

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

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



MVI
(CIUDAD DE BUENOS
AIRES - MORMACSURF a-12 Bd)

17 APR 1958

Commandant's Action

on

Marine Board of Investigation; sinking of the Argentine SS CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES with loss of life following collision with the American SS MORMACSURF on 27 August 1957 in the Rio de La Plata

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. On the night of 27 August 1957 the American SS MORMACSURF, a freighter of 7,980 gross tons, was downbound in the Rio de La Plata, en route from Rosario to Buenos Aires. The upbound Argentine SS CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES, a passenger vessel of 3,754 gross tons, attempted to cross the course of the freighter, was struck on her starboard side at almost a right angle and sank 23 minutes later. The number of passengers and crew aboard is unknown. The MORMACSURF rescued 78 persons, local craft numerous others, but 75 to 80 were lost.
3. No personnel or survivors from the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES were available for interrogation by the Board and efforts to obtain copies of the record of an investigation conducted by the Argentine authorities were unsuccessful. It was therefore impossible for the Board to determine whether human error or mechanical fault caused the passenger vessel to cross the bow of the freighter; similarly no information was obtainable as to the condition and accessibility of the lifesaving equipment or other facts which might possibly have disclosed why so many lives were lost. Coast Guard Headquarters has since been informed that the Argentine newspaper La Prensa quoted survivors as stating that "many passengers and crew who lost their lives could have lived if ordinary and basic precautions had been adopted." "There was not enough salvage(lifesaving) equipment aboard *** and such equipment as there was was not in good working condition."
4. The Board concluded that the MORMACSURF was not at fault in this collision, and that her rescue operations were timely and efficient.
5. The report by the Marine Board of Investigation is approved.

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

REPORT OF

MARINE BOARD OF INVESTIGATION

Convened on 17 October 1957, Appraisers Building,
630 Sansome Street, San Francisco, California

To inquire into the collision involving the SS
MORMACSURF (U. S.) and the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES
(Argentine) on the Rio de La Plata, on 27 August 1957,
with loss of life.

The Marine Board of Investigation, after a careful consideration of the facts and circumstances connected with the incident, and having considered the evidence adduced, finds as follows:

Findings of Fact

1. The U. S. freight ship MORMACSURF and the Argentine passenger vessel CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES collided in Rio de La Plata at night on 27 August 1957, as a result of which the Argentine vessel sank. The MORMACSURF suffered a damaged bow, and a large number of persons on the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES were lost.

2. The vessels involved were:

a. The MORMACSURF, a U. S. registered and inspected C3 steam ocean freight ship of 7980.60 gross tons, Official No. 252748, home port, New York, N. Y.; built in 1944 of steel hull, owned and operated by Moore-McCormack Lines, Inc., 5 Broadway, New York, N. Y. The vessel was equipped with telegraph and radio telephone, radar and gyro compass. It was under command of Captain Kenneth J. Sommers, License No. 152196, Issue 2-5, of 10 Sommers Court, Belvedere, Tiburon, California. It was being piloted by Argentine Pilot, Damian Abalos.

b. The CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES, as listed in Lloyd's Register, Official Number 06615, 3754 gross and 2177 net tons, home port, Buenos Aires. Overall length, 364 feet 7 inches, breadth, 44 feet 2 inches, draft, 12 feet 2 inches, built in 1914, maximum speed 14 knots; classified for service between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, and owned by Compania de Navegacion Fluvial, Argentina.

3. The weather at the time of the casualty was dark and clear, with variable light airs and good visibility. Current, two knots.

4. The MORMACSURF departed Rosario, Argentina, at 1200 hours on 27 August 1957, down bound for Buenos Aires, drawing 18 feet 2 inches forward, and 20 feet 8 inches aft, and carrying 3261 tons of food-stuffs and general cargo.

5. The voyage down river had been uneventful and the vessel was proceeding through the water at 14 knots on 60 RPMs as it emerged from the Rio Parana Barca shortly after 2217, and entered the Rio de La Plata heading downstream.

6. At 2230, the MORMACSURF had just passed Buoy No. 135 in the Rio de La Plata, close aboard to port, and at 2235, had Buoy No. 132 abeam 50 feet to starboard. At approximately this latter time the pilot and the mate on watch noticed a group of lights down river, and identified them through the binoculars as deck lights of a vessel about two points off the port bow. Soon thereafter this same vessel's green running light was sighted at which time the pilot, Damian Abalos, had the helmsman start swinging the ship slowly to the right. At 2240, the approaching ship still showed a green light and Abalos put the engines on standby, then blew one blast on the ship's whistle. At 2241, the engines were put half-ahead while the other ship continued to show a green light and appeared to be angling toward the MORMACSURF. At 2242, Abalos blew another blast on the whistle, had the rudder put hard right and the engines full astern. At 2244, the MORMACSURF collided with the other vessel, the bow of the MORMACSURF piercing the other ship's starboard side amidship at nearly a right angle.

