

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD  
Washington, D. C.

MVI  
10 July 1953  
(P. N. ELLIS a-8 80)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; capsizing and sinking of  
motor tug P. N. ELLIS, Atchafalaya River, 23 April 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 0230 on 23 April 1953 the motor tug P. N. ELLIS, of 52 g.t. with a tow of three barges, proceeded into the Atchafalaya River. Approximately 3/4 of a mile below the junction of Bayou Boeuf, an attempt was made to round up the tow, during which the P. N. ELLIS became unmanageable due to the current and other conditions of the river forcing her port quarter up against the side of one of the barges and causing her to heel sharply, fill with water and sink. Of the nine crew members on board the P. N. ELLIS only three were rescued. The six crew members who lost their lives are as follows:

Leslie L. Recnel, Jr., Chief Engineer  
Harry M. Lewis, Second Engineer  
George W. Aderman, Deckhand  
Curtis J. Campbell, Deckhand  
Horace W. Fleming, Deckhand  
Quintan Mabrey, Cook

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. On 23 April 1953 at about 0230 a.m. CST, the tug P. N. ELLIS while towing three empty barges on a hauler on the Atchafalaya River in the vicinity of its east bank about one mile below its junction with Bayou Boeuf, capsized and sank resulting in loss of life of six crew members and loss of the P. N. ELLIS.

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"2. The P. N. ELLIS was a Diesel inland towboat, having a metal hull of the following dimensions: 52 gross tons, 30 net tons, 58.0 feet long by 15.6 feet breadth by 7.9 feet depth, 300 horsepower single screw. Official Number 216069, built 1918, owned by Koch-Ellis Marine Contractors, New Orleans, La.

"3. The tow of the P. N. ELLIS consisted of tank barges KE-19, KE-20, KE-18. The KE-19 and KE-20 have dimensions of 170' x 35' x 9.5', 458 gross tons, 8000 bbl, and the KE-18 has dimensions of 175' x 35' x 9.5', 532 gross tons, 8000 bbl capacity. The three barges were made up semi-rigid, end to end as a unit, and the lead barge KE-19, was secured to the P. N. ELLIS by a bridle consisting of two 32' x 1" wire cable and an 8" manila hawser let out to 12 feet, made fast to the towing bits and the balance of the hawser faked on deck. This made the overall length of tug and tow approximately 583 feet.

"4. The draft of the tug was approximately 7 feet and of the barges less than a foot. Freeboard of tug estimated to be approximately one foot at its lowest point making weather deck door sills to engine room approximately 2 feet above the waterline.

"5. The deck house of the P. N. ELLIS was fitted with four doors on the port side and three on the starboard. These doors were hinged dogged doors the sills of which were approximately 12" to 14" above the main deck. On the starboard side from forward aft they opened into the galley, bathroom, engine room and shower room. Aside from the engine room the above named spaces have decks which are considered to be watertight or nearly so. Witnesses state that the deck house doors were customarily left open during periods of good weather and were open at the time of this casualty.

"6. The towing bits, constructed of 6" steel pipe, two verticals with one cross piece, were located immediately abaft the deck house approximately 12 to 15 feet forward of the rudder. The vessel had topped off her fuel and water tanks at Destrehan, Louisiana and had traveled approximately 118 miles.

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"7. The Board examined the towline, bridles, barges KE-18, KE-19, KE-20 and two Koch-Ellis towboats, one slightly larger and one slightly smaller than the P. N. ELLIS, but having similar characteristics. There was no damage to the barges, no marks that could be attributed to this casualty and the hawser and bridle were intact and in good condition. The manila hawser approximately 250-300 feet long was fairly new and had only one small cut in its strands and that was far distant from the part of the line believed to have been made up on the bitts. The bridle and hawser were rigged to approximate conditions at time of the casualty.

"8. Mr. Morton Leroy Cannon (no license or document), the mate, was on watch in the wheelhouse at the time the tow approached Bayou Shaffer while west bound. He called deckhand G. W. Adelman and H. Fleming to stand by the towing bitts while the tow proceeded by the junction of Bayou Boeuf and Bayou Shaffer and into the Atchafalaya with orders to slack off or cut the towline if necessary, with a fire axe upon hearing the emergency signal of two blasts on the whistle. No difficulty was encountered at this junction and the tow proceeded on to the Atchafalaya River, entered the river and headed down towards its west bank. When approximately 1/2 to 3/4 of a mile below the junction of Bayou Boeuf and the river, Mr. Cannon commenced rounding his tow up to the left in order to head upstream and tie his barges at the east bank one mile below Bayou Boeuf. To do so he used 1/4 speed ahead and left rudder. Mr. Cannon stated that at 1/4 speed in still water pulling three empty barges the speed would be 2 miles an hour. The tow proceeded in rounding up to a point where the barges were within ten degrees of being parallel to the east bank, the lead barge headed slightly towards that bank and approximately 100 feet from it. At this time, the bow of the P. N. ELLIS, which was ahead of the tow with left rudder and a full strain on her towing hawser, fell off rapidly to the left and continued around until her port quarter was snugged up against the port side of the KE-19. During this maneuver, which occupied but a matter of moments, the vessel heeled sharply to starboard,

