

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

ADDRESS REPLY TO
COMMANDANT
U. S. COAST GUARD
HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.



MVI

10 AUG 1955

(SOUTHERN DISTRICTS -
a-S Bd)

Commandant's Action on

Marine Board of Investigation; M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS, disappearance at sea, subsequent to 5 December 1954, with all persons on board

1. Pursuant to the provisions of Title 46 C.F.R. Part 136, the record of the Marine Board of Investigation convened to investigate subject casualty, together with its Findings of Fact, Opinions, and Recommendations, has been reviewed.
2. The SOUTHERN DISTRICTS, propelled by internal combustion engines, of 3338 g.t., a former U. S. Navy LST, built in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1944 and converted during 1949 for the carriage of bulk cargo in coastwise merchant service, departed from Port Sulphur, Louisiana, on 2 December 1954 with a full load of bulk sulphur destined for Bucksport, Maine. At 1350 on 5 December 1954 the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was in radio communication with WOE RCA Station and at approximately the same time was overtaken and passed by the GULF KEYS. During the night of 5 December off the Florida and Carolina coasts the wind from a southeasterly direction reached force 7, shifting the next day to northerly, force 8, accompanied by squalls with wind gusts of force 9 and rough seas. The weather conditions moderated on 7 December. The SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was expected to arrive at Bucksport on 7 or 8 December and the master was to report 72 hours in advance of the estimated time of arrival. No word was received from nor was the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS sighted and identified at any time subsequent to 1600 5 December 1954. The owners, after making due allowance for bad weather, endeavored on 9 December 1954 to communicate with the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS by radio. At 2130 11 December, the owners informed the Coast Guard of their failure to reach or receive word from the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS, whereupon the Coast Guard instituted a communications, surface and air search which continued until 20 December with negative results. It is evident that the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was overcome by casualty sometime after 1600 5 December 1954 and that her entire crew, comprising 23 officers and seamen, perished with the vessel.

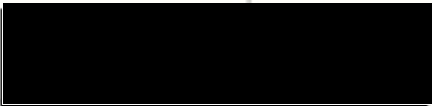
REMARKS

3. 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 with which such vessels would have to comply 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 with respect to additional safety requirements necessary as a condition to the issuance of certificates of inspection to such vessels in order that the greatest possible use in commercial service might be made of surplus Government vessels.
4. The M/V SOUTHERN ISLES, a converted LST, with a cargo of iron ore on board, en route from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Chester, Pennsylvania, on 3 October 1952, foundered during heavy weather. Immediately thereafter the standards of safety of former LST's operating as merchant vessels were again reviewed and as a result, additional strengthening of all such vessels was required, and the density of cargo to be carried was limited not to exceed a density corresponding to 26 cubic feet per ton. Instructions were also issued that because of the relatively light scantlings of LST's, 1/4 inch deck plating outboard of hatches and 3/8 inch bottom plating were to be replaced when reduced from the original thickness by more than 15 per cent instead of the more customary 25 per cent. These requirements were calculated to insure the structural suitability of former LST's for service as merchant vessels in the interests of safety to life.
5. The SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was converted to a bulk cargo carrier in 1949. She was originally constructed as an LST, a Naval combatant vessel, and was therefore not designed or constructed originally in conformance with established principles and requirements normally applicable to merchant vessels. In her conversion to a bulk carrier and in subsequent structural modifications which were required as a result of consideration of the SOUTHERN ISLES' loss, requirements based on known experience with respect to any inherent deficiencies in the vessel's design, construction, and maintenance were considered and instituted to insure that the vessel could be operated in the proposed service with safety. The record does not indicate any negligence with respect to developing and establishing safety standards and reviewing and approving conversion plans from the standpoint of structural and safety characteristics of vessels. However, it would appear that to some extent an incorrect assessment was made of the structural qualities of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS for the practical operation of such vessel in the bulk carrier trade.

