

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

Address reply to:
COMMANDANT
U. S. Coast Guard
Headquarters
Washington 25, D. C.

MVI
17 August, 1950
(JANE SMITH a-8 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation: Motor towboat JANE SMITH, collision with bridge and foundering on 19 May, 1950, 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, Opinions, Conclusions, and Recommendations, has been reviewed and is forwarded herewith.

2. The motor propelled towboat JANE SMITH, built in 1948 of typical Western River design, 100' in length, 22' breadth and height above water line about 23', on 19 May, 1950, was engaged in pushing two light tank barges downbound in the Atchafalaya River. Upon approaching the railway bridge at Melville, La., her signals for passage through the bridge were not immediately answered which necessitated maneuvering in the river to keep in line with the axis of the draw span. When the span was raised the JANE SMITH although not lined up with the axis of the draw span and with insufficient steering way undertook to pass through the bridge. The strong current forced the JANE SMITH and her tow into a diagonal position between the piers in the open span. The two barges broke loose and free. The current forced the JANE SMITH against the abutting closed span of the bridge with the upper part of the JANE SMITH being held by the closed span of the bridge and the hull being subjected to the strong current which severely listed the vessel and caused her to become flooded and founder in 93 feet of water. The weather conditions at the time of this casualty were in all respects excellent.

3. As a result of this casualty, the following five persons lost their life:

William K. Weldon, Captain
Russell R. Randolph, Pilot
Timothy Cushing, Crew Member
Harold Lynch, Crew Member
Floyd L. Ashley, Crew Member

4. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"(1) On May 19, 1950 at approximately 2130 the M/V JANE SMITH, pushing two light tank barges, NBC-891 and NBC-892, bound downstream in the Atchafalaya River, collided with the Texas and Pacific Railway Bridge at Melville, Louisiana, in the vicinity of Milepost 30. As a consequence the JANE SMITH sank in 93 feet of water. Of her crew of eleven (11) two (2) members met death by drowning, three (3) are missing and presumed to be dead. Damage to the two barges consisted

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of some indents and a moderate fracture in the deck plating of each; the monetary estimate of this totals \$1,700.00. The JANE SMITH had a current market value of between \$150,000 and \$200,000 and, for the time being at least, is to be presumed a total loss. Damage to the bridge was confined to a bent lateral steel member and to several chipped places in a concrete abutment; none of this was considered serious enough to warrant the interruption of train traffic. Salvaging of the JANE SMITH is under discussion and will probably be undertaken when the river stage recedes to normal.

(2) The following comprised the crew of the M/V JANE SMITH at the time of the accident and were employees of the Oil Transport Company, Inc. of 338 Baronne Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.

William R. Weldon, 38, 9540 Flora St., St. Louis, Mo., Master
Russell R. Randolph, 58, Box 927, Paducah, Kentucky, Pilot
Billy Moore, 23, 309 South "C" St., Pensacola, Fla., Deck Mate
Lennis L. Verret, 33, 2729 Frankfort St., New Orleans, La., Extra Pilot
Harvey A. Odom, 34, 3717 N. Dorgenois St., New Orleans, La., Deckhand
Timothy Cushing, 41, 736 Monroe Street, Gretna, La., Deckhand
Charles W. Koch, 31 Box 26-V, Sta. A, New Orleans, La., Chief Engineer
Robt. K. Jones, 22, 606 N. 14th St., E. St. Louis, Ill., Ass't Engineer
Vince J. Matherne, 22, Larose, La., Oiler
Floyd L. Ashley, 45, 7904 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans, La., Oiler
Harold Lynch, 47, 1111 Euterpe St., New Orleans, La., Cook

(3) The survivors include Lennis Verret, who suffered an abrasion of the scalp and exposure in a swamp, Billy Moore, Harvey A. Odom, Charles W. Koch, Robert K. Jones, and Vince J. Matherne, none of whom reported injuries. William R. Weldon and Harold Lynch drowned and their bodies have been recovered. Russel R. Randolph, Timothy Cushing, and Floyd L. Ashley are still missing after a prolonged search of the area surrounding the scene of the accident. They are to be presumed lost.

