

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

ADDRESS REPLY TO:



MVI

20 August 1956

(WESTERN EXPLORER - a-11
Bd)

Commandant's Action

on

Marine Board of Investigation; foundering of F/V WESTERN EXPLORER off Socorro Island, Mexico, 14 May 1956, with loss of life

1. Pursuant to the provisions of Title 46 CFR 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 motor fishing vessel WESTERN EXPLORER, built in 1941, of 166 g.t., powered by a 400 h.p. diesel, on 28 April 1956 departed from San Pedro for a fishing voyage off the Mexican coast. The WESTERN EXPLORER fished until 12 May 1956, at which time she had on board 35 tons of tuna. Due to worsening weather conditions the WESTERN EXPLORER proceeded to and at 0300 13 May arrived at a sheltered anchorage to the south and in the lee of Socorro Island. Other fishing vessels were anchored in this area. The sea and wind were from the north, wind estimated at 40 knots with gusts up to 50 knots. During the afternoon of 13 May the WESTERN EXPLORER shifted anchorage for a better lee in way of high land. The wind and sea continued unabated with rain and poor visibility. Sometime before 0300 14 May the wind began to shift from north to west and by 0230 the wind direction was northwest to west. This wind change, unnoticed by the deck watch, caused the WESTERN EXPLORER to swing, probably drag anchor, and ground on rocks in a stern to shore position, and to sink shortly thereafter. The vessel was abandoned in a skiff which immediately swamped, and the crew entered the water wearing life preservers. Fishing vessels in the area considered it too dangerous due to darkness, rough weather, rocks, and poor visibility, to search for survivors until after daybreak. Of the twelve crew members on board the WESTERN EXPLORER, the STELLA MARIS, a fishing vessel, rescued seven and the remaining five perished as a result of this disaster.
3. The Findings of Fact, Opinions, and Recommendations of the Marine Board of Investigation convened to investigate subject casualty are approved.

(signed) A. C. Richmond

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

REPORT

of a

MARINE BOARD OF INVESTIGATION

convened at the

Office of the Commander, Eleventh Coast Guard District

on 23 May, 1956

by order of the

Commandant, U. S. Coast Guard

To investigate the foundering and total loss of the Motor Fishing
Vessel WESTERN EXPLORER which occurred on the 14th of May, 1956 on SOGORRO
ISLAND

Eleventh Coast Guard District Office
1114 Times Building
Long Beach 2, California
18 July 1956

The Board, having thoroughly inquired into all the facts and the circumstances connected with the incident which occasioned the inquiry, and having considered the evidence adduced, finds as follows:

FINDING OF FACTS

1. That at about 0300 on 14 May, 1956, the M/V WESTERN EXPLORER, during heavy weather, drifted ashore and foundered on the southwestern shore of Socorro Island in the Revilla Gigedo group in the approximate position, latitude 18° 43' north and longitude 110° 58' west.
2. That the commercial fishing vessel WESTERN EXPLORER, Official Number 251283, was built of wood in Tacoma, Washington, in 1941. It was of conventional seine vessel design of 166 gross tons, and therefore not subject to provisions of the Officer's Competency Act of 1936, nor was it subject to inspection by the Coast Guard. The vessel's two bulkheads were not watertight due to pipe and shafting penetrations. The vessel was powered by a 400 horsepower diesel engine, and was owned by a co-partnership consisting of the Western Boat Building Co., and Frank Manaka, with offices at 2505 E. 11th Street, Tacoma, Washington.
3. That the WESTERN EXPLORER departed San Pedro, California, on 28 April, 1956, bound on a tuna fishing voyage to Mexican waters. The vessel was stored and equipped for a 70-day period, such period coinciding with the term of validity of the Mexican fishing permit. The crew consisted of 12 men including the Master, Frank Manaka. On 2 May, 1956, the vessel arrived at San Benedicto Island and remained in that vicinity until the evening of 12 May, 1956. During this 10-day period, approximately 35 tons of tuna were caught.
4. That at about 2200 on 12 May, the wind was from the north with a force of between 15 and 20 knots. The Master believed that Socorro Island would provide better shelter and a better anchorage in view of the increasing wind. After contacting other fishing vessels by radio, he proceeded towards Socorro Island, arriving there at 0300 on 13 May. During the passage from San Benedicto to Socorro, the wind and sea increased from the north until the wind reached an estimated 40 knots with gusts