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6. Paragraph 45 of the Board's Opinions to the effect that the inspectors concerned exercised poor judgment is not supported by the record and therefore is not approved. Considering the fact that the Board formulated its opinions in retrospect, my appraisal of the record of investigation, together with supplementary information obtained, leads me to the view that, under the circumstances, such personnel properly performed their duties under the statutes and regulations established thereunder.
7. The cause or causes for the disappearance of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS are incapable of exact ascertainment. Whatever the cause or causes, it is probable the structural conditions of the vessel contributed thereto.
8. The Board in paragraph 49 recommended that converted vessels of construction similar to the M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS should not be certificated by the Coast Guard to carry bulk cargoes of high density on ocean or coastwise routes. Authorization for the operation of LST-type vessels for unlimited ocean and coastwise routes was withdrawn several months ago following the disappearance of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS. The policy of the Coast Guard not to issue certificates of inspection permitting cargo-carrying operations by converted, manned LST-type vessels on unlimited ocean or coastwise routes will be continued. It should be noted that there are many LST-type vessels operating under foreign flags without restriction.
9. In connection with Recommendations, paragraphs 50 and 51, the requirement for crew lists for vessels engaged in coastwise voyages is covered by 46 C.F.R. 14.05-20, and the requirement for position reporting of vessels while at sea is now the subject of pending legislation.
10. Subject to the foregoing remarks, the Findings of Fact, Opinions, and Recommendations of the Marine Board of Investigation convened to investigate subject casualty are approved.


A. C. RICHMOND
Vice Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard
Commandant

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. At 1055 on 2 December 1954, the M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS sailed from Port Sulphur, Louisiana for Bucksport, Maine with a cargo of bulk sulphur and subsequently disappeared with the entire crew.
2. The M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS, Off. No. 258240, is an all welded steel hull (Ex - L.S.T.) cargo vessel of 3337.72 gross tons; 314.3 feet registered length; 327'9" overall; 50 feet beam; 24.1 feet depth; powered with two 900 horsepower General Motors Diesel Engines; built Leavenworth, Kansas in 1944, owned by the Philadelphia and Norfolk Steamship Co., 103 Pennsylvania Building, Wilmington, Delaware and operated by the Southern Steamship Company, 103 Pennsylvania Building, Wilmington, Delaware.
3. The SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was purchased from the U. S. Maritime Administration in 1948 or early 1949 by the Philadelphia and Norfolk Steamship Co. It was converted into a cargo carrier in 1949, as per plans approved by the U.S. Coast Guard, and was classed by the American Bureau of Shipping as A-1 for Coastwise Service, North and South America and West Indies.
4. In converting this vessel the tank deck was dropped between frames 16 and 28 and the inboard longitudinal wingtank bulkheads port and starboard sides were cut away and sloping bulkheads installed. Between frames 28 and 35 the inboard wingtank longitudinal bulkheads port and starboard sides were also cut away and sloping bulkheads installed. The bow ramp door was welded up and new collision bulkhead installed at frame eight and two additional transverse bulkheads installed at frame spaces 10 and 22½. The cargo space was divided into two cargo holds by the erection of a transverse bulkhead at frame space 22½. Eight hatches were cut in the main deck; four leading to each hold. One piece 3/8" steel hatch covers, hinged for raising and lowering were provided for each cargo hatch. Gaskets and dog attachments were provided for securing watertightness when hatches were closed and secured for sea. Four sets of kingposts were erected on deck; one forward of No. 1 hatch; one between Nos. 2 and 3 hatches; one between Nos. 4 and 5 hatches; and one between Nos. 6 and 7 hatches. These kingposts were for raising and lowering the hatch covers.
5. The initial annual inspection was made at Norfolk, Virginia, and the vessel was certificated on 7 July 1949, to operate as a cargo vessel on oceans, not to exceed 200 miles offshore and the Gulf of Mexico. The 200 mile limit on the ocean route was extended to permit direct voyages between ports in North and South America.
6. After the loss of the M/V SOUTHERN ISLES on 5 October 1951, additional strengthening requirements, as contained in Exhibit 12, were placed against the vessel by the Coast Guard. These additional requirements were taken in hand by the owners and were completed in February 1952, and

on 14 February 1952, the vessel was recertificated after annual inspection at Norfolk, Virginia, with no change in route. The cargo carried was, however, limited to a density of 26 cubic feet per ton to preclude weights exceeding 1900 pounds per square foot being brought to bear on tank tops.