(4) The M/V JANE SMITH was a pusher type towboat typical of this part of the country, with low freeboard, two deckhouses surmounted by a pilothouse; her bow was equipped with towing "knees", vertical steel members designed to fit against the stern of the tow thus providing a firm connection. Her general dimensions were: Length 100 feet, breadth 22 feet, depth of hull 8 feet 3 inches, height above waterline about 25 feet. She was single screw, propelled by a General Motors Diesel motor of 1235 rated horsepower. The engine was remotely controlled from the pilothouse. The vessel was a little over two years old. Charles C. Smith Company of Houston, Texas are the owners; the Oil Transport Co., Inc., chartered and operated the vessel. The tow consisted of two tank barges, each 240 feet long by 50 feet wide, constructed of steel. These craft are especially designed for what is known as a "streamlined unit." One end of the barge is square while the other - the bow - has a spoon shape, the out-away extending back some 90 feet. When the two vessels are placed with squared ends together, tandem fashion and secured, they are as one huge barge with modeled ends making for

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better handling. The towboat is then made fast to one of the "bows" by facing it up to the towing knees; a complete and integrated self-propelled unit that can be maneuvered around sharp bends with comparative ease is thus obtained. The two barges, NBC-891 and NBC-892, belonged to Charles C. Smith Company, 905 M & M Bldg., Houston 2, Texas, and were operated by Oil Transport Company, Inc.

EVENTS ON THE M/V JANE SMITH

(5) The M/V JANE SMITH tow was made up in the manner described above upon leaving Simmesport, Louisiana at or about 1830 of 19 May 1950, the last departure prior to the casualty. On the evening of 19 May the tow had proceeded down the Atchafalaya without serious difficulty; at about 2100 the Melville, La. railroad bridge was approached to a point approximately one mile upstream from the only draw in this span. The Master, William R. Weldon, was at the con; he was steering, working the engine controls, manipulating two searchlights and handling the whistle as necessary. Weldon had the six p.m. to twelve p.m. watch; this was his first trip through the Atchafalaya waterway. For this reason Pilot Lennis L. Verret had boarded the towboat at Simmesport, La. with instructions from the Oil Transport Company to assist and advise the Master in the conning of the tow; however, this did not include the actual handling of it. Although both Captain Weldon and Pilot Verret held licenses issued by this Service, neither one was qualified as pilot by such document for the waters being navigated.

(6) The weather at this time was clear with excellent visibility; there was a light wind blowing but it was not sufficiently strong to affect the steering of the tow in any way. The velocity of the river current had been estimated from four to six miles per hour by the witnesses. A test made by the U. S. Corps of Engineers on the day following the casualty fixed the current at three and one-half (3½) miles per hour with no perceptible deviation to either side of the Melville railroad bridge.

(7) In addition to the Master Weldon and the pilot Verret who were in the pilothouse, there were on watch the Chief Engineer Koch, one oiler Matherne, and one deckhand Odom. Another pilot, Russell Randolph, in charge of the 12 to 6 watch, the cook Lynch, and the deck mate Moore were up and about in various parts of the vessel, some in the galley getting coffee, others lounging on deck. The balance of the crew, three in number, Jones, Cushing and Ashley, had turned in and were either asleep or in their bunks reading. The tow was now in the middle of the river heading toward the center of the draw opening which was one hundred and sixty feet (160') wide. The usual navigation lights were exhibited on the towboat and on the tow. The bridge lights marking the pier abutments, on each side of the draw, as well as the signal lights on the draw span were dis-

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played. The latter consisted of two lanterns in a vertical line at the center of the span which showed red when the draw was closed but automatically turned green when it was opened. The Melville railroad bridge has a vertical lift draw that operates like a large elevator, the center span rising and lowering between two vertical shafts. At this point the signal lights were showing red indicating that the draw-span was down in its normal position, or, in other words, closed.

