

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

MVI  
19 December 1952  
(A. C. DODGE - MICHAEL  
a-3 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; collision between the MV  
A. C. DODGE and the SS MICHAEL, Delaware River, 25 May  
1952, 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. During the evening of 25 May 1952, the SS MICHAEL, a tank vessel of 10,441 g.t., fully loaded with crude oil, was up-bound and the MV A. C. DODGE, a tank vessel of 1,147 g.t., fully loaded with gasoline, was down-bound in the Delaware River. The weather was clear, visibility 5 to 10 miles and a flood tide of about one knot. At the intersection of Reedy Island and Baker Ranges, passing signals were exchanged for a normal port-to-port passing, following which the A. C. DODGE evidently made an erratic change of heading which confused the MICHAEL, and although collision-avoiding action was taken, such efforts, due to close proximity and speed of the vessels, were ineffective and both vessels collided at approximately 2230, 25 May 1952. The A. C. DODGE exploded, caught fire and sank and the MICHAEL sustained hull and superficial fire damage. As a result of this casualty, the following eight crew members from the DODGE and two from the MICHAEL lost their lives:

A. C. DODGE

John D. Elliott, Master  
John R. Elliott, Second Mate  
Charles Hsie, Chief Engineer  
John R. Holmes, 1st Assistant Engineer  
Rasmus M. Kleppe, Deckhand  
Ramond E. Anderson, Deckhand  
William O'Brien, Cook  
Howard G. Moller, Deckhand

MICHAEL

Clarence R. Backman, Consular Passenger  
Alfred R. Magnuson, 3rd Mate

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3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. The tankers MICHAEL and A. C. DODGE collided in the Delaware River in the vicinity of Reedy Island Range Lighted Bell Buoy 2-R (1541) at about 2230 Eastern Daylight Saving Time on 25 May 1952. Fire and explosion occurred on the DODGE immediately after the impact, resulting in the subsequent sinking of the vessel 1200 yards 059° True from Reedy Island Middle Light. The MICHAEL suffered hull damage in the way of both bows and from fire which burned in that section for some hours after the collision. She also suffered superficial fire damage on the after part of the hull from gasoline burning on the water. Eight crew members from the DODGE and two from the MICHAEL were unaccounted for after the disaster, and of these, four bodies have been recovered, three identified from the DODGE and one from the MICHAEL; the others are still missing and presumed dead. Other crew members suffered injuries of varying extent, none seriously.

"2. The MICHAEL (Official No. 247423) is a steam-driven tank type vessel (T-2) of 10,441 gross tons 503.9 ft. long, built of steel materials at Sausalito, Cal. in 1945 and develops 6000 H.P. She is owned and operated by J. M. Carras, Inc., 21 West St., New York City and at the time of the collision was under the command of Nelson M. Amy (CDB-105522) of 1313 Keswick Avenue, Haddon Heights, N. J. and had Harry D. Lemmon, Validated Merchant Mariners Document Z-980962 of 7947 Fayette St., Philadelphia, Pa. on board as pilot. Pilot Lemmon was acting under the authority of his state pilot's license issued by the State of Pennsylvania.

"3. The A. C. DODGE (Official No. 241603) is a diesel-driven tank vessel of 1147 gross tons, 243.1 ft. long, built of steel at Camden, N. J. in 1942. She is owned by the Diesel Tanker A. C. Dodge, Inc. of 764 Court St., Brooklyn, N. Y. and at the time of the collision was under the command of John D. Elliott, CDB 077440 of 1127 Walnut St., Collingdale, Pa. Captain Elliott was acting under the authority of his master's license No. 115758 and pilot's license for the Delaware Bay and River.