7. After 14 February 1952, the vessel was continued in the bulk cargo trade, carrying cargoes of Sulphur, Phosphate Rock, Commercial Fertilizers and Iron Ore, and underwent annual inspections on 24 February 1953 and 9 January 1954. Drydockings were made on 8 August 1952; 20 February 1953; 9 January 1954; 7 April 1954, and 30 November 1954, to effect periodical and casualty repairs and to comply with yearly drydockings, as required by Coast Guard regulations.

8. The last annual inspection was made between 30 December 1953 and 9 January 1954 at Norfolk, Virginia. During this annual inspection, the vessel was drydocked and underwater body examined. While hauled out, defective bottom shell plating on port side forward in way of No. 2 void space was cut out and renewed and defective areas of shell plating aft on port and starboard side, in way of the propellers was renewed. Wasted seams in bottom plating were chipped out and rewelded, as found necessary. During annual inspection, the main deck and hold bulkhead were drilled in approximately 12 locations, calibrated and found satisfactory. Twelve hold pillars in No. 1 hold and six in No. 2 hold were renewed. Twenty feet of hatch girder starboard side and 3 shell stringers port and starboard side No. 1 hold were renewed. Six escape hatch tops, including closing gear were renewed and all 2-1/2" sounding pipes, Nos. 1 and 2 holds, were renewed. An examination of the vessels hull, external and internal, including internal structural members, was made and found satisfactory after renewals or repairs, as required, were completed. All life saving equipment, fire fighting equipment and navigation equipment, including steering gear were examined and after repairs and/or renewals, as listed on Form N.C.C. 835, Exhibit No. 59 were tested and found satisfactory and vessel in compliance with Coast Guard regulations.

9. The vessels life-saving equipment consisted of two Globe American Metal lifeboats; builders, Nos. 2564 and 3012, dimensions 22' x 7.5' x 3.17', 313 cubic feet capacity, and allowed 31 persons each. The boats were each equipped with sets of Welin Sheath Screw davits, Serial Nos. 543AL; 544AR, 932AR, and 677AL, and at the last annual inspection, boats and davits were tested, as required by Coast Guard regulations, by lowering to a point near the water, loaded to allowed capacity, and then lowered into the water until afloat. The two life-boats were also equipped, as required by section 94-20-10 (a) of subchapter 1. 46, C.F.R. and all loose equipment was properly stowed in the lifeboats. Life preservers were provided for all persons allowed to be carried, as required by Coast Guard Regulations.

10. The fire fighting equipment consisted of 3 motor fire pumps with 3" fire mains and 10 hydrants with 500 feet of 1-1/2" hose and 10 nozzles. The hydrants were located on the vessel so as to comply with Coast Guard regulations. The vessel was equipped with a fixed system of fifty-five 50-pound bottles of CO₂ for smothering system for cargo holds; six 50-pound CO₂ extinguishers for machinery space and boiler room and sixteen 15-pound CO₂ portable extinguishers and two 1-quart carbon tetrachloride extinguishers dispersed over the vessel to comply with Coast Guard regulations. The General Alarm system, Line Carrying Gun and Mackay 401-A portable radio were also in compliance with applicable Coast Guard regulations.

11. The vessels radio equipment was examined by a representative of the Federal Communications Commission on 8 January 1954 at Norfolk and found to comply with the radio provisions of the international convention for safety of life at sea, London 1948 and after this examination the Federal Communications Commission authorized the OCMI at Norfolk, Virginia to issue a Safety Radiotelegraphy Certificate, to the vessel. This certificate was issued by the OCMI at Norfolk, Virginia to the M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS on 25 January 1954, to expire on 9 January 1955.

