

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
WASHINGTON, D. C.

MVI
27 February 1953
(USS RUCHAMKIN - WASHINGTON
a-5 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; collision between USS RUCHAMKIN
and tanker SS WASHINGTON, off the Atlantic Coast, on 14 November
1952, with loss of life

1. Pursuant to the provisions of Title 46 CFR 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. Shortly after midnight on 14 November 1952, a naval circular formation of heavy ships with forward screen was in operation on a westerly course off Cape Henry, Virginia. The USS RUCHAMKIN, a fast attack transport of destroyer escort type of 1,800 tons displacement, at a speed of 22 knots, was approaching the north side of the formation from astern on a parallel westerly course. The SS WASHINGTON, T-2 tanker of 10,195 G.T., fully loaded, was to the south of the formation and was bound northward at a speed of 14.2 knots. The SS WASHINGTON passed ahead of the formation off her starboard side on a crossing course, except that she passed astern of the two northerly screen vessels off her port side. When sighted, the USS RUCHAMKIN mistook the SS WASHINGTON as a naval vessel in the formation on a parallel course in the same direction and neither vessel had any knowledge that a crossing situation existed until collision was inevitable and its avoidance by any maneuver was impossible. The USS RUCHAMKIN and the SS WASHINGTON collided at approximately 0215, 14 November 1952, 55 miles 92° from Cape Henry Light. The night was dark, calm sea, and excellent visibility. The estimated damage to the USS RUCHAMKIN was \$803,706 and to the SS WASHINGTON unknown but relatively less. As a result of this casualty, thirty-two persons aboard the RUCHAMKIN were injured and the following persons on board that vessel lost their lives:

Allred, Kenneth U.	CPL
Eckert, Edward J. Jr.	CPL
Fulwiler, John T.	PVT
Kenny, Raymond	CPL
Poma, Pasquale	PVT-2
Bode, Ralph A.	PFC

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3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. The USS RUCHAMKIN, APD 89, is a fast attack transport of destroyer escort type, 306 feet long, 36 feet 11 1/2 inches beam, 1800 tons displacement with turbo-electric propulsion capable of giving a speed of 22 plus knots. On 14 November 1952 she was en route from Little Creek, Virginia to join a naval formation off the Virginia Capes.

"2. The SS WASHINGTON (ex-COMITERAS), official number 243111, is a T-2 type tank ship of 10,195 tons, turbo-electric drive, of Wilmington, Delaware and owned and operated by The Texas Company of New York, N.Y. She is 323 1/2 feet long, 68 feet beam, was loaded with a full cargo of petroleum products bound from Atreco, Texas to Philadelphia, Pa. on a time chartered voyage for Atlantic Refining Company to which the cargo was consigned. The SS WASHINGTON was last given annual inspection and drydock examination at Los Angeles, California in March, 1952.

"3. The RUCHAMKIN and the WASHINGTON were in collision at 0213 WASHINGTON time, 0215 RUCHAMKIN time on 14 November, 1952 at a point approximately 55 miles, 92° from Cape Henry Light. The bow of the WASHINGTON entered the port side of the RUCHAMKIN abaft the bridge structure at the after troop compartment and the port engine room. Angle of contact was approximately 90 degrees.

"4. All times hereafter used are Eastern Standard Time as kept on the WASHINGTON. (It is assumed that the bridge clock of the RUCHAMKIN was synchronized with those of other ships in the formation it was to join).

"5. Lieutenant, junior grade, David J. Morgan, U.S.N.R. (502188) was officer of the deck and had the conn of the RUCHAMKIN, under supervision of the commanding officer who was present on the bridge, from 0001, 14 November 1952 until relieved by the commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Arthur C. Jackson, U.S.N. (103808), instants before the collision.

"6. Oliver F. Riche, holder of unlimited master's license No. 59543, was second mate of the WASHINGTON and was in charge of the navigation of the WASHINGTON from 0001 through time of collision on 14 November 1952.

"7. John D. Cain, license No. 88785, master of the WASHINGTON, was asleep in his cabin stateroom when collision occurred and had not been called prior thereto but proceeded immediately to the pilothouse when awakened by the collision.

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"8. The RUCHAMKIN was proceeding to join a bent line screen formation of four ships screening a circular formation of heavy ships, five of which were on the periphery, spaced at angular intervals of 60° , 1000 yards distant from the USS FREMONT, the guide ship, in center of circle with an unfilled station on the periphery 120° relative from the guide.

"9. The line of the screen was more than a mile ahead of the guide of the heavy ship formation. Formation speed was 14 knots and formation course was 257° .

"10. The ships in the screen and in the heavy ship formation were exhibiting navigational lights.