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filled and sank. Mr. Cannon stated that it happened so suddenly that he blew the two blast signal to slack the tow as soon as the bow commenced to fall off and before he could alter his rudder or engines the ELLIS heeled and sank barely allowing him sufficient time to escape through a wheelhouse window on the port side. Just before he jumped from the wheelhouse he saw the head and shoulders of deckhand H. Fleming on the stern and also saw Mr. Trahan leave the deck house on the port side. Paul Dubois, relief master, who had been asleep in the cabin immediately abaft the wheelhouse, was awakened by two whistle blasts, recognized the emergency signal, got up and by the time he had pulled on his clothes, water was entering the cabin through the door located on the aft bulkhead. He yelled for the chief engineer in the dark and escaped through the screen door which had become jammed closed by a bunk mattress. By the time he got out the door and was between the stack and the cabin he was under water, the ELLIS having sunk, and he had to fight his way to the surface. Trahan, who had been asleep in the crew quarters, was awakened by water pouring through the porthole and door onto him as he lay in his bunk. Trahan stated that he slept on the left side of the boat, that it was heeled over to that side and that he crossed the room to the high side, left by the door, jumped overboard, came to the surface alongside the barges, passed between the rake ends of two adjoining barges and swam to the east bank where he was picked up by the JIM BOY. He stated also that the cook and a deckhand were also asleep in the room and that he saw Curtis Campbell jump overboard.

"9. The weather conditions at the time were calm, dark clear night with strong 5 to 6 mile current in the river caused by spring rains and comparatively low water in the Gulf. That portion of the river below its junction with Bayou Boeuf is subject to variable currents, eddies, and whirlpools and the river's depth is approximately 90 feet with numerous holes and stumps on the bottom in the vicinity of the east bank.

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"10. The crew of the P. N. ELLIS consisted of:

Paul Dubois, Relief Master  
Norton Leroy Cannon, Mate  
Leslie L. Beemel, Jr., Chief Engineer  
Harry M. Lewis, Second Engineer  
George W. Adelman, Deckhand  
Sidney Trahan, Deckhand  
Curtis J. Campbell, Deckhand  
Horace W. Fleming, Deckhand  
Quitman Mabrey, Cook

At the time of the casualty Cannon, Lewis, Adelman, and Fleming were on watch, the others believed to be sleeping.

"11. Shortly after the casualty Columbus J. Griffin, piloting the MV JIM BOY upstream in the Atchafalaya, heard a cry for help and by using his searchlight spotted Captain Dubois swimming in the water and picked him up. He then discovered the three barges, circled them and rescued Cannon from the water near the stern of a barge and picked up Trahan who had swum to the east bank. The three barges were then parallel to the east bank approximately 100 feet off and the bridle on the KE-19 was seen to lead down and forward into the water. The mainline towline was not visible and there was apparently a strain on the bridle as the barges were not drifting. Griffin at no time saw the P. N. ELLIS.

"12. Shortly after 0500 a.m. CST, 23 April 1953 Donald Dwyer proceeded from Morgan City, Louisiana with the MV ALABAMA to pick up barges KE-19, KE-20 and KE-18. He located the barges approximately 2000 yards below the junction of the Intracoastal Waterway (Little Wax Bayou) where they were found drifting, held in against the west bank by the wind with the KE-18 on the up-river end. They were still secured together, and the towing hawser and bridle were dragging in the water.

"13. Of the total crew only Paul Dubois, Norton Leroy Cannon, and Sidney Trahan survived. Bodies of Leslie L. Beemel, Jr., George W. Adelman, Horace W. Fleming, and Curtis J. Campbell have been recovered. Numerous efforts by the Coast Guard and private individuals have been made to locate the P. N. ELLIS by diving and dragging but to no avail. Bodies of Harry M. Lewis and Quitman Mabrey have not been recovered.

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"14. Witnesses interviewed were:

Paul Dubois, Master, tug P. N. ELLIS  
Sidney Trahan, Deckhand, tug P. N. ELLIS  
Morton Leroy Cannon, Mate, tug P. N. ELLIS  
Harry Koch, President, Koch-Ellis Marine  
Contractors, Inc.  
Columbus J. Griffin, Master MV JIM BOY  
Donald Dwy, Master, MV ALABAMA

"15. Vessels rendering assistance were:

MV JIM BOY - Genac Towing Co., Houma, La.  
MV ALABAMA - Sam Carline, Inc., Berwick, La.  
CG 56305 - Morgan City, La.

"16. Barges KB-19, KB-20 and KB-18 are inspected and sea-worthy. The P. N. ELLIS is an uninspected vessel and personnel employed thereon were not licensed or documented by the Coast Guard. Captain Paul Dubois holds a valid Tankerman's Certificate.

