

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

Address Reply To:  
COMMANDANT  
U. S. Coast Guard  
Headquarters  
Washington 25, D. C.

MVI  
14 August, 1950  
File:(SIGNAL HILL a-11 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; sinking of fishing vessel SIGNAL HILL in Catalina Channel, California, on 10 June, 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 and Recommendations, has been reviewed and is forwarded herewith.

2. The Motorboat SIGNAL HILL, 14.86 gross tons, a converted LCVP built in 1944 was documented as a commercial fishing vessel. At or about 0500, 10 June, 1950, the SIGNAL HILL with eighteen male passengers for hire and two crew members on board departed from Long Beach, California, on a fishing excursion. Following failure of the bait tank the SIGNAL HILL at 1500 departed from Catalina Island for return to the mainland. When halfway between Catalina Island and the mainland the sea became choppy and due to free water in the vessel together with open ports in the machinery space through which additional water was shipped, the engine room became flooded and the vessel foundered at about 1655 at which time the vessel was abandoned. The survivors were rescued at or about 1900. As a result of this casualty the following persons aboard the SIGNAL HILL lost their life.

Joseph A. Robinson, Master  
William Pelletier, Passenger  
Jimmy Roberts, Passenger  
John J. Singer, Passenger

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"(1) The Motorboat SIGNAL HILL, official No. 257836 of 14.86 gross tons, was an uninspected commercial fishing vessel whose crew was not required to be licensed or certificated by the Coast Guard. Permanent License No. 280, issued by the Collector of Customs at Los Angeles, California, on 10 June, 1949, permitted the vessel to be employed in the Mackerel Fishery for one year. This license indicated that the SIGNAL HILL, (Ex LCVP C-35211) of Los Angeles, was built in the year 1944 at North Tonawanda, New York. Previous to documentation, the character of the vessel had been altered by having a conventional bow, with a raked stem, added; the cockpit decked over; a pilothouse added above the new main deck; port holes, two on each side, installed in the hull, in the way of the engine room, approximately 6 inches below the main deck; and a watertight bulkhead installed between the engine room and the forward cabin.

14 August, 1950  
(SIGNAL. INWI: a-11 Bi)

(2) The vessel was equipped with a, 250 horsepower, Hudson Invader engine; one, 3 horsepower, Briggs and Stratton motor connected to a pump which circulated water in the bait tank, and to a bilge pump. A bait tank, of approximately 300 gallons capacity, was carried on the main deck directly over the main-engine hatch. The vessel was also equipped with a two-way radiotelephone.

(3) Customs Form No. 1258 (Exhibit 3) dated 12 May, 1949, issued at Los Angeles, California, lists W. N. Ottele as master and J. A. Robinson and W. N. Ottele, each as half owner. Customs Form No. 1311 (Exhibit 4) dated 9 January, 1950, issued at Los Angeles, California, lists a change of masters from W. N. Ottele to J. A. Robinson. William N. Ottele, the W. N. Ottele listed on the Customs documents, claimed that sometime in October, 1949, he relinquished his interest in the SIGNAL HILL to his partner, Joseph A. Robinson, when it was found that the vessel needed a new motor which he was unable to contribute toward, and that this prompted the change in masters as reflected in Customs Form 1311. Mr. Ottele also claimed that he had no further knowledge of, or interest in, the operation of the vessel after this time.

(4) Sometime previous to 10 June, 1950, a group of employees of the Paramount Steel Corporation, Long Beach, California, planned a fishing trip for the employees of that plant. The organizers of the party were Kenneth L. Van Horn and Albert G. LeBlanc. Mr. Van Horn, being acquainted with the managing owner of the SIGNAL HILL, Joseph A. Robinson, arranged with Mr. Robinson, whom he knew to be carrying charter parties, for a trip to Catalina Island aboard the SIGNAL HILL on 10 June, 1950, for a stipulated fee of \$100 for a party of 20 or less members.

(5) At or about 5:00 a.m. on 10 June, 1950, a party of 18 men met at Hopkins Landing, Long Beach, California, and boarded the SIGNAL HILL. The owner/operator, Joseph A. Robinson was aboard the vessel at the time; and Alvis A. Ottele, a brother of William N. Ottele, was aboard as a crew member. (Alvis N. Ottele claimed that he was not paid for his services on this trip, but merely went along for the outing.) The SIGNAL HILL left Hopkins Landing at or about 5:00 a.m., and proceeded to the southeast end of Catalina Island, arriving there at or about 8:00 a.m. The party fished at various points off the southeast end of the island until approximately 3:00 p.m., at which time the vessel was close to the entrance of Avalon Bay, Catalina Island.