"11. From 1934, 13 November 1952, through time of collision, RUCHAMKIN exhibited navigational lights consisting of masthead, range, side, and stern lights. In addition she exhibited from about 0200 to and through collision a speed signal consisting of two white pulsating 32 point lights in horizontal line near the truck of the foremast.

"12. RUCHAMKIN proceeded eastward from off Camp Fendleton, Virginia to join the formation. Being south of the formation she gradually rounded to the eastward of the formation commencing at 0104 swinging through north and finally steadied on course 265° true at speed of 22 knots at 0201 when she was about $3 \frac{2}{3}$ miles north and east of the heavy ship formation guide.

"13. WASHINGTON exhibited navigational lights consisting of masthead, range and side lights. Navigational lights, including the green side light of the WASHINGTON, were sighted by the FREMONT at a distance of about seven miles bearing 229° true.

"14. WASHINGTON passed 4.7 miles west of Target Lighted Buoy "TB", northeast of Cape Hatteras, at 2048 on 13 November 1952. From that point WASHINGTON steered course $007 \frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ true 089° gyro at a speed of 14.2 knots.

"15. At about 0100 WASHINGTON made a temporary change of course to port to clear vessels sighted three points on the port bow and then resumed course 009° gyro.

"16. Shortly after 0200 WASHINGTON made a 14 degree course change to the right to put on the port bow red lights of two vessels sighted almost dead ahead and shortly thereafter resumed base course of 009° gyro. No whistle signal indicating direction of course to starboard was made.

"17. WASHINGTON passed ahead of the two southernmost screening vessels, astern of the one just north of these, and ahead of the six vessels in the heavy ship formation.

"18. WASHINGTON passed ahead of CAPRICORNUS, the ship 60° relative from guide at 0208. At 0208, when WASHINGTON passed ahead of CAPRICORNUS, WASHINGTON and RUCHAMKIN were 2.4 miles apart on courses crossing at an angle of 102½ degrees.

"19. Second mate Riche did not become aware of presence of RUCHAMKIN until a half minute before collision at which time he immediately gave the command for left full rudder followed by several short blasts of the whistle and ringing up of full astern on engine room telegraph. Rudder was at full left and engine was going full astern at instant of collision.

"20. During the time of approach of the WASHINGTON on the naval formation blinking signal lights from ships within the formation were observed by James L. Smith, the helmsman, on the WASHINGTON from 0155 to 0125.

"21. Formation course change from 270 to 257 true was made at 0147. Engine speed reductions from 14 knots to eight knots and from eight knots to five knots were made by the formation at 0202 and 0203 respectively.

"22. The presence, minutes prior to collision, of a number of vessels under way on the starboard bow was known to second officer Riche of the WASHINGTON.

"23. After the WASHINGTON passed out of and clear of the formation her lights were sighted by Lieutenant Commander Arthur C. Jackson, U.S.N., Commanding Officer of RUCHAMKIN, who was on the port bridge wing. It was not determined by Lieutenant Commander Jackson until about one minute before collision that the WASHINGTON was a vessel other than one of the formation. Change of course to 270 degrees true was made immediately and seconds later course change to 275 degrees was made. One-half minute before collision command of right full rudder (which is 35°) was given, but the rudder had been moved right only 28° when collision occurred. No whistle signals indicating that RUCHAMKIN was directing her course to starboard was made at any time.

"24. About the time WASHINGTON cleared formation an attempt was made by USS FREMONT to communicate with WASHINGTON by blinker searchlight.

"25. The weather on the morning of 14 November 1952, prior to and at time of collision, was dark, clear, bright starlight, no moon, calm sea, light airs and excellent visibility.

"26. Surface radars on both RUCHAMKIN and WASHINGTON operated satisfactorily from 0001 through time of collision on 14 November 1952.

"27. RUCHAMKIN and WASHINGTON maintained proper lookouts and otherwise were full manned for the safe navigation of the vessels.

"28. Before collision there were no failures of material or equipment on either RUCHAMKIN or WASHINGTON other than that of the gyro course recorder on the latter vessel.

*29. At the time of collision and for some hours prior thereto RUCHAMKIN was operating singly, having not joined formation.

*30. RUCHAMKIN was immobilized as a result of the collision and was towed to Norfolk Naval Shipyard.

*31. WASHINGTON was able to proceed at reduced speed to Philadelphia, Pa. after having stood by to render assistance as required by 33 USC 367 until 0346.

*32. Medical and other assistance was given RUCHAMKIN by other naval vessels.

*33. There were no vessels other than the ten vessels in formation, RUCHAMKIN and WASHINGTON in the vicinity at the time of collision.

*34. The following U. S. Army personnel who were in the after troop compartment in RUCHAMKIN at time of the collision died as a result of the collision.