12. After completion of Annual Inspection on 9 January 1954, the vessel continued in the bulk cargo trade on the Atlantic Coast, West Indies and Gulf of Mexico. On 7 April 1954 it was necessary to drydock the vessel at Norfolk, Virginia, to renew the bottom shell plating in the way of forepeak tank, install a doubler in way of No. 3 Port double bottom; install a doubler in way of No. 3 starboard double bottom; install a doubler in way of No. 3 wing tank, and install doubler in way of main engine circulating tank. The drydock examination record on form CG 840-H did not indicate that any repairs other than a notation that minor bottom repairs were made and another notation that underwater body was examined and found in satisfactory condition.

13. On 19 November at about 0835 while the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was proceeding up Tampa Bay on a voyage from Port Sulphur, La. to Tampa, Fla., with a cargo of sulphur, the vessel grounded on the eastern edge of Cut "C" in a position 1000 yards, 82° true from Hillsborough Cut "C" Beacon 12.

14. The vessel was refloated at 1921 on 19 November 1954 with assistance of Tugs EVA and ROY and use of main engines. Surveys were made after docking in Tampa, while vessel was afloat for grounding damages by an American Bureau of Shipping Surveyor; U. S. Salvage representative and U. S. Coast Guard Marine Inspector.

15. The log book, when examined by the surveyor at Tampa, showed that soundings of all tanks and bilges were taken at regular intervals during discharge of cargo and the soundings disclosed that the vessel was not making water. The starboard main engine reduction gear was noticed to be noisy during and after grounding by the Chief Engineer, and this fact was reported to the American Bureau of Shipping Surveyor. An examination of the

gears disclosed that the after roller bearing on the astern pinion gear shaft was defective and this bearing was renewed. The port main engine reduction gear was also examined and found satisfactory. After repairs to the starboard engine reduction gear were completed, a dock trial was made which the American Bureau of Shipping Surveyor considered satisfactory, and he recommended that the vessel be retained in her present class, subject to further examination on drydock at the first convenient opportunity.

16. The report of the Coast Guard Marine Inspector did not show any damage resulting to the starboard engine from the grounding, nor did the master's report of the grounding, on Form CG 2692, list damage to the engines. The Coast Guard Investigating Officer's report stated that the vessel apparently suffered no damage from the grounding.

17. After completion of engine repairs and dock trial the vessel loaded a cargo of Phosphate Rock at Tampa for New Orleans. On the voyage from Tampa to New Orleans the log book showed bilges and tanks were sounded daily at 1000 and there was no indication from the soundings that the vessel was making water. The vessel docked at Harvey, Louisiana at 0346 on 24 November, 1954. At about noon on 24 November 1954, the stevedores reported that there was damp cargo in the No. 1 hold. Soundings taken at the time showed approximately four feet of water in No. 1 hold.

18. After discharge of cargo, a survey disclosed that the water had entered No. 3 double bottom tank through holed bottom plating and holed No. 3 double bottom tank top. Approximately 415 tons of Phosphate Rock were damaged by water.

19. The vessel was drydocked on 26 November 1954 at the Todd Shipyard Corporation yard, New Orleans. An examination of the vessel's underwater body was made by an American Bureau of Shipping Surveyor and a Coast Guard Marine Inspector. The following repairs to the underwater body were found necessary:

- a. Bottom shell plates A strake port and starboard side were found holed and were renewed between frames 19 and 22 with 1/2" plating. A 12" x 48" x 3/8" doubler was installed over a hole in shell plating on the inside of No. 3 double bottom in B strake starboard side between frames 19 and 22. These repairs were attributed to grounding by the U. S. Salvage Surveyor.
- b. A 38" x 48" x 3/8" doubler was installed on D strake, port side forward of frame 31 over small hole in plating.
- c. A 51" - 0" x 78" - 6" x 1/2" doubler was installed over holed plating on A strake, port side between frames 34 and 35.
- d. A sharp indentation at centerline in way of forepeak tank was laced welded and two doublers 9" x 9" were installed over holes in way of forepeak tank inside of tank.