(6) At or about this time the water in the bait tank was discovered to be low, and, on examination, it was found that a hose coupling in the circulating pipeline to the bait tank, just below the main deck, had come apart, and water from the tank had drained into the bilge of the engine compartment. An effort was made to pump the water out of the bilge with the bilge pump, but the bilge pump was found to be inoperative. The pump to the circulating line was therefore disconnected and used to pump the water out of the bilge. Since the bait could not

14 August, 1950  
(SIGNAL HILL a-11 rd)

be kept alive without circulating water, it was decided by the party to return to Long Beach; so, shortly after 3:00 p.m., the SIGNAL HILL got underway and headed back toward Long Beach at a speed of about 11 knots. The weather at this time was clear and calm, with a light northwesterly breeze and unlimited visibility.

(7) About a half hour later, when the vessel passed out of the lee of Catalina Island, the wind increased from the northwest and seas and swells became heavier, causing the SIGNAL HILL to assume a starboard list of from 10 to 15 degrees and spray to break across the deck over the port side. The operator of the vessel, Joseph A. Robinson, thereupon decreased speed to about 5 knots and requested the passengers to stay on the port side of the vessel to correct the list. Several passengers became seasick as a result of the rough sea and went down into the forward cabin to lie down in the bunks located there. Water, seeping through the overhead deck planking, however, caused some of these men to return to the weather deck. Shortly after this Kenneth I. Van Horn, one of the passengers, opened the hatch to the engine room and noted that the water in the bilge was 6 to 8 inches higher than it was when the vessel left the vicinity of Avalon. He notified the operator of the boat of the condition, and the operator gave instructions for the crew member, Alvis Ottele, to check the bilge pump.

(8) Testimony as to what happened at this point was conflicting, for Van Horn claimed that Ottele went down into the engine room and found that the pump would not take a suction; Ottele, however, claimed that he was never in the engine room at any time. Van Horn then advised Robinson to either return to Catalina or to call the Coast Guard. Robinson, thereupon, decided that, since the SIGNAL HILL was approximately halfway between Avalon and Long Beach, there was no point in returning to Avalon; so continued on toward Long Beach. At or about this time the engine stopped, but, when the starter button was pushed the engine started again and ran for about 5 minutes longer when it failed completely.

(9) After the motor stopped, one of the party members looked over the starboard side and found that the starboard port holes to the engine room were open and the water entering the engine room was coming through these ports. Too much water had entered the engine room by this time to permit a person to enter it to close the ports. The party members therefore donned life-preservers while the operator, Joseph A. Robinson, called the Coast Guard by radiotelephone and informed the Coast Guard that the SIGNAL HILL was in a sinking condition. Between calls to the Coast Guard, Robinson assured the party members that the vessel would not sink because of the watertight bulkhead between the engine room and the forward cabin. When the engine room filled with water, however, the main deck settled below the surface and water started pouring down the hatch into the forward cabin. Mr. Robinson then, at or about 4:53 p.m., informed the Coast Guard that the SIGNAL HILL was sinking and that the party was abandoning ship. In explaining

Acting Chief, VI Division to  
Commandant

14 August, 1950  
(SIGNAL HILL a-11 Rd)

the location of the SIGNAL HILL, Mr. Robinson gave conflicting reports. One report indicated that the vessel was halfway between Avalon and Long Beach, another, that the vessel was bearing 330 degrees, 10 miles distance, from the southeast point of Catalina Island. The SIGNAL HILL sank about 2 minutes after it was abandoned, in approximate Latitude 33°29.3' N. Longitude 118°51.1' W.

(10) The Duty Officer at Coast Guard Operations Search and Rescue Control Center was informed, almost immediately, by the Commanding Officer of the CGC MORRIS, that the MORRIS, which was returning to Los Angeles Harbor from Avalon with a fishing boat in tow, had intercepted the distress call from the SIGNAL HILL and was dropping its tow to proceed to the SIGNAL HILL's assistance. The Duty Officer thereupon ordered the CG 83452 at Newport Beach to proceed to the scene and search for survivors. The CG 83452 departed from Newport Beach at or about 5:35 p.m. The Duty Officer also alerted the CG 83320 in San Pedro Harbor to standby for further orders.

(11) At or about 4:57 p.m., a PBM, Coast Guard Aircraft No. 84414, returning to San Diego from San Pedro, was notified by the Coast Guard Air Station at San Diego that the SIGNAL HILL was halfway between Catalina Island and San Pedro and sinking fast. The PBM 84414 thereupon proceeded to the vicinity indicated, and contacting the CGC MORRIS, coordinated its search procedure with the MORRIS, using the MORRIS as a base. At or about 6:16 p.m., the Commanding Officer of the PBM 84414 requested a replacement plane from San Diego when he discovered that his fuel supply was low, but remained in the search area until another plane arrived from San Diego. The San Diego Air Station, in the meantime, alerted another plane crew and also requested assistance from the Naval Air Station at Alamitos, California. The Naval Air Station immediately sent a flight of 8 fighter planes and one JRB, twin engine Beechcraft, to search the area.