ALLRED, Kenneth U.	CPL	US54008448	USA
ECKHART, Edward J. Jr.	CPL	RA12334028	USA
FULWILK, John T.	PVT	US52175071	USA
KENNY, Raymond	CPL	RA11206292	USA
POMA, Pasquale	PVT-2	52183865	USA
BODES, Ralph A.	PFC	562267	USA

Of those the first five named were pronounced dead prior to their arrival at the Norfolk Naval Base and PFC Bode died on 16 November 1952, at the U.S. Naval Hospital, Portsmouth, Virginia.

*35. The following personnel on the RUCHAMKIN were injured and transferred to the U.S. Naval Hospital, Portsmouth, Virginia, for treatment.

HEIDELBACH, Walter E.	SQSN	278 49 82	
MATTOLI, Carmine (n)	YN1SA	867 48 27	
KREZ, Donald O.	SQSN	235 63 65	
BURCH, Robert W.	USQSN	439 29 72	
KAUSCHLITZER, Wm. L.	PA	464 07 01	
LACEY, Joseph A.	SQ3	365 51 45	
JEFFERIES, Dan S.	PVT-2	53094267	USA
BRIGHT, Morton	PFC	55235427	USA
POLITZ, Frederick P.	CPL	RA11101021	USA
RHODAY, H. N.	PVT	RA6668786	USA
RICKS, O. C.	PVT	52133641	USA

*36. The following personnel in RUCHAMKIN were shaken up and sent to barracks, U.S. Naval Amphibious Base, Little Creek, Virginia.

RAMOND, Arthur E.	100	211 06 36
COOPER, Victor C.	100	713 07 76
KIRBY, Richard E.	100	464 08 03
FLYNN, Walter F.	100	415 89 20
FRANK, Robert E.	100	118 28 77
WRIGHT, Mitchell J.	100	415 91 37
LEWIS, Melvin E.	100	424 23 94
TURLEY, Daniel F.	100	436 11 50
THOMAS, Park W.	100	373 05 80
SMITH, Harry (n)	100	367 34 13
OSBORN, Feligon J.	100	547 80 64
NELSON, Palmer H.	100	417 16 62
PARDICARO, Robert F.	100	496 95 88
JACOBSON, Allan (n)	100	426 38 20
RYAN, Russell E.	100	419 76 76
TURK, Richard L.	100	461 30 63
SOCIA, Chester G.	100	303 79 01
SHELDON, Robert P.	100	202 42 55

*37. The following personnel in the BUCHHEIM were injured and transferred to the Naval Air Station Infirmary, Norfolk, Virginia:

OAKLAND, Eugene	100	233 20 63
ROBBY, Fredrick	100	912 34 17
WILLIAMS, Moses Leo	100	356 13 28

*38. James A. Upton, Z-679534, ordinary seaman, who was serving as bow lookout on the forecastlehead of the WASHINGTON at the time of the collision suffered back injuries as a result of the collision. He was ambulatory when he appeared as a witness before the Board on 18 November 1952. No other personnel in the WASHINGTON were reported to have been injured as a result of the collision.

*39. The damage to WASHINGTON was confined to the bow. The stem and shell plating were opened for a height of 18 1/2 feet commencing at about the 20 foot waterline. The torn stem and starboard shell plating were curled over to the port side. All damage was confined forward of the collision bulkhead. Estimated cost of repairs and replacement of lost equipment is about \$67,000.

*40. The BUCHHEIM suffered extensive damage above and below the waterline on the port side between frames 98 and 125, and from keel to superstructure. Flooding by sea water and/or fuel oil was encountered in the following compartments: B-4, Engine Room; C-201 EL, Crew's quarters; C-201A, Medical Store Room; C-201-2 EL, Laundry; C-201 L, Crew's quarters, C-203 A, Troop Stores; C-204 AL, Crew's quarters, C-207 E, Steering Gear Space; C-25, C-1 F, C-3, C-4, C-5, C-6, C-7, C-8, Shaft Bearing Compartment; C-9, Shaft Bearing Compartment; and C-30IM and C-10M. Estimated cost of repairs is \$803,706.

"41. There were no complaints about the conduct after the collision of personnel of either vessel."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. The use of radar was not demanded by reason of excellent visibility which would make determination of burdens and privileges of vessels dependent upon visual observation of navigation lights exhibited and of relative movement thereof.

"2. Second mate Riche knew that if he maintained course and speed of WASHINGTON he would pass through what he knew was a naval formation approaching his vessel from the starboard.

"3. After passing clear of the naval formation the attention of second mate Riche in the WASHINGTON was directed towards the heavy ships of the formation which were about to pass astern of WASHINGTON, and for that reason he did not learn of the presence of RUCHAMKIN until the two vessels were in the jaws of a collision.