e. New packing glands were installed on port and starboard stern tubes at outboard end and glands repacked.

f. A crack in port rudder approximately 8" long was chipped out and welded.

g. A 68" x 70" x 1/2" doubler was installed over holed plating on D strake starboard side between frames 34 and 35.

h. A 68" x 61" x 1/2" doubler was installed over a hole in shell plating B strake starboard side between frames 34 and 35.

i. A 14" x 30" x 3/8" doubler was installed over hole in A strake starboard side forward of frame No. 19.

j. No. 3 double bottom tank top found wasted and holed in several places. Tank top plating between port and starboard sloping plates connection with tank top and frames 19 and 22 renewed with 1/2" plating.

k. Two Swedish iron plates each 18" x 40" x 3/8" installed on hull above port and starboard propellers.

l. The forward ladders in No. 1 hold was renewed and the after ladder repaired.

m. Port and starboard propellers removed and, new wearing sleeve installed and propellers replaced.

n. Four nut lugs and 8-3/4" x 3" monel studs on one stern stuffing box flange renewed.

o. A 24" x 24" x 1/4" doubler was installed over hole in port longitudinal bulkhead in No. 1 cargo hold.

20. During the examination of the underwater body the shell plating was drilled and gauged as follows:

Forepeak port side bottom plating gauged 3/8" - one hole drilled.

A strake between frames 20 and 21, port side gauged 5/16" - one hole drilled. This plate renewed.

D strake, port, near frame 31 gauged 11/32" - one hole drilled.

A strake, port side between frames 34 and 35, gauged 5/16".

B strake, starboard side between frames 20 and 21 gauged 5/16".

21. In three cases the plating calibrated 5/16", which exceeded the 15% allowable depreciation. After completion of repairs all bottom and double bottom tank top repairs were tested and found watertight.

22. Three seamen who left the vessel at New Orleans prior to sailing on 2 December 1954, stated that their reason for leaving the vessel was concern as to the vessel's seaworthiness. They testified that the vessel's structure was very rusty and deteriorated and that the vessel was having frequent steering gear trouble and engine breakdowns at sea. Testimony was also given by them that doublers were welded over cracks in the main deck at sea and that a fish bolt had been inserted in a hole in wasted bottom shell plating, while the vessel was afloat in the Port of Corpus Christi, about the end of October or first part of November 1954, and that cargo had been loaded without drydocking vessel to make proper repairs.

23. According to the stevedore foreman, who loaded the vessel at Port Sulphur, instructions as to the way the Sulphur was to be loaded and the amount to be loaded in each hatch, were received from the master on a piece of paper and that after the vessel was loaded the piece of paper was thrown away. They also stated that the master wanted about 4 feet trim by the stern if possible.

24. The draft was taken by the weightometer clerk after completion of loading. Captain [redacted] National Cargo Bureau Surveyor, examined the vessel prior to loading at Chalmette, La., and issued a certificate to load Sulphur after the examination. He stated that this examination was made after dark and that he did not enter the holds but used a portable cargo light to view the holds from the main deck. He did not examine the hatch covers to determine whether or not the gaskets were in good condition. After the vessel had completed loading he took the draft and measured the freeboard on the dock side (port side) assisted by the Mate. He did not measure the freeboard on the starboard side.

25. The vessel sailed from Port Sulphur, La., at 1055 on 2 December 1954, with a crew of 23 men, including the master. The names of the crew, next of kin, and their addresses are as follows:

[redacted], Master; [redacted]
Norfolk 8, Virginia.

[redacted] Chief Mate; [redacted]
[redacted] Norfolk 2, Virginia.

[redacted], 2nd Mate; [redacted]
Virginia Beach, Virginia.

[redacted] 3rd Mate; [redacted]
[redacted] Portsmouth, Virginia.

[redacted] Radio Operator; [redacted]
[redacted] Miami Beach, Florida.

[redacted] Chief Engineer; [redacted] Scranton,
North Carolina.