"4. The DODGE sailed from Eagle Point, New Jersey on the evening of 25 May 1952 bound for Wagner's Point, Baltimore with a full cargo of gasoline. Her sailing draft was 12-05'F., 13-06'A. Since the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal had been closed to navigation, the

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DODGE's intended voyage lay down the Delaware, outside from Cape Henlopen to Cape Henry, Va., thence up the Chesapeake, a distance of less than 400 miles. And under these conditions her certificate of inspection required the following crew: 1 master, 1 chief mate, 1 second mate, 4 able seamen, 2 ordinary seamen, 1 chief engineer, 1 first assistant engineer and 1 second assistant engineer.

"5. A list of those known to be aboard, including one survivor, indicates that the DODGE was being navigated without the required crew to the extent of 1 chief mate, 1 second assistant engineer and 1 ordinary seaman.

"6. The known dead were:

SS MICHAEL:

Clarence R. Backman, consular passenger, Z-319747, home address c/o brother, Walter Backman, 508 Boston Ave., Medford, Mass.

MV A. C. DODGE:

Ramond E. Anderson, deckhand MMD Z-490761, 212 Court St., West Haven, Conn.

William O'Brien, cook, MMD-Z unknown, 890 Beech Street, Long Beach, L. I., New York

Howard E. Moller, deckhand, MMD Z-438293, 830 Seventy First St., Brooklyn, New York

Missing and presumed dead:

SS MICHAEL:

Alfred R. Magnuson, 3rd mate CDB 35348, home address c/o mother, Gunhild Hagg, 129 Colfax St., Providence, R. I.

MV A. C. DODGE:

John D. Elliott, master CDB 077440, home address 1127 Walnut St., Collingdale, Pa.

John W. Elliott, second mate MMD 131259, 1018 McDade Blvd., Collingdale, Pa.

Charles Hoie, chief engineer CDB 005285, 964 Seventy Second St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

John R. Holmes, 1st assistant engineer MMD Z-66607, 84 Bryson Ave., Port Richmond, S. I., New York

Rasmus M. Kleppe, deckhand, MMD Z-216455, 434 68th St., Brooklyn, New York

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"7. The weather at the time of the collision was clear with an estimated visibility of five to ten miles and a flood tide of about a knot was running. The MICHAEL's radar was in operation but was not used before or during the collision.

"Since no eye witnesses from the DODGE survived the collision the circumstances before and after it occurred are those given in the testimony of the MICHAEL witnesses. Prior to and during the collision, the master, Nelson Amy, CDB 105522, Alfred R. Magnuson, CDB 35348, third mate and Walter H. Sibley Z-573479, A. B. helmsman were on the bridge with Pilot Lesmon. Edward H. Fields Z-775902, Bos'n, was on lookout on the bow; and their testimony essentially agrees on what transpired to the point of the collision.

"The MICHAEL, fully loaded with crude oil, sailed from Suez, Egypt on 8 May 1952, bound for Paulsboro, N. J. An uneventful passage ensued during which all her navigating gear was in constant use and functioned satisfactorily. At about 1900 on 25 May 1952, Pilot Harry S. Lesmon boarded the MICHAEL at the pilot station at the entrance to Delaware Bay. The draft at the time was estimated at 29-09 ft. forward and aft.

"Under the com of Pilot Lesmon the MICHAEL proceeded up the Delaware and upon approaching the intersection of Liston and Baker Ranges, an outbound vessel, later identified as the A. C. DODGE was observed on Reedy Island Range in the vicinity of Reedy Island. As the vessels continued to approach each other, the MICHAEL was on her own right-hand side of the channel on the Baker Range on a course of 358 or 359 P. G. C. at a speed of about 15 knots, and the DODGE was on the starboard bow of the MICHAEL showing a red side light. When in the vicinity of Buoy 2-B, the MICHAEL's course was changed by a 10 degree right rudder order to enter Reedy Island channel, and a one-blast signal was blown to the DODGE. At this point they were about a mile or mile and a half apart; but no answer was heard to the signal by either the pilot or the master. The MICHAEL swung slowly to the right, reaching a heading of 008 to 009 as she rounded the buoy. According to the pilot and master, at this point the DODGE suddenly closed in her port side light and showed her starboard, and the pilot assumed that the change of course of the DODGE was occasioned by her desire to leave the channel and cut the corner east of Baker

