

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
WASHINGTON, D. C.

NVI
27 February 1953
(QUARTETTE - G-14 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; stranding and loss of
SS QUARTETTE on Pearl and Hermes Reef, Territory of
Hawaii, 21 December 1952

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 16 December 1952, the SS QUARTETTE, a Liberty type vessel, departed from Honolulu with approximately 9,000 tons of milo maize in bulk, consigned to the U. S. Army in Korea. The Master retained charge of the navigation of the vessel and on 20 December, miscalculated the time of arrival and distance off Pearl and Hermes Reef. The Master calculated that the QUARTETTE would pass nine or ten miles off Hermes Reef at noon on 21 December, while in point of fact she stranded on this Reef at 0710 21 December 1952, and has since been considered a constructive total loss. The weather conditions immediately preceding and at the time of the stranding were favorable. No loss of life or injuries were sustained as a result of this casualty.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. That the SS QUARTETTE is a U. S. flag Liberty type cargo vessel of 7,198 gross tons, official number 246279, built in 1944. The owners and operators are Standard Steamship Company, Ltd., 129 South State Street, Dover, Delaware. On the voyage commencing at Galveston, Texas, on 22 November 1952, the Master was Christoforos Catsambis, License No. 49662, and the vessel was on voyage charter to Military Sea Transportation Service, laden with approximately 9,000 tons of animal fodder (milo maize) in bulk, consigned to the U. S. Army in Korea. Last Coast Guard inspection was at Baltimore, Maryland, 13 November 1952.

- "2. That at 0710 (zone time plus eleven), 21 December 1952, the SS QUARTETTE stranded on the east side of Pearl and Hermes Reef in position Latitude $27^{\circ} - 51' - 45''$ North, Longitude $175^{\circ}43' - 12''$ West. The vessel suffered extensive bottom damage and immediate attempts to refloat using the engines were unsuccessful.
- "3. That the crew consisting of thirty-six (36) men were removed on 22 December 1952, without injury or loss of life, by boats from the SS FRONTENAC VICTORY and landed at Midway Island.
- "4. That the oceangoing tug ONO of 517 gross tons, operated by Isloway Ltd., Honolulu, T. H., arrived at the scene of the stranding 25 December 1952, put a line on board and dropped both her anchors in an effort to prevent the QUARTETTE from going further on the reef. That the Master, Chief Engineer, and Radio Operator of the SS QUARTETTE assisted in this operation.
- "5. That on 3 January 1953 during stormy weather, the tug ONO parted both anchors at the shanks and the SS QUARTETTE was driven broadside on the reef, where battering by heavy seas caused further extensive damage to the hull. On 6 January 1953, the vessel was declared a constructive total loss by the owners.
- "6. That the SS QUARTETTE called at Honolulu for bunkers, arriving at about noon, 16 December 1952 and departing at about 2230 the same day.
- "7. That when the SS QUARTETTE departed Honolulu it was apparently seaworthy, with the navigation equipment, consisting of gyro compass, magnetic compasses, fathometer, radio direction finder, chronometers, sextants and radio equipment, in operating condition. The vessel was manned by licensed and certificated personnel as required by her certificate of inspection.
- "8. That upon departure from Honolulu, the Master set various courses to pass south and west of the Island of Oahu and north and east of the Island of Kauai, to a position on a Great Circle Course in Latitude $22^{\circ} - 25'$ North, longitude $159^{\circ}21'$ West.

"9. That the Master assumed all responsibility for the navigation of the vessel.

"10. That the First, Second and Third Mates took some celestial observations, during their watches on 18, 19 and 20 December, and plotted them on a plotting sheet.

"11. That the Master took various star observations on the evening of 18 and 19 December and meridian observations and sun lines on 18, 19 and 20 December and plotted the noon positions on U.S.C. & G. S. Chart No. 4,000.

"12. That none of the Mates checked, nor were required to check the Master's navigational work.

"13. That the last fix before the grounding was obtained by celestial observation at noon, 20 December 1952, which was Latitude $27^{\circ}-04'$ North - Longitude $172^{\circ}-21'$ West.

"14. That the Master set a course of 288° , true from the 20 December noon position to pass 9 to 10 miles north of Pearl and Hermes Reef which he calculated would be abeam at about noon, 21 December.

"15. That the Master's calculated estimated time of arrival off Pearl and Hermes Reef was in error by approximately five (5) hours.

"16. That the Master expected to be in the vicinity of Pearl and Hermes Reef during daylight hours.

"17. That the Master planned on obtaining a fix before arriving in the vicinity of Pearl and Hermes Reef, and if unobtainable, to give the area a wider berth.