[redacted] 1st Asst. Engineer; [redacted]
[redacted] Havana, Cuba.

[REDACTED] 2nd. Asst. Engr.; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], New Orleans, La.

[REDACTED], 3rd Asst. Engr; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Richmond, Virginia.

[REDACTED] AB; [REDACTED]
Savannah, Georgia.

[REDACTED] AB, [REDACTED] Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania.

[REDACTED] O.S.; [REDACTED]
Cefollo, Greece.

[REDACTED] OS; [REDACTED] South
Carolina.

[REDACTED] 2nd Cook; [REDACTED] Panama
City, Panama.

[REDACTED] Oiler; Owner's records indicate next of kin as [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Savannah, Georgia. Other infor-
mation developed by owners indicates Mrs. [REDACTED] is
Mrs. [REDACTED] Corpus Christi, Texas. Also has
[REDACTED] in May this year in Yugoslavia. [REDACTED] is presently
enroute to this country to be with Mrs. [REDACTED] Also has [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Baltimore 28, Maryland.

[REDACTED] Messman; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Tampa, Florida.

[REDACTED] Oiler; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Whistler, Alabama.

[REDACTED] Messman; [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] New Orleans, La.

[REDACTED] AB; Sister; [REDACTED]
Jackson Heights, New Jersey.

[REDACTED] Oiler; [REDACTED]
Fordyce, Arkansas.

[REDACTED] AB; [REDACTED]
West Lake, La.

[REDACTED] AB; [REDACTED]
Spartansburg, South Carolina.

[REDACTED] Cook; [REDACTED]
Thomson, Georgia.

26. The above crew list was submitted by the owners as the entire crew of the vessel, as far as could be ascertained by them, when the vessel sailed from Port Sulphur, Louisiana on 2 December 1954. No crew list on Form 735T was submitted to the Coast Guard prior to sailing by the master and no evidence has been adduced by the board establishing whether or not all of the above persons listed actually joined the vessel and were on board and sailed with the vessel.

27. The vessel proceeded down the Mississippi with River Pilot, Captain [REDACTED] conning and from Pilottown through South Pass with Bar Pilot, Captain [REDACTED] conning. During passage down the River and through South Pass both pilots stated that vessel had a slight list to starboard but appeared to be shipshape and handled in a normal manner. Neither the master nor any other member of the crew indicated to either pilot that there was anything wrong with the vessel.

28. The bar pilot was dropped at the South Pass bar and the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS proceeded on her voyage bound for Bucksport, Maine. Weather reports indicated that good weather was encountered in the Gulf and through the Straits of Florida. The vessel was last sighted off Jupiter Inlet on afternoon of 5 December 1954 by the S.S. GULF KEYS, at which time the GULF KEYS overtook and passed the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS at about 1330. While in sight the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was proceeding on its course and there was nothing in its behavior which would indicate to the observers on the GULF KEYS that it was having any difficulty.

29. The Master and Third Mate of the USMS ANACOSTIA stated that they sighted a loaded L.S.T. between 1100 and 1200 on 7 December 1954, approximately 2 miles on the starboard side of their vessel. The noon position of the ANACOSTIA on 7 December 1954, was not entered in the log and the L.S.T. was not identified as the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS.

30. At 1350 G.M.T. on 5 December 1954, a message was received by Radio W.O.E.R.C.A. Station, Iantana, Florida from SOUTHERN DISTRICTS and at that time there was no indication that the vessel was experiencing difficulty.

31. On 6 December 1954 at 1758, E.S.T., a message addressed to [REDACTED] M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was filed at Radio W.S.V., Savannah, Georgia and a copy of this message was placed with Radio W.S.C., Tuckerton, New Jersey, at 1552 E.S.T. on 7 December 1954. Both stations failed to contact the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS and this message was cancelled on 17 December 1954.