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Range, a maneuver commonly used by shallow draft vessels in the Delaware. He placed the distance between the vessels at two ship lengths at this point, but the master, a mile and a quarter. When the pilot saw the green side light of the DODGE he ordered a full left rudder; sounded a two-blast whistle signal, and as he did so observed that the DODGE was again showing a red light. He then sounded the one-blast signal; ordered the rudder full right and at the same time the engines were rung full astern by the master. The two vessels collided shortly thereafter, the MICHAEL striking the DODGE at or near the forward end of the deck house on the port side at about 2230 Eastern Daylight Saving Time.

"The lookout of the MICHAEL was on the bow for some time before the collision, and he testified that the DODGE was on the MICHAEL's starboard bow at all times until just before the impact. At no time did he see a green side light on the DODGE but he did hear an answering signal from her when the first signal was sounded by the MICHAEL. The wheelman of the MICHAEL testified that he also heard a one-blast answering signal from the DODGE after the first signal was blown by the MICHAEL.

"Mr. Thomas R. Marshall, the pilot of the SOCONY VACUUM, testified that he had passed both the DODGE and the MICHAEL while outbound, and he plainly heard the sequence of signals from the MICHAEL and a one-blast signal from the DODGE. He further testified that he expected to hear a danger signal, and the absence of one drew his attention aft, where he saw the burst of flame following the impact.

"Fire broke out immediately after the impact, accompanied by explosions on the DODGE as the two vessels separated. As the DODGE and MICHAEL drew apart, port-to-port, flaming gasoline, reaching as high as the foremast head of the MICHAEL, covered the river surface, completely enveloping the DODGE. Confusion reigned on the bridge of the MICHAEL. The pilot yelled to "get to hell out of here", and led by the master, he and the third mate dashed off the bridge to the No. 1 Boat on the starboard side, leaving the engines at full astern; and the wheelman still at the wheel. No general alarm was rung. They were joined at the No. 1 Boat by Fields, the lookout, who had run aft after the explosion, and a passenger whose room was immediately below. Their attempts to saving out the boat were frustrated by the lubberly fashion in which this was done. The davits were screwed out without releasing

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the outboard gripes, and since the falls were set up the boat fell on its side. It was during or just before this incident that the third mate, Magnuson was last seen; he disappeared, and no trace of him has since been found.

"While these operations were under way on No. 1 Boat, the radio operator stood by for an S.O.S. and when the pilot dashed into the captain's quarters to get a life belt, the position of the vessel was obtained from him and the message sent. According to witnesses, Sibley, the wheelman and Brittain, the radio operator, who saw him at this time, the pilot was distraught. The fire appeared less on the port side, and those who were at No. 1 Boat proceeded to No. 2, but before launching operations were completed, all of them by common impulse went aft. When the master left the No. 1 Boat, he stated he went to the wheelhouse, rang the general alarm, called for steam on the steam-smothering lines, and water on deck. He then went to No. 2 Boat and aft with the others.

"As the boats were being readied aft, the chief mate initiated action towards fighting the fire, since it was fairly evident that the MICHAEL was not in such immediate danger as the excitement and confusion led all hands to believe. He mustered and led a fire-fighting party to the bow, where it was discovered that a section of the DODGE's hull was impaled on the stem of the MICHAEL. It was also discovered that this section, containing burning gasoline, was supplying the fuel for the fire on the MICHAEL. While the master and the pilot handled the maneuvering on the bridge, an attempt was made to dislodge the hull section with the starboard anchor, but the effort produced no improvement. The MICHAEL was then maneuvered to a position off Elsinore Point where 30 fathoms of chain were backed out and the vessel nosed into the sand to hold her in position to fight the fire and to prevent her endangering other vessels.

"After the collision, the DODGE drifted away, a blazing hulk, and so remained until she sank.