"17. There were life preservers on board the P. N. ELLIS but they were not used due to the time element in this casualty. There was no alarm system installed in the living and/or working spaces for calling the crew in an emergency."

4. The Board made the following Conclusions:

"1. From the foregoing it is concluded that the P. N. ELLIS, while rounding up her tow in the Atchafalaya River approximately one mile below Morgan City, Louisiana on 23 April 1953, tripped and immediately sank with loss of lives of six crew members. The combined effects of a strong river current, eddies, and whirlpools, unskillfulness in navigation, and poor seamanship are believed to have been the causes of the casualty.

"2. The Board is of the opinion that Morton Leroy Cannon, the mate on watch, failed to recognize the risk and hazard of this rounding up maneuver and therefore did not alert his crew, failed to set the highest condition of watertight integrity possible by use of watertight closures on the main deck, and failed to use his rudder and engines to their best advantage. It is hard to believe that Cannon kept his rudder

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left once the vessel commenced to take a sheer in that direction. However, because of the difference in draft between tug and barges and the direction of pull on the hawser and location of towing bits, it appears that the P. N. ELLIS was rudder bound or nearly so and that the rudder would have little effect unless the maximum power of the main engine were employed.

"3. Because of the relatively short length of towing bridle and hawser and the difference of freeboard and draft between tug and barges once the P. N. ELLIS sheered left she became broadside to the current and was set down, causing the hawser to dip under the rake end of the lead barge, KE-19, pull the port quarter of the P. N. ELLIS in against the port bow of the KE-19, thereby heeling and dipping her lowest point of freeboard on the starboard side into the current. Since the doors to the engine room and other spaces were open it took only a few moments for her to fill and sink.

"4. It is further considered that this was a maneuver which should not have been attempted under these conditions and that a three barge tow such as this requires the use of a tugboat having much greater power and stability when maneuvering in strong and treacherous currents.

"5. Because of the manner in which the barges were secured to the P. N. ELLIS and the fact that the barges came adrift from the P. N. ELLIS after the vessel had sunk, that there was no damage to the towing hawser and that the mate saw Mr. Fleming, who had been ordered to stand by the hawser, at his station as the boat capsized, it is concluded that the two deckhands had nearly succeeded in casting the tow adrift before the P. N. ELLIS sank and had therefore carried out their orders insofar as was possible.

"6. There was no failure of machinery or other material defect of the P. N. ELLIS or barges or her tow which caused or contributed to this casualty.

"7. This casualty was not the result of any act of misconduct, incompetence, inattention to duty, culpable negligence, or violation of any law or regulation by licensed or certificated or other personnel of the P. N. ELLIS and, therefore, action under R.S. 4450 or assessment of any penalty is not applicable.

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"8. No personnel of the Coast Guard or any other government agency caused or contributed to this casualty, nor did any aid to navigation or the lack thereof, or any improperly charted object or area cause or contribute thereto.

"9. There is no evidence of any damage having been sustained by government property as a result of this casualty.

"10. Assistance rendered by personnel and equipment of the Coast Guard was adequate.

"11. Until such time as legislation is enacted which will subject all vessels employed in commerce, regardless of method of propulsion, to inspection and which will require the operating personnel thereof to be duly licensed and certificated, this type of casualty will continue to occur as it has in the past, making the Coast Guard, as a regulatory agency, powerless to prevent or reduce in number this type of casualty or to minimize the resulting loss of life and damage to property."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. That all vessels employed in towing inspected barges should be subject to inspection and certification by the Coast Guard and that officers employed thereon should be licensed personnel.

"2. That consideration should be given to the regulating of horsepower tonnage ratio of inland tows by some responsible agency.

"3. That no action be taken against the owner or operator of the P. N. ELLIS as this case is considered to be one of unskillfulness of navigation rather than negligence.

"4. That Columbus J. Griffin, master of the NW JIM BOY, be commended for his prompt action in rescuing the survivors of the P. N. ELLIS and in connection therewith a sample letter is submitted with this report.

"5. That no further action be taken and the case closed."



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REMARKS

6. Recommendations 1 and 2 of the Board with respect to the regulation and inspection of towing vessels require legislation. A number of proposed bills to extend U. S. inspection statutes and regulations thereunder to motor towing vessels have been considered by the Congress during the past session and unless some such proposed bills are enacted into law, there is no authority to regulate the safety of towing vessels by inspection and certification for seaworthy purposes.

7. In connection with Recommendation 4 of the Board, it would appear that while the action of Columbus J. Griffin, master of the MV JIM BOY, in rescuing the survivors of the P. N. ELLIS is commendable, such action was not above and beyond the call of his duty so as to warrant specific citation.

8. 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

FIRST ENDORSEMENT TO MVI memorandum of 10 July 1953

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15 July 1953

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

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

APPROVED: JUL 17 1953

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