up to 50 knots. The WESTERN EXPLORER anchored in Binner's Cove in the lee of Socorro Island at approximately 0300 on 13 May, 1956. There were several other fishing vessels anchored close by, including the STELLA MARIS and the ANTHONY M.

5. That the WESTERN EXPLORER was equipped with ground tackle as follows: on the port side a 500-pound Navy type anchor, 16 fathoms of 3/4 inch stud link chain, and 750 feet of 7/8 inch 6x18 galvanized wire rope, all purchased new in November, 1955. On the starboard side, a 600-pound Navy type anchor and 100 fathoms of chain. Both anchors and cables were in good condition and could be used together or separately and they were handled by an electrically driven windlass which was in good working order.

6. That the WESTERN EXPLORER remained at the anchorage in Binner's Cove from 0300 on 13 May until the afternoon of the same day, when the vessel shifted anchorage one mile to the northwest in order to anchor in the lee of high land. This shifting of anchorage lessened the effect of the northerly wind. The vessel anchored in 17 fathoms of water; the port anchor with a scope of 116 fathoms was used. There were five other fishing vessels anchored in the vicinity. The Master used a magnetic compass to take bearings of headlands; the bearings showed no apparent dragging. The vessel was lying with bow towards the shore and perpendicular to the shoreline, and about 1/2 mile off the beach. The last compass check of the anchor bearings was made by the Master just before dark, at approximately 1930 on 13 May; no dragging was apparent. The wind held steadily from the north.

7. That the Master was relieved about midnight on 13 May by [REDACTED], a crew member, who was instructed to keep a close watch on the vessels anchored nearby and to check the anchor cable frequently and to notify the Master of any changes. Up to midnight, the vessel's anchor had held and no dragging was apparent.

8. That [REDACTED] remained on deck watch until 0100 on 14 May, at which time he was relieved by [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] passed on the Master's instructions to Mr. [REDACTED] and included in the instructions was the order to check the anchor cable every 15 minutes. This was accomplished by stepping or jumping on the cable at regular intervals. [REDACTED] stated that the WESTERN EXPLORER held its position throughout his watch. The wind remained out of the north, and the relative positions of vessel and shore held constant when the shore line could be distinguished between rain squalls. The anchor lights of other vessels remained in the same relative positions.

9. That at approximately 0300 on 14 May, [REDACTED] went to the crew quarters to call his relief, [REDACTED] was awakened, and [REDACTED] went to the galley for coffee. He had been in the galley for several

minutes when [redacted] ran into the galley and shouted "rocks." He then ran to call the Master and crew.

10. That rocks and breakers were evident on the vessel's port side and were seen by Lopez and the Master who arose immediately after being awakened. The Master stated that the wind was still from the north or northwest. The vessel was aground in a stern-to-shore position which resulted in the port anchor cable leading around the stem and aft along the starboard side in a northwesterly direction. The Captain and other crew members went to the forecandle head and attempted to use the windlass to pull the vessel clear of the rocks. The windlass was in operating order, and it picked up a short scope of slack cable, then was unable to overcome the cable strain. At about this time, the Engineer reported to the Master that water was entering the engine room faster than it could be pumped out. The Master went to the bridge and increased the speed of the engines in an attempt to maneuver the vessel off the rocks. The attempt was unsuccessful. The WESTERN EXPLORER took a rapidly increasing port list and within five minutes the vessel sank.