(8) The tow continued downstream at slow speed and with caution until it was about one mile from the bridge when a whistle signal of three blasts was given in the way of a request for the draw to open. No immediate reply was received; a searchlight on the towboat was trained on the bridge. A second searchlight which was intended to be pointed at the river bank in order to show the distance the tow was off the shore was out of commission. However, the position of the tow in relation to the axis of the river was determined with reasonable certainty to have been parallel with it and in the center. Upon seeing that the draw was not to open right away the Master reversed the engine to hold the tow stationary in the current and at a safe distance approximately one-half ($\frac{1}{2}$) mile above the bridge. The time was approximately 2120. However, the tow did not remain completely stationary but drifted downstream toward the center of the draw twice during the interval of waiting for the bridge to open. Each time, it was backed upstream to more or less the original distance of one-half mile. At 2131 the draw span was raised to a sufficient height for the tow to pass under and a long blast was given on the bridge's siren signifying that the way was clear for the tow to proceed through. No other craft was moving in the vicinity.

(9) Meanwhile the tow had come downstream again; this time it was no longer lined up with the axis of the draw, being in a slightly diagonal position in the river, with its head pointing toward the left hand or East pier of the bridge-draw while the towboat was still farther to the eastward. Although Pilot Verret had previously advised the Master, Weldon, to favor this left hand pier as he had anticipated a set to the Westward, he now warned him that he thought the tow to be too close to this pier or abutment. The master placed the engine controls to what corresponded to emergency speed ahead, swinging the rudders to hard left at the same time in an attempt to "break" or pivot the tow around the East pier, straighten it into the opening and then drive through. Instead, and largely because the tow had lacked sufficient headway at the outset, the river current bearing along the entire length, on the starboard side, flung the port side of the lead barge against the left hand or East pier.

(10) Thereafter, events followed with disastrous suddenness. The tow bouncing off the left bridge abutment, veered sharply to the right while gathering headway through the draw; the starboard quarter of the lead barge fetched up against the opposite bridge abutment, 160 feet away. The entire tow was now oatercorner in the draw with the

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current still pushing along its starboard length and carrying it again toward the left abutment. The third impact came on the heels of the second with this time the port aft section of the "face" barge colliding with the concrete bridge pier. It was the hardest blow yet; it caused the starboard couplings between the towboat and the tow to part instantly. Then the port bow of the JANE SMITH struck the pier causing the port couplings to part; the two barges now free from the towboat but still secured to each other, continued downstream through the draw; the towboat already crosswise in the current only a short distance from the opening, but well to its left when separated from her tow, was swiftly borne down the remaining few feet and stopped only when her pilot house brought up against the bridge proper. Inasmuch as the clearance under the bridge was only sixteen (16) feet, the JANE SMITH momentarily remained with her topmost works jammed port side to against the fixed span in a more or less parallel position in relation to it and at right angle to the river current. At this point the engine was still set on emergency speed ahead, the rudders remained hard left. With the towboat held fast against the bridge structure at its top part the effect of the engine and the rudders imparted an exaggerated twisting motion toward the left. The net result was a tendency to shove the JANE SMITH'S bow under the bridge.

(11) The design peculiar to these river "pusher" towboats allows for a very low freeboard with considerable superstructure and other installations above the weather deck. In the case of the M/V JANE SMITH her freeboard amidships was not over twenty inches. This made it necessary, on occasion, to close the door in the main deckhouse leading to the galley as the wash from passing craft would slush over the flush gunwale. The design also invariably calls for two or more doors, some in single panel, other in two sections, and several windows, all of which are set in the main deckhouse and lead either directly or through passageways into the hull. Door sills are fitted but extend only six inches above deck. During most of the year, on account of the heat, it is customary to leave open all of these deck house apertures; this was the case on the JANE SMITH on the night of 19 May. The hull compartmentation in this vessel had four watertight bulkhead doors, two at each end of the engine room. These were fitted with gaskets and "dog" type fasteners but in order to permit ready access to other compartments they also were kept open. This condition made at least one half of the entire hull readily floodable in the event that water found access therein.