(12) At or about 5:45 p.m., a Norwegian freighter, the M/V HINDANGER, left Los Angeles Harbor bound for Buenaventura, Colombia. At or about 7:00 p.m., the HINDANGER sighted the survivors of the SIGNAL HILL in the water and lowered a lifeboat, reaching them at or about the same time the CG 83452 arrived in the vicinity. The HINDANGER's lifeboat picked up 16 men from the water, 2 of whom subsequently succumbed from drowning or exposure, and the CG 83452 picked up 4 men from the water, 2 of whom later succumbed from drowning or exposure. The HINDANGER returned to San Pedro with its survivors and was met on arrival at the dock by doctors and ambulances to care for those in need of medical assistance. The CG 83452 returned to Newport Beach and, enroute, crew members applied artificial respiration to the 2 survivors who appeared to be unconscious. On arrival at Newport Beach, however, a doctor who boarded the vessel, pronounced the 2 men dead.

14 August, 1950  
(SIGNAL HILL a-11 5d)

(13) The entire party of 20 passengers and crew members was recovered from the water, 4 of whom died from drowning or exposure. The casualties were as follows: Joseph A. Robinson, age 43, owner/operator, 2435 Lemon Ave., Long Beach, California; William Pelletier, age 24, 1869 Myrtle Ave., Long Beach, California; Jimmy Roberts, age unknown, 1902 Stanley Ave., Long Beach, California; and John J. Singer, age unknown, 246b Pasadena Ave., Long Beach, California. Two of the party, Robert Waters, passenger, and Alvis Ottele, crew member, were hospitalized, but each is expected to recover.

(14) The life preservers carried aboard the SIGNAL HILL were Coast Guard approved, cork type, life-preservers from war salvage stock. The canvas coverings of these life-preservers were a slate gray color that blended with the water, making them difficult to detect.

(15) U. S. Coast Guard records failed to reveal that a license to operate motorboats had ever been issued to Joseph A. Robinson."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"(1) The Motorboat SIGNAL HILL sank as a result of water entering the port holes of the engine room which had been negligently left open.

(2) The Motorboat SIGNAL HILL was carrying passengers in violation of its Custom's License.

(3) The operator of the SIGNAL HILL, Joseph A. Robinson, violated the Motorboat Act of April 25, 1940, 46 USC, 526f, by carrying passengers for hire without holding a license for such service.

(4) The stability of the SIGNAL HILL was questionable inasmuch as it assumed and retained a heavy list to starboard during normal weather conditions and was, therefore, unsuitable for carrying passengers.

(5) William N. Ottele, who is listed on Custom's documents as a half owner of the SIGNAL HILL, was negligent in failing to change Custom's records to reflect true ownership of the vessel, but was unaware that the vessel was being used for illegal purposes and was not responsible for its operation.

(6) Coast Guard rescue efforts might have been more effective if conflicting position reports had not been broadcast or if the life-preservers, which were used by the survivors, had been of a more appropriate color."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"(1) It is recommended that no action be taken against William N. Ottele, who was listed as co-owner on Custom's documents since he

Acting Chief, MVI Division to  
Commandant

14 August, 1950  
(SIGNAL HILL a-11 Bd)

apparently had no control over the operation of the vessel.

(2) It is recommended that Coast Guard boarding officers check the documents of vessels carrying charter parties to determine whether they are licensed for such service; and, if the owner is operating the vessel, to determine whether the owner has a motorboat operator's license for such service.

(3) Since the owner/operator of the M/B SIGNAL HILL is deceased, it is recommended that no further action be taken and that the case be closed."

#### REMARKS

6. Opinion 6 of the Board indicates that had the survivors in the water been fitted with life preservers of a more appropriate color, their rescue would have been greatly facilitated. In this connection, it should be observed that after 30 October, 1948, all life preservers manufactured for marine use under Coast Guard approval are required to be Indian orange in color. This color was determined to be most effective for spotting persons in the sea after exhaustive tests of the various possible colors for such purpose.

7. Recommendation 2 of the Board suggests that Coast Guard boarding officers check documents of vessels carrying charter parties to determine that such vessels are appropriately documented for such service and to insure that the operator is properly licensed.

8. The Coast Guard boarding manual, 1931, as supplemented by Commandant's Circular 23-48 of 15 November, 1948, contains instructions with respect to the boarding of vessels to insure that a vessel is engaged in the trade for which it is documented; that all motorboats carrying passengers for hire are in charge of a licensed operator and that vessels are in conformity with applicable safety statutes and regulations thereunder. It is the opinion of this Division that conformance with such instructions as indicated by the Board's recommendations is of utmost importance in the interest of safety of life at sea.

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

P. A. OVENDEN  
P. A. OVENDEN

Acting Chief, XVI Division to  
Commandant

14 August, 1950  
(SIGNAL FILE a-11 R)

Ind-1

7 September, 1950  
(SIGNAL FILE a-11 R)

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

H. C. SHEPHEARD  
H. C. SHEPHEARD

APPROVED 7 September, 1950

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