11. During the interval between grounding and sinking, the Master had contacted by radio another fishing vessel and requested aid. The crew had been instructed to launch the power skiff, and life preservers had been issued to all persons. As the vessel listed to port, the skiff floated free and several crew members were aboard, and the skiff's engine was operating. The skiff was swamped a few moments after it was water borne; the entire crew of the WESTERN EXPLORER was in the water, either swimming or holding on to floating objects, approximately 10 minutes after it was first learned that the vessel was aground.

12. That the fishing vessel STELLA MARIS was in the vicinity of Socorro Island on 13 and 14 May, 1956, and on the evening of 13 May this vessel was one of a group of six vessels which included the WESTERN EXPLORER, all of which were anchored in Bahia Cornwallis. The Master of the STELLA MARIS kept a log book and recorded therein the wind direction and force and barometer readings during the night of 13 May and morning of 14 May. At 0230 on 14 May, the barometer indicated 29.29 and wind direction northwest to west.

13. That a few minutes after 0300 on 14 May the STELLA MARIS received radio advice from the ANTHONY M. stating that the WESTERN EXPLORER was aground. The STELLA MARIS got underway and attempted to go to the aid of the WESTERN EXPLORER, but heavy swells and strong winds made a close approach impossible. The STELLA MARIS did not make a further rescue attempt until after daylight, at which time two men were rescued from the water and two from a rocky ledge. The STELLA MARIS continued rescue attempts and by the morning of 15 May had succeeded in rescuing seven men and recovering the bodies of Shiro Matsushita, Masayoshi Masuda, and Mike Bebich. Two crew members, [redacted] were not rescued nor were their bodies recovered.

14. That the seven survivors were transferred to other fishing vessels in the vicinity as accommodations permitted. The Eleventh Coast Guard District was kept advised by radio of events as they occurred, and the naval vessel BURTON ISLAND was diverted from its course by naval authorities to rendezvous with fishing vessels at Socorro Island. The seven survivors and three bodies were transferred to the USS BURTON ISLAND on 15 May, 1956, and were transported to Long Beach, California, arriving on 18 May, 1956. All of the survivors received minor injuries.

15. That the value of the WESTERN EXPLORER was estimated to be \$120,000.

OPINION

1. That the WESTERN EXPLORER grounded and sank in Cornwallis Bay, Socorro Island, during heavy weather on 14 May, 1956..
2. That the vessel was equipped with sufficient ground tackle for a vessel of her class, which, if judiciously used, could have prevented the grounding.
3. That no definite fix of the vessel's position was known to the men on watch and under the existing weather conditions, any dragging of the anchor would not be apparent as no drift lead was used.
4. That judicious use of the fathometer would have indicated proximity to danger.
5. That at about 0230 on 14 May, 1956, the wind backed from north to west and this change of wind direction was unnoticed by the deck watch on the WESTERN EXPLORER.
6. That at the time of grounding there were 12 persons on board, including the Master. Three of them, Masayoshi Masuda, Shiro Matsushita, and Mike Bebich died by drowning. Two of them, [REDACTED], perished and their bodies have not been recovered.
7. That the failure on the part of the deck watch to be alert to the change in the direction of the wind contributed materially to the grounding of the vessel.
8. That the failure on the part of the Master to heed the existing weather conditions, the falling barometer, which to an experienced seaman would indicate change in wind direction, contributed materially to the grounding of the vessel.

9. That the Master's forethought in promptly ordering the issuance of the life preservers to his crew prevented a greater loss of life.

10. That there were no violations of any applicable laws or regulations.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Inasmuch as no seamen licensed or certificated by the Coast Guard were involved, it is recommended that no further action be taken.

(signed) Lionel H. de Santy

LIONEL H. DE SANTY
Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
President

(signed) Bernard T. Clark

BERNARD T. CLARK
Lieutenant Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
Member

(signed) John A. Corso

JOHN A. CORSO
Lieutenant Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
Member and Recorder

The Board then, at 1130, adjourned to await the action of the convening authority.

(signed) Lionel H. de Santy

LIONEL H. DE SANTY
Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
President

(signed) John A. Corso

JOHN A. CORSO
Lieutenant Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
Member and Recorder