(12) With the pilot house of the M/V JANE SMITH still held fast against the edge of the Melville railway bridge, and acting as a fulcrum, the river current took immediate effect on the vessel's underwater section, pushing hard against the starboard side. This and the

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pull to port exerted by the engine and rudders instantly listed the tugboat at a sharp angle. Due to the low freeboard the starboard side of the deck dipped into the river within a period of seconds. The list increased enormously, the river water began pouring into the hull through the several open windows and two doors on the starboard side of the main deckhouse. As the water ran to the low side in the hull interior a considerable inclining moment was created and it appears that an angle of between forty-five and fifty degrees was reached before the JANE SMITH began settling in the water. Meanwhile, the electric generators were flooded and the lights went out; the engine had stopped. The vessel was well into her death plunge and, since the pilot house was now lower than the bridge, she began drifting downstream, passing under the span while she was now righting herself and sinking at the same time.

EVENTS ON THE TEXAS AND PACIFIC RAILWAY BRIDGE, MELVILLE, LA.

(13) The bridge tender, Vincent Loubelle, had come on duty at 1500 on 19 May 1950. The weather being pleasant he had kept the door in the watch house open. This was near the center of the bridge, to one side of the draw-span. Some time before the JANE SMITH tow had rounded a bend upstream and come into view, the bridge tender had become aware of its presence through watching the beam of the searchlight being swung to and fro. Loubelle waited until the towboat blew for the bridge to open. He asserted that although he was standing in the open he heard only one very short blast from the JANE SMITH. However, he took this to be the usual request and immediately checked by telephone with the train dispatcher to ascertain that no train was approaching the span. This was the usual procedure; it appears that it did not entail more than two minutes. Getting the "all clear" from the dispatcher, the bridge tender proceeded to lift the draw span. This is electrically operated and has a maximum clearance of 50 feet with a vertical lift rate of 11.32 feet per minute. The bridge machinery was in good order. As soon as the bridge tender deemed that the tow could clear the lifted draw span he blew a long blast on the bridge's siren to indicate to the JANE SMITH that the way was open. The total elapsed time between the initial whistle signal from the towboat and the answering "all clear" blast from the bridge is shown as 16 minutes, according to the records of the Texas and Pacific Railway Company.

EVENTS DURING AND AFTER THE SINKING OF THE M/V JANE SMITH

(14) Within a matter of seconds after the JANE SMITH began listing and filling with water she had sunk below the surface; during this interval one crew member, Moore, managed to grasp a wire cable

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hanging from the Melville bridge and pulled himself out; another crew member, Mathorne, helped himself up the high port side of the deck house and clambered into a skiff on the second deck; the skiff floated clear; a third crew member, Odum, feeling himself going down with the vessel kicked free and regained the surface where he came to safety and later assisted in picking up other survivors. Two more men, Kesh and Jones, were rescued in the vicinity of the bridge; Pilot Verret floated downstream in the darkness for a considerable distance and finally succeeded in reaching some weeds growing along the bank. He pulled himself out and onto a swampy section where he spent the night; he was found in an exhausted condition on the following forenoon. The Master, Weldon, was last seen at the controls of the pilothouse and presumably went down with the vessel. The cook, Lynch, who together with Pilot Randolph, was seen in the galley just before the impact, and two other crew members, Cushing and Ashley, scattered throughout the vessel's interior are missing. At this writing only Weldon's and Randolph's bodies have been recovered.

(15) The M/V JANE SMITH was not inspected annually by the U. S. Coast Guard and did not have a certificate of inspection inasmuch as motor towing vessels operating on inland waters are not presently required by law to conform with the regulations applicable to similar steam propelled vessels. She appears to have had one life preserver for each man on board, some ring buoys, fire extinguishers, and a nondescript small boat. The vessel was equipped with a general alarm bell; however, with the exception of the small boat in which one man floated off, none of the lifesaving equipment was used and the general alarm was not rung.

