made the following recommendations:

"1. Since the presence of unapproved equipment constituted the only violation of law and in the absence of any evidence of foul play, it is recommended no further action be taken and the case be closed."

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6. It is recommended that the findings of Fact, Conclusions, and Recommendations of the Marine Board of Investigation be approved.

/s/ [Redacted]  
P. A. OVENDEN

FIRST DEPUTY CHIEF OF DIVISION memorandum of 26 February 1953

RECEIVED  
2 March 1953

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/ [Redacted]  
H. C. SHEPHEARD

APPROVED: MAR. 3, 1953

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