7. Captain Sommers, who had left the bridge on entering the La Plata, was called by the mate in time to see the other ship through a porthole close aboard, and he ran to the bridge, arriving just before the impact. On reaching the bridge he telephoned the engine room to stop the engines which was done.

8. The two vessels remained together for a couple of minutes, thereafter drifting slowly apart, during which time men on the bow of the MORMACSURF were securing a hawser and a pilot ladder to the other ship, identified as the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES.

9. Four male persons scrambled up the pilot ladder to the bow of the MORMACSURF from the other ship, but then the ladder was dropped at the lower end and could not be re-secured.

10. Less than ten minutes after the collision the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES started listing to port following which the general alarm was sounded on MORMACSURF at 2249 by bell and whistle, and at 2252, her crew had the boats ready to lower. As the other ship began to list heavily Captain Sommers ordered the boats lowered and liferings and preservers thrown to persons jumping from the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES into the river.

11. After developing considerable list the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES began to settle and at 2306 sank, whereupon Captain Sommers had his radio operator send out an S. O. S. repeating the urgent message reporting the collision previously dispatched by the pilot at 2325, giving the apparent location of the collision which had been omitted from an urgent radio message received from the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES at 2300.

12. The vessel's gangways were lowered and lines thrown to the nearby survivors, and by 2325, a number of survivors had been rescued by these means. Meanwhile the two lifeboats circled around picking up survivors under the glare of the MORMACSURF searchlights, and assisted by some local craft that had hastened to the scene, including the Tug PANCHO, the PALLQ DELEPHINA, the PAULSITA DON PABLO 2253, the ESTRELLIA DEL MAR and the VICENTE VASQUES. By 0200 a total of seventy-eight (78) survivors, including eight (8) women had been rescued and put aboard the MORMACSURF. Six of those rescued were slightly injured and one was a litter case. All were given first aid and care by the MORMACSURF's crew and on their own volition transferred to the aforementioned local craft, which also had survivors aboard for transportation ashore. Thereafter the two lifeboats were raised and secured.

13. The MORMACSURF had managed to pay out the starboard anchor at 2320, and remained at anchor until 0750 the next morning when anchor was weighed and the ship continued on down to Buenos Aires.

14. During the night the ship was continuously checked for damage and leaks and found not to be taking water, although the bow was severely stove in.

15. Reports indicated approximately 75 to 80 persons had been lost off the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES.

16. After the arrival of the MORMACSURF at Buenos Aires an investigation of the incident was conducted by the officials of the Argentine Government which included inspection of the MORMACSURF and her lifesaving equipment, as well as interrogation of the Master and crew. The vessel was surveyed, received some temporary repairs and authorized to return to the U. S. for permanent repairs. The Master and crew, after several days of detention, were all granted authorization to return to the U. S. with the ship.

17. Witnesses interviewed included:

- a. Kenneth J. Sommers, Master, MORMACSURF, 10 Sommers Court, Little Reed Park, Belvedere, Tiburon, California.
- b. Edward A. Ozalin, 3rd Mate, 3717 Grant Road, Mountain View, Calif., also, 340 Twin Lane, South Wantaugh, New York.
- c. Augustine A. Lopez, helmsman, 1502 Fries Ave., Wilmington, Calif.
- d. Severo Ibyan, lookout, 56 South Park, San Francisco, Calif.
- e. Ford Feltz, 1st Asst. Engr., Bedford Rd., Cumberland, Maryland.

- f. John S. Wizowski, 3rd Asst. Engr., 329 - 14th Ave., San Francisco, Calif.
- g. Leonard A. Johnson, Radio Operator, 10300 - 51st Ave., S. Seattle, Washington

The pilot of the MORMACSURF was not available for interrogation, nor were any of the personnel serving on the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES, nor any of the survivors of that vessel.

The Board regrets that only the Master and members of the crew of the MORMACSURF were available for interview and is of the opinion that the lack of any testimony from witnesses from the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES limits the Board in coming to more complete findings.

Opinions

1. It is the opinion of the Board that the MORMACSURF was proceeding on her own side of the channel and took reasonable precautions to avoid the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES, which vessel improperly crossed to her port side of the channel and having the MORMACSURF on her starboard side failed to give way, but attempted to cross ahead of the MORMACSURF, thus causing the collision.

2. If there was any mechanical failure or difficulty or outside force which induced the CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES to leave her own side of the channel it was not discovered by the Board from the evidence available. The Board is of the further opinion that the MORMACSURF's rescue operations were timely and efficient, that there was no negligence on the part of any personnel on the MORMACSURF, nor any failure of material or equipment of said vessel involved.

Recommendations

1. The Board makes no recommendations.

(Signed) F. A. Reicker
F. A. REICKER
Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
Chairman

(Signed) L. C. Walen
L. C. WALEN
Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
Member

(Signed) A. C. Hoens, Jr.
A. C. HOENE, JR.
Lieutenant Commander, USCG
Member - Recorder