32. Weather reports from the U. S. Weather Bureau and on the spot reports from vessels off the Florida and Carolina Coasts bear out the fact that during the night of 5 December 1954, the wind increased from a southerly direction and attained a force of 7; that at about 1000 on 6 December 1954, the wind changed to the northerly and increased in force to 8 and continued at force 8 with squalls reaching force 9 throughout the remainder of 6 December 1954 and the morning of 7 December 1954. Heavy rain squalls with high mountainous seas were experienced by ships in that locality. During the afternoon of 7 December 1954, the wind and seas moderated.

33. The Second Officer of the Gulf Keys stated that the GULF KEYS overtook and passed the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS at about 1330 on 5 December 1954, and that the vessel was in sight until about 1600. The log of the GULF KEYS indicated that wind increased in force from southeasterly on the night of 5 December 1954, to force 7 and at about 1000 on 6 December 1954, changed abruptly to NE and increased to force 9; that due to high rough mountainous seas it was necessary to alter course to get out of the Gulf Stream and reduce speed to ease vessel's laboring. During this period the decks were awash and sprays were being shipped overall.

34. The logs of the Naval vessels PODMAN, THOMAS E. FRAZER and SHANNON, which were bound to Charleston, verified weather conditions, as given by the GULF KEYS on 7 December 1954. The log of the Naval vessel SALVAGER verified weather conditions, as given by the GULF KEYS on the afternoons of 6 and 7 December 1954. The Commanding Officer of the SALVAGER, an ARSD type vessel, reported that at midnight on 6 December 1954, his vessel was in a position 35 miles NE of Cape Canaveral; "that at the time his vessel was experiencing mountainous seas, worse than any experienced in two hurricanes; that the vessel had to be held into the sea at two-thirds speed and that he believed the vessel would have capsized if not so maneuvered."

35. The Master of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was instructed to report the vessel's estimated time of arrival at Bucksport, Maine 72 hours prior to arrival. Since eight days would normally be required to make this voyage, the Southern Steamship Company expected the Master to report his arrival on 7 or 8 December 1954. When no message reporting arrival at Bucksport was received by the Company when expected, the Company, taking into consideration that another of their vessels had been delayed by weather conditions in the same area, did not take any action until 1258 on 9 December 1954, at which time a message to the Master of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was filed with F.C.A. station at Tuckerton, N. J. by telephone, which read as follows: "Advise present ETA" and signed "SOSCO". At 1515 on 9 December 1954, Tuckerton, N. J. station was asked by the operators to pass this message to Savannah Radio and Chatham radio for transmission (request by telephone) to SOUTHERN DISTRICTS, and a request was made that the operators be advised as soon as they were able to make radio contact with the ship. All subsequent efforts to contact the vessel by radio were unsuccessful. At 2130 on 11 December 1954, the Coast Guard was notified by telephone by Mr. [REDACTED] of the Southern Steamship Company from Wilmington, Delaware, that his company was concerned over the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS' failure to report its ETA 72 hours in advance of arrival and subsequent failure of F.C.A. and Mackay radio stations to establish communications with the vessel and requested Coast Guard assistance in establishing communications or whereabouts of vessel.

36. After receiving this report from Mr. [REDACTED], a communication search was immediately started by the Coast Guard and continued through 11 and 12 December 1954, without success. Thereafter, a search by aircraft and surface

vessels was made, continuing until dark on 20 December 1954. This search consisted of 303.8 plane search hours, which covered an area of 262,400 square miles and 9,000 square miles by surface craft over the route the vessel would have taken to reach Bucksport, Maine. The search result was negative. No wreckage or any floating equipment from the vessel was sighted during this search.

37. The Master of the SS TULLAHOMA, on a voyage from Paulsboro, N. J. to Beaumont, Texas, and while proceeding on a course of 255° in the Florida Straits in lat. 24° - 25° N. Long. 81° - 84° W at 1430, E.S.T. on 2 January 1955, sighted a white painted life buoy close on the starboard bow (about 30 feet) and with binoculars the name on the buoy "SOUTHERN DISTRICTS" was very legible in block letters. About five minutes later, a gray life preserver with no markings visible and a 2"x8" plank, about 10 feet long with slats attached were sighted. The plank appeared to be part of a gangway ramp. The Master stated that the cover of the ring buoy was torn on one side. The TULLAHOMA did not pick up the ring buoy or other objects from the water.