"The only survivor from the DODGE, Stur B. Tellefsen (Z No. unknown), could shed but little light on the collision because he was asleep in his quarters when it occurred. He was partly thrown from his bunk by the impact, and on dashing for the door saw the engine room full of flames. He then donned a life jacket, jumped overboard through the port, swam from the scene and managed to get on board a gas buoy, where he remained until rescued.

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"Coast Guard and other assistance arrived about 0400, and with this help the fire was finally extinguished. The MICHAEL then proceeded to her discharging berth at Paulsboro, N. J.

"As the investigation proceeded, the testimony of witnesses was given wide publicity by the local press, and among the circumstances receiving full measure of attention was the conduct of the master and the pilot after the impact. Their emphatic denial of some of the allegations was also published, resulting in a telegram to the Chairman of the Board by one of the crew members, reiterating his opinion of the conduct of the two officers. Eleven additional witnesses were then subpoenaed to testify on the incidents that took place on the MICHAEL after the collision. Three others were questioned at other ports, but little was added to what had been formerly adduced, that is, that the master and the pilot acted as if in a state of mental aberration during the period immediately after the fire."

The Board made the following conclusions:

"1. Even without adequate testimony from the DODGE, it is considered that the primary cause for this disaster was Pilot Lemson's reversal of his proposed passing, and the failure of the MICHAEL to take proper action when a passing situation was not clearly agreed upon. The master and pilot claimed they never heard any answer to the first one-blast passing signal, yet they permitted the MICHAEL to proceed blindly on at 15 knots, closing the DODGE at an estimated relative speed of 25 knots. It is considered that the danger should have been immediately apparent to them when it was evident that the vessels would meet at or near the junction of the Reedy Island-Baker Channels, where both would be changing to new courses with the attendant necessity for each to clearly understand the intention of the other before they met.

"2. It is also considered that any uncertainty on the developing situation should have been resolved at this time, and that the apparent failure of the DODGE to answer the one-blast signal indicated at least a reduction in speed and the use of the danger signal on the part of the MICHAEL. Such action would also have warned the DODGE, made her aware of the uncertainty of the MICHAEL, and would have provided her with an opportunity to have taken preventive measures herself. However, notwithstanding the failure of the master and pilot to hear it, it is considered that the DODGE did in fact answer the one-blast passing signal, thereby assenting to a port-

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to-port passing. Her signal was clearly heard by two of the men on watch on the MICHAEL, and also by the pilot of the SOCONY VACUUM that had passed the MICHAEL outbound shortly before the collision.

"3. Having permitted the MICHAEL to proceed into a position of danger, the action of the pilot in using the two-blast and later a one-blast signal was considered in extremis, and consequently best suited in his own mind to avoid the collision, and as such are questions of judgment. It is evident that the results of his original fault had overtaken him, since the decrease in speed was only signaled when it was obvious that the port-to-port passing was in doubt, and by then it was too late. Whether the DODGE suffered a steering casualty or poor steering caused her to change course so as to show a green light immediately before the collision lacks explanation, as does her failure to navigate on her own right-hand side of the channel. Witnesses who might have testified to these circumstances are believed to have perished, and lacking their version, that of the MICHAEL must be accepted that the collision took place on the easterly side of the channel. The Board took note of the discrepancies between the testimony and the record of bells and maneuvers as shown in the MICHAEL's bell books. Those in the deck bell book ended some time before the collision, and the officer who could have explained the absence of entries is presumed to have died. However, the engine room bell book places the time of collision at 2234, some minutes after it allegedly happened, according to all the bridge witnesses. The fact that the bells were customarily struck on the MICHAEL, and that the helmsman had not made five bells for 2230 are considered to be more indicative, since the chief engineer stated that the entry made relative to the crash was done after it happened, and then by estimate. Allowing the same difference in time as shown by other entries in both bell books, the full astern bell was given about two minutes before the collision, and this would agree fairly well with the pilot's estimate of the speed of the MICHAEL through the water when the vessels collided. No satisfactory explanation was given for the failure of the telegraph to function properly after the collision, but it is considered this failure had no bearing on the collision itself.

