

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
WASHINGTON, D. C.

MVI
10 July 1953
(42 E 299 (YONNIE) a-2 3d)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; MB 42 E 299 (YONNIE) going
over Dam #41, Ohio River, 26 May 1953, with loss of life

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, Conclusions, and Recommendations, has been reviewed and is forwarded herewith.

2. At about 2300 on 25 May 1953, the MR 42 E 299 (YONNIE) with seven persons on board was underway in the Louisville, Kentucky, Harbor area. Upon encountering driftwood, her motor was stopped and could not be restarted due to a low battery. The MR 42 E 299 (YONNIE) drifted past a Coast Guard Station to which a Naval vessel was moored and could not attract the attention of either to her distressed condition. The motor-boat went through an open weir in Dam #41, dropping about 10 feet, during which one of the persons on board, Marshall W. Fern, lost his life.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. The YONNIE, number 42 E 299, an inboard cabin cruiser, twenty (20) feet long is owned by Dr. [REDACTED], M.D., [REDACTED]. The YONNIE departed Harrods Creek (Mile 595.8, Ohio River) with seven persons on board at about 2300 CDT on 25 May 1953. The boat was operated by [REDACTED] age [REDACTED] years.

"2. The following persons were on board: [REDACTED] operator of the boat.

"3. At Mile 603.5, Louisville Harbor area, the motor was stopped by the operator due to encountering driftwood. Attempts were then made to start the motor with the self starter without success due to insufficient battery power. Following this, attempts were made to start the motor with crank, but this was also unsuccessful.

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The boat continued to drift downstream past the Coast Guard Station until it went through an open weir in Dam #1 at approximately Mile 604.6 at about 0015 A.M. CDT on 26 May 1953. At this time the difference in levels of the upper and lower pools was ten (10) feet as reported by the U. S. Army Engineers.

"4. Immediately after passing over the dam Marshall W. Fenn was found to be missing. The boat, however, continued to float and it was not materially damaged. The remaining six occupants were uninjured. The boat was later found to be adequately equipped with buoyant cushions.

"5. After the boat and its occupants had landed at Clarksville, Indiana, Mile 605.7, the Coast Guard Station was notified. They immediately proceeded to the scene and rendered all necessary assistance, and began searching for the missing man.

"6. The remains of Marshall William Fenn were recovered in the vicinity of Cloverport, Kentucky on 31 May 1953.

"7. The records of the U. S. Army Engineers indicate that the current at the Louisville Highway Bridge at this stage of the river was between 2-1/2 and 3 miles per hour.

"8. The Lifeboat Station lookout's testimony, supported by the time clock record, indicated that the time clock had been punched at intervals of not more than thirty minutes from 2000 on 25 May 1953 to 0400 on 26 May 1953. The time clock and the turn key are located on the lookout tower. Testimony supported by official records indicates that David D. Wilson, 292-837, GS was assigned the lookout watch from 2200 to 2400 on 25 May 1953, and that Robert Gamber, 278-330, HM2 was assigned to the 0000 to 0400 watch on 26 May 1953.

"9. The Board personally verified that all necessary instructions as to the duties of the lookouts were properly posted under glass in the lookout tower.

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"10. A Naval vessel, the ISSL-65, was moored to the offshore side of the Lifeboat Station for a period of about one week. It was during this period that the subject casualty occurred.

"11. The Lifeboat Station Log was examined by the Board and weather entries were made every two hours. The 2400 entry on 25 May 1953 indicated a visibility of "1/4", which would mean that objects were visible for more than 1/2 mile but less than one mile."

4. The Board made the following Conclusions:

"1. Testimony indicated that Marshall W. Fern dove over the side at about the time the YONNIE dropped over the dam, resulting in his death.

"2. Due to conflicting evidence, the Board is unable to determine the exact track followed by the YONNIE from the time she became disabled until the boat went over the dam. The evidence from various witnesses indicated that the closest point of approach to the Louisville Lifeboat Station was between 100 yards and 400 yards. It is difficult for the Board to determine why neither the continuous anchor watch on the Naval vessel nor the lookout watch at the Lifeboat Station heard or saw the vessel in distress, in view of the alleged signaling from the boat. The Board notes that the following factors may have contributed to the distressed vessel going unnoticed:

- (a) Glare and reflection of shore lights on the water,
- (b) partial obstruction of vision by the Naval vessel moored alongside, and
- (c) noise caused by the generators on board the Naval vessel.

"3. The Board visited the Lifeboat Station and observed the station routine and the instructions pertaining to lookouts. The condition of the above was found to be satisfactory.

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"4. No negligence could be attributed to any particular lockout, but it appears that at least one of the lockouts was not maintaining an efficient watch. However, it is possible that the absence of the lockout for three minutes, as testified, for the purpose of calling his relief, may have been during the critical time the disabled motorboat was signaling for assistance. Evidence indicated the YONNIE was probably abreast of the Coast Guard Station at approximately 2400 25 May 1953. Information obtained from the U. S. Corps of Engineers estimated the current at this period to be 2-1/2 to 3 miles per hour. The Board estimated that the total time from the time the boat became disabled until it dropped over the dam was between 15 and 20 minutes. This is based on an average drift of between 3 and 4 miles per hour for the 1 mile the vessel drifted, allowing for a swifter current as the dam was approached.

"5. There is no apparent willful negligence on the part of the operator of the YONNIE; however, the Board is of the opinion the operator exercised very poor judgment by venturing away from the moorings at night during a period when pleasure boating conditions were extremely hazardous due to driftwood. Had he used the make-shift anchor that was available and the electric horn had been in operating condition, the casualty might have been averted.

"6. The Board cannot too strongly emphasize the hazardous condition that exists in the Louisville Harbor area for amateur motorboat operators. The reasons why the area is particularly hazardous are:

- (a) The difference of water levels is greater at Dam No. 41 than at any of the other movable dams,
- (b) the dam has a most unusual shape in that the greater part of the dam runs parallel to the river axis,
- (c) the existence of the dam is not apparent from the upriver side.

"7. While the station has demonstrated its effectiveness in preventing numerous pleasure boats from going over Dam No. 41, it is believed that even the most efficient of lifeboat stations cannot absolutely preclude similar casualties.

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"8. Due to the fact that the principal task of the Louisville Lifeboat Station is to warn boats to stay clear of the dam, it is believed that this station should be provided with a "bull horn" similar to the type used on large cutters. Since these horns have an effective range of about a mile, they would be ideal for this station. In addition to the efficiency in warning the boats promptly, it is believed that this horn would have an impressive effect on boating in the area. However, the lack of this horn did not contribute to the subject casualty."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. Mooring of the Naval vessel alongside the Coast Guard Station may or may not have had some bearing in this case. However, it is recommended in the future no vessel that will in any way obstruct or restrict the efficiency of a lookout's vision or hearing be permitted to moor alongside the station.

"2. While it is a general practice particularly at units with small complements for the man on watch to personally call his relief, it is recommended that at this station the relief be announced by some other method.

"3. It is also recommended that a letter be addressed to the Officer in Charge of the Louisville Lifeboat Station to the effect that in this casualty there were indications that the lookouts were not standing an efficient watch and that immediate corrective action should be taken."

REMARKS

6. The Recommendations of the Board will be referred to the Office of Operations for such action as may be appropriate.

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

/s/P. A. OVENDEN
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FIRST ENDORSEMENT TO MVI memorandum of 10 July 1953

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Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/H. C. SHEPHEARD
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APPROVED: JUL 16 1953

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