(16) A few members of the crew of the M/V JANE SMITH held licenses of various grades and/or certificates of competency issued by the U. S. Coast Guard though no one was licensed as pilot for the Atchafalaya waterway. However, these documents are not presently required by law on this type of vessel; neither were they a condition of employment. Therefore, none of the holders of said licenses and/or certificates were acting under them or by virtue thereof.

(17) The Marine Superintendent, Lamar C. Jones, of the Oil Transport Company, hurried to the scene shortly after hearing of the accident. The next morning he engaged a motorboat to run up and down the Atchafalaya River, along the banks, for a considerable distance below the Melville bridge and to search for survivors who could have possibly drifted with the current. None was found. Pilot Verret was rescued by another boat."

5. The board made the following Conclusions:

(1) That the testimony with respect to the time required by the bridge to open after the JANE SMITH sounded her signal is conflicting. Throughout the survivors' narratives runs the contention that there

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was some delay in the opening of the bridge and that if the span had risen sooner - when the tow was lined up as on the first two approaches - everything would have gone well. However, the conclusion of this Board is that no undue delay in the lifting of the draw span can be affirmatively established. Though it is true that the span did not open immediately, a liberal allowance in time should have been made for this by the party or parties responsible for the navigation of the tow. Certainly no bridge can be reasonably expected to open up at a moment's notice. A prudent navigator should consider the possibility of a major and unavoidable delay under these circumstances; a train may be on the way to cross the bridge; the lifting machinery may be out of order; the bridge tender may not have heard the boat's whistle signal because of some peculiar atmospheric conditions. It would appear that the safe thing is to wait well upstream, taking the river bank if necessary, until sure that passage through the draw can be effected without the added risk of maneuvering in close quarters.

(2) That there is marked insistence by two witnesses that the current was setting to the westward at least to some degree; this knowledge may have justified the action of both the Master of the towboat and Pilot Verret in favoring the East side of the draw in order to overcome any tendency to drift toward the West bank of the river. The Board concludes that there was no perceptible deflection of the current to either side in the vicinity of the Melville bridge draw. This is based on conducted experiments by the U.S. Corps of Engineers who obtained several "float paths", all of which failed to show any deviation from the main axis of the current flow. (See Exhibits 3 and 4.)

(3) That although the correct call signal by a vessel for the opening of a bridge draw is one long blast, as determined by the applicable Rules and Regulations issued by the War Department (see Exhibit 12), the fact that the JANE SMITH blew three somewhat short blasts does not constitute any fatal error. It is amply evident that the bridge tender construed correctly the signal he heard from the towboat as a call to grant passage.

(4) That there were no failures of equipment, machinery or material in the M/V JANE SMITH nor in the tank barges NBC-891 and NBC-892.

(5) That there was no apparent failure in the draw operating machinery of the Texas and Pacific Railway Company Bridge at Melville, La. at the time of the marine casualty, and immediately prior thereto.

(6) That there is no indication of any inattention to duty, misconduct, negligence or wilful violation of any law or regulation on the part of any member of the crew of the M/V JANE SMITH.

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(7) That no personnel of the U. S. Coast Guard or any other U. S. Government agency were connected directly or indirectly or contributed in any manner to the casualty.

(8) That no aids to navigation were involved.

(9) That no uncharted or incorrectly charted area or objects were involved.

(10) That no U.S. Government property of any character was damaged or destroyed.

(11) That the construction of entrance approach pilings on either side of the draw to the Melville bridge, both upstream and downstream of it, as brought out in the testimony by various witnesses and as recommended by some is not feasible principally by reason of the extreme depth of water.

6. The board made the following Opinions:

(1) That this marine casualty was the direct result of an error in judgment. Reluctant as one may be to criticize in retrospect and to find any fault with the actions of a person who can no longer speak for himself, the Board would be defeating its functions as well as its stipulated purpose if it failed to find that a grave mistake was made by the master, William R. Weldon, in attempting to push the JANE SMITH tow through the draw in the manner and under the circumstances described.

(2) That the Master's error in judgment was an honest one; that this error evidently stemmed from his lack of knowledge of local conditions; that he did everything in his power to extricate his vessel and her tow from a bad situation and finally that he paid with his life for this failure to properly appraise the situation beforehand and to act accordingly.