"4. Both the master and the pilot left the bridge with the engines on full astern, and no attempt was made at the time by any of the officers to ring the general alarm or take any steps for the safety of their shipmates. The conclusion is inevitable that they were seeking their own safety with no thought of others. Their mental state can be gauged by the condition in which they left No. 1 Boat, a lack of seamanship that



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would probably not be overlooked by either if done by anyone else. The master's statement that his actions were influenced by the thoughts of the safety of the crew is not considered adequate, nor can his actions be deemed in the best interest of his vessel. His testimony that he rang the general alarm and stopped the engine by telephone because the telegraph became inoperative after the impact and before he went aft also is open to question, since the Second Assistant testified that he saw the master in the chief engineer's room aft, and heard him talking to the engine room over that phone. Further, the telegraph was tested the following day and nothing was found the matter with it.

"5. The Board also noted that the radio operator removed the radio log from the vessel without permission and contrary to the regulations that this document be kept on board until sighted by F.C.C. officials. He later forwarded the log by mail from his home in Atlanta, Georgia."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. That the pilot of the MICHAEL, Harry S. Lannon be cited for violation of Article 18, Rule III for failure to sound the danger signal.

"2. That Pilot Lannon also be cited for violation of Article 28 in that he failed to signal the full astern motion of his engines to a meeting vessel.

"3. That the attention of the authority having jurisdiction over his license be invited to his conduct after the collision.

"4. That the master of the MICHAEL, Nelson M. Amy, be charged with negligence for neglecting to sound the general alarm.

"5. That Captain Amy be charged with negligence for failure to comply with the station bill in that he failed to muster his crew at either fire or boat stations in an emergency.

"6. That Captain Amy be charged with negligence for leaving the bridge of his vessel while under way without a licensed officer in charge.

"7. That Captain Amy be charged with negligence for failure to reduce speed or take adequate measures to prevent collision when a passing situation had not been agreed upon with an approaching vessel.

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"8. That the radio operator of the MICHAEL, Edward R. Brittain, Z-413295, be charged with misconduct for removing the radio log from the MICHAEL in a manner contrary to regulations.

"9. That the A. C. DODGE be cited for the penalties provided for operating in violation of 46 USC 222 (crew deficiencies).

"10. That inasmuch as Pilot Lemson was acting under the authority of his State Pilot's license, a copy of this report and the proceedings of the Board transmitted herewith be provided to the American Pilots' Association, 423 Washington Building, Washington, D. C. for their information and appropriate action.

"11. That the monetary penalty against Pilot Lemson be held in abeyance pending action by the appropriate State authorities."

REMARKS

6. R.S. 4450, as amended (46 USC 239) provides that "If the Commandant of the Coast Guard shall find evidence of criminal liability on the part of any licensed officer or holder of a certificate of service, he shall refer all of the evidence and the findings in such investigation to the Attorney General for investigation by and prosecution through the Federal District Attorney of the district having jurisdiction, under the provisions of the Criminal code." The evidence in the record indicates that signals were exchanged for a normal port-to-port passing between the MICHAEL and the A. C. DODGE shortly before the collision and that thereafter an erratic change of heading by the A. C. DODGE set in motion a chain of events including errors of judgment on the part of the pilot on board the MICHAEL which resulted in the collision and the loss of ten lives. The record of investigation of subject casualty therefore contains no evidence of criminal liability on the part of said pilot under the provisions of the Criminal Code.

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

/s/P. A. OVENDEN  
P. A. OVENDEN

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; collision between the MW  
A. C. DODGE and the SS MICHAEL, Delaware River, 25 May  
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Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/ H. C. SHEPHEARD  
H. C. SHEPHEARD

APPROVED: Dec 30 1952

/s/ A. C. RICHMOND  
A. C. RICHMOND  
Rear Admiral, U. S. Coast Guard  
Acting Commandant