"4. That Lieutenant Commander Jackson, Commanding Officer of RUCHAMKIN, when lights of WASHINGTON were first sighted assumed that they were the lights of a vessel of the heavy ship formation that he was overtaking on a nearly parallel course.

"5. From 0208 the starboard hand rule applied and the WASHINGTON was the burdened vessel in a crossing situation.

"6. Failures of RUCHAMKIN and WASHINGTON to sound whistle signals indicated the changes of courses made prior to collision did not contribute to the cause of collision.

"7. Second mate Riche neglected to use the precautions required by the ordinary practice of seamen in his failure to avoid crossing ahead of the naval formation, and by reason thereof he was responsible for the development of a crossing situation which involved risk of collision of WASHINGTON with RUCHAMKIN. Second mate Riche by his failure to timely change course or speed or both, to avoid crossing ahead of the RUCHAMKIN was solely at fault for the collision.

"8. Although Lieutenant Commander Jackson failed to evaluate correctly the crossing situation until about 1 minute before collision the holding of course and speed up to that instant by RUCHAMKIN was a fortuitous compliance with the rule requiring the privileged vessel to do so.

"9. That the loss of lives in the BUCHANAN was due to the negligence and the inattention to his duties of Oliver F. Riche."

5. The Board made the following recommendations:

"1. That Oliver F. Riche, master's license No. 59543, be charged with inattention to duty in failing to discover the presence of BUCHANAN immediately after passing clear of the naval formation and with neglect of duty in that he failed to exercise the precaution of the ordinary practice of seamen and passed ahead of a naval formation of which he was bound to keep clear.

"2. That the case be referred to the Department of Justice for the prosecution of Oliver F. Riche for violation of 18 USC 1115."

REMARKS

6. Opinion paragraph 2 of the Board that Second Mate Riche knew that if he maintained course and speed of the WASHINGTON, he would pass through what he knew was a naval formation approaching his vessel from the starboard is not concurred with. In this connection, the Board in view of its questioning the master, second mate and the radio officer on board the WASHINGTON as to whether they received information through Notice to Mariners or otherwise with respect to the presence of naval amphibious operations off Cape Henry on or about 14 November 1952, should have offered evidence as to whether or not any such information was actually issued. So far as is ascertainable, neither the Hydrographic Office nor the Coast Guard in Washington, D. C., or in the 5th Coast Guard District issued any Notice to Mariners or made any radio broadcasts to the effect that amphibious naval formations would be operating 50 miles off Cape Henry. The Notice to Mariners issued by the commander, 5th Coast Guard District on 10 November 1952 to the effect that on 14 November 1952 amphibious operations would be conducted in the vicinity of the Cape Pendleton beach area, would not cover the area where the subject collision occurred and was only for local distribution.

7. The failure of both vessels to sight each other in time to take collision avoiding action is inexcusable. The opinion of the Board, paragraph 8, to the effect that LCDR Jackson failed to evaluate correctly the crossing situation before the collision occurred is concurred with since the evidence clearly indicates that the USS BUCHANAN took no cognizance of the fact that merchant or other non-formation vessels might be in the vicinity.

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She proceeded at high speed into a group of vessels, the identities, courses, speeds and distances of which she was apparently unaware. Her commanding officer assumed that he passed a naval vessel on the starboard quarter of the circular formation and further assumed that a vessel with regulation lights off his port bow was a naval vessel in the formation on a parallel course in the same direction, but which in fact was a merchant vessel on an intersecting collision course. The commanding officer of the RUCHAMKIN was evidently so intent on fulfilling his naval mission in maneuvering in the vicinity of, and taking his station in the formation that he failed to properly identify the WASHINGTON, or determine her course and speed, and thus neglected the normal precautions for safe navigation. This neglect of precautions under the circumstances cannot be condoned merely because of the chance situation that the RUCHAMKIN had the WASHINGTON on her port rather than starboard bow under a strained interpretation of Article 19, particularly in view of Articles 21, 27 and 29, International Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea.

8. The evidence in the record of investigation of subject casualty does not establish that there is any evidence of criminal culpability on the part of any person and accordingly duplicate copies of such record will not be transmitted to the U. S. Attorney General for the institution of criminal action.

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.

/s/ EDW. A. RICHMOND

EDW. A. RICHMOND
Acting

Chief, MVI Division to
Commandant

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FIRST AMENDMENT TO MVI memorandum of 27 February 1953

R
30 March 1953

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; collision between USS RICHAMKIN
and tanker SS WASHINGTON, off the Atlantic Coast, on 14 November
1952, with loss of life

Forwarded, recommending approval.

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

APPROVED: 1 April 1953

/s/ MERLIN O'NEILL

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