(3) That the reason the general alarm bell was not rung, or for that matter any sort of alert given, was the element of surprise and the swiftness with which one event followed the other after the JANE SMITH tow started through the draw and that there had been no premonition of impending danger to give cause for ringing the general alarm prior to the actual collision. Also that had this alarm been rung when the JANE SMITH was in her difficulties it is doubtful that it would have resulted in minimizing the loss of life.

(4) That the contributing factors to this casualty were the obvious lack of sufficient headway of the tow through the water and the failure to allow for ample maneuvering distance above the bridge on the final approach.

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(5) That finally, and though not directly connected, is the question of inspection by the U. S. Coast Guard. As it now stands there are no laws for the inspection and control over this type of craft (inland motor towing vessels) in regards to hull construction, freeboard, stability and other related technical items. Yet, these vessels are in day to day competition with steam vessels which must live up to the letter of the law. Certainly, no one can argue with honesty that a motor vessel is much less of a menace to life, limb, and property when improperly constructed, equipped and navigated than a similar steam vessel. It is, therefore, the opinion of this Board that motor vessels of more than fifteen (15) gross tons operating on rivers and inland waterways should be inspected and certificated and that officer personnel thereon should be properly licensed. It is felt that although the certificating of a vessel and the holding of a license by a pilot will not of itself prevent a marine casualty it most definitely tends to greatly reduce the risks that would be otherwise taken with impunity.

7. The Board made the following Recommendations:

(1) That death certificates, which are not available at this writing from the local authorities, be forwarded to Headquarters as soon as received and that they then be incorporated in this file.

(2) That, in view of the contents of paragraph 5 of the "Opinions", it is obvious that the M/V JANE SMITH not being under the jurisdiction of the U. S. Coast Guard as to her construction, equipment, and personnel, no positive course in the way of recommending remedial measures can be followed.

(3) That in the interest of safety to life, limb, and property, motor vessels of a burden of above fifteen (15) gross tons operating on rivers and other inland waters be brought into full compliance with the Marine Inspection Laws of the United States and that personnel of such vessels be properly licensed and certificated for the waters navigated.

REMARKS

8. Opinion 5 and Recommendation 3 of the Board in effect state that in the interest of safety to life, limb, and property, motor vessels of over 15 gross tons be brought into full compliance with the marine inspection laws and that the personnel on such vessels be licensed and certificated is not wholly concurred with. To carry out the Board's recommendation would require the inspection and certification of yachts, pleasure vessels, fishing vessels, and etc., which are over 15 gross tons regardless of where navigated. Furthermore, all crew members would require examination and licensing or certification by the Coast Guard as a condition to their

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employment on any such vessels. The record of subject casualty does not sustain any need for such a wide extension of the marine safety statutes and regulations thereunder in the interest of safety to life.

9. The cause for the subject casualty as stated by the Board was an error of judgment on the part of the master of the JANE SMITH who was in charge of her navigation at the time the casualty occurred. The recommendation of the Board that officers on such vessels possess the necessary qualifications and be properly examined and licensed by the Coast Guard as a condition to their employment on river towboats as well as the calculated extension of the marine safety statutes and regulations thereunder to such vessels is concurred with.

10. Congressional bills encompassing legislation suggested by the above recommendations are now before Congress for consideration and are as follows:

- (a) HR 7710 - A bill to apply the marine safety statutes and regulations thereunder to all motor vessels over 15 gross tons except pleasure vessels and vessels engaged in the fisheries.
- (b) HR 454 - A bill to apply the marine safety statutes and regulations thereunder to all seagoing motor propelled vessels.
- (c) HR 3254 - A bill to extend the marine safety statutes and regulations thereunder to seagoing motor fishing vessels of 15 gross tons or over.
- (d) HR 4450 - A bill to require licensed officers on motor vessels above 100 gross tons with certain exceptions for yachts and fishing vessels.

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

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

Acting Chief, LVI Division to
Commandant

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

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

APPROVED 6 September 1950

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