"18. That the Master was called by the Second Mate, [REDACTED], shortly after midnight, 21 December, due to a shift of wind to the northwest, at which time he went on the bridge and changed the course to 290° true, to allow for leeway.

"19. That when the Chief Mate, [REDACTED], came on watch at 0400, 21 December, he did not acquaint himself with the ship's position in relation to Pearl and Hermes Reef, or other dangers to navigation.

"20. That on the night of 20-21 December, the Master did not write any night orders, or otherwise leave instructions for the Mate coming on watch.

"21. That shortly after 0700 on the morning of 21 December, the lookout, [REDACTED], standing his watch on the flying bridge observed what he described as a "white line" on the water ahead of the ship, which he reported to the Chief Mate who was then standing on the lower starboard bridge wing, and then the Chief Mate went to the flying bridge to observe the reported object.

"22. That the Chief Mate took no action until after the vessel struck the reef, at which time he ordered full astern on the engine.

"23. That the vessel struck the reef on a heading of 290° true, at a speed of approximately 10.5 knots, 62 revolutions.

"24. That the weather conditions at the time of the casualty were: wind northwest, force 7, moderate northwest sea and swell, partly overcast, early morning twilight, good visibility.

"25. That following the grounding, the Master attempted to refloat the vessel by using engine maneuvers on the 21st of December, without success and that he dropped both anchors under the forefoot.

"26. That on the morning of the 22nd of December, the starboard lifeboat was lowered in the water, secured alongside by painters fore and aft, and the whole crew embarked.

"27. That water entered the boat through the hull or its fittings covering the floor boards in a matter of minutes, and that because of this condition the crew reboarded the vessel."

4.

The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. That the primary cause of this casualty was that the Master, [REDACTED] failed to take effective measures to prevent his vessel, the SS QUARTETTE, from stranding on Pearl and Hermes Reef.

"2. That the Master, [REDACTED], was incompetent in that he did not administer, and have the navigation conducted, in accordance with accepted established practices.

"3. That the Chief Mate, [REDACTED], was negligent in that he failed to stand the 0100-0800 watch on 21 December 1952, on board the SS QUARTETTE in accordance with accepted established practices.

"4. That the Chief Mate, [REDACTED], was incompetent in that he made no attempt to prevent the vessel from striking the reef after sighting a possible obstruction on the vessel's course."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. That [REDACTED] Master, SS QUARTETTE, be charged with negligence and incompetence under the provisions of R.S. 4450 looking to the suspension or revocation of his license.

"2. That [REDACTED], Chief Mate, SS QUARTETTE, be charged with negligence and incompetence under the provisions of R.S. 4450 looking to the suspension or revocation of his license.

"3. That Headquarters review the procedures involved whereby two obviously incompetent individuals, namely, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], obtained unlimited Master's licenses.

"4. That Headquarters should verify whether or not the lifeboat inspection conducted at the last annual inspection, 13 November 1952, at Baltimore, Maryland, was adequate."

REMARKS

6. The Opinions paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Board relating to "accepted established practices" are not predicated on any evidence in the record of investigation or the Board's Findings of Fact and accordingly such references in the Opinions are not concurred with. In this connection, it should be observed that the Master is

Chief, NY Division to
Commandant

NY
27 February 1953
(QUARTETTE - C-1) Bd)

responsible for the safe navigation of his vessel and the delegation of any duties to subordinate officers under this responsibility remains within the discretion of the Master to be exercised in his sound judgment for the safety of his vessel.

7. Recommendation paragraph 3 of the Board is disapproved. The procedures under statute law and regulations for the licensing of officers for service on private vessels would not permit the issuance of unlimited master's licenses to any obviously incompetent individuals. There is no evidence in the record and there is nothing in the Board's report which would indicate otherwise. Coast Guard Headquarters will, however, review the records of the Master and Chief Mate of the QUARTETTE in order to determine whether any requirements under the statutes and regulations pursuant thereto were not fully carried out in the issuance of licenses to said persons.

8. The Recommendation paragraph 4 of the Board that Headquarters verify whether or not the lifeboat inspection conducted at the last annual inspection, 13 November 1952 at Baltimore, Maryland, was adequate, should have been supported by the Board's Opinions and Conclusions indicating the particulars and scope of the suspected inadequacy of the lifeboat inspection. Such information should have included the use of the lifeboat and its condition on board the vessel as affected by weather and other operating conditions which might have had an effect between the dates of the inspection and its use following the stranding.

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

/s/ [REDACTED]
P. A. OVENDEN

Chief, MVI Division to
Commandant

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(QUARTETTE - C-14, Bd)

FIRST INCORPORATION TO MVI memorandum of 27 February 1953

M
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Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/ [REDACTED]
R. A. SMYTH
Acting

APPROVED: MAR 3 1953

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