38. The M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was valued at \$325,000.00 by the owner. The cargo was valued at \$107,800.00.

Witnesses interviewed:



Cdr. John P. Fox, USCG.



Lt. [REDACTED] USCG.

Lt. [REDACTED] USCG.



P.J. Smenton, Cdr., USCG.



OPINIONS

39. That the M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS, subsequent to sailing from Port Sulphur, Louisiana on 2 December 1954, with a cargo of bulk sulphur, foundered in tempestuous seas, and the casualty occurred without warning and so quickly that a request for assistance was impossible.

40. That the twenty-three members of the crew must be presumed to have perished with the vessel.

41. That taking into consideration the weather conditions on the Atlantic Coast; the date and time of last sighting (5 December 1954 at 1500); the date and time of last radio contact (5 December 1954 at 1350); and the fact that radio contact could not be made with the vessel after 1800 on 6 December 1954, the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS disappeared some time after 1600 on 5 December 1954 and during 6 December 1954 or morning of 7 December 1954, off the coast of the Carolinas.

42. That inasmuch as repairs required by the American Bureau of Shipping Surveyor and the Coast Guard Marine Inspector, who made the drydock examination, were completed and tested satisfactorily to both inspectors, and the vessel was recommended to be retained in class by the American Bureau of Shipping Surveyors, it is concluded that the owner and/or operator took the customary precautions necessary to maintain the vessel in a seaworthy condition.

43. That the draft, as shown on the stem and stern of the vessel, after completion of loading at Port Sulphur, Louisiana on 2 December 1954, indicated that the maximum allowable draft of the vessel was not exceeded and the vessel was not overloaded; however, in view of the fact that the freeboard was only measured on one side, the port side, and a small starboard list was evident, no accurate data is available to check the draft taken with the actual freeboard at the time. Taking into consideration the amount of cargo loaded and other deadweight on board, the vessel was very near her maximum draft, and could have been slightly overloaded.

44. That the vessel's Coast Guard inspection records were incomplete in that from these records alone, it was not possible to determine all repairs and renewals of plating and structural members that had been made on the vessel.

45. That, taking into consideration the nature of bottom and tank top repairs necessary during the last two drydockings, and the fact that bottom plating at these examinations show numerous small holes and the No. 3 tank top holed from deterioration, it is concluded that the inspectors making these inspections used poor judgment in not going further in making a more thorough examination and tests of the bottom shell plating and tank tops.

46. That the Coast Guard search for the missing vessel by plane and surface craft was thorough and covered all possible areas in which the vessel could have been if it had remained afloat.

47. That the life ring sighted off Sand Key, Florida by observers on the SS TULLAHOMA could have possibly been from the wreckage of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS. However, when considering that the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS was sighted as far north as Jupiter Inlet on 5 December; the northerly flow of the Gulf Stream, and the damaged condition of the life ring, it is more likely that this life ring was discarded by the vessel prior to entering the Straits of Florida.

48. That the owners or operator of the SOUTHERN DISTRICTS should have given a more timely notice to the Coast Guard when the vessel did not report its estimated time of arrival at Bucksport, Maine, when such notice was expected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

49. That converted vessels of construction similar to the M/V SOUTHERN DISTRICTS should not be certificated by the Coast Guard to carry bulk cargoes of high density on Coastwise or Ocean routes.

50. That all vessels entering on Coastwise voyages be required to submit a crew list to the Coast Guard of all persons on board and actually sailing with the vessel prior to the vessels sailing.

51. That all vessels on a voyage, either Coastwise or Foreign, be required to report their position at least every 48 hours to their owners or agents.

[REDACTED]
J. H. BYRD,
Captain, U.S.C.G.,
Chairman

[REDACTED]
J. C. WARDLAW,
Captain, U.S.C.G.,
Member

[REDACTED]
JOHN F. KETTLER,
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Member & Recorder