

MVI

2 October 1952
(WESTERN FARMER -
BJORGHOLM - C-3 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; collision SS WESTERN FARMER
and tanker BJORGHOLM (Norwegian), in Dover Straits, 20 August
1952

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, Opinion and Recommendation, has been reviewed and is forwarded herewith.

2. The SS WESTERN FARMER of 7239 g.t., with a full cargo of coal on board was en route from Norfolk, Va., to Bremerhaven, Germany. On 20 August 1952 she was in the English Channel where slight difficulty was experienced with her steering gear but which was restored to normal functioning before the collision occurred. While proceeding through the English Channel the MV BJORGHOLM (Norwegian) of 11,371 g.t., was overtaking the WESTERN FARMER. Evidently a proper lookout was not kept on the BJORGHOLM and although collision avoiding action was taken by the WESTERN FARMER, the BJORGHOLM collided with the port side of the WESTERN FARMER at approximately 1556 20 August 1952. Following this casualty the WESTERN FARMER broke in two, the forward part sank and the after part was beached off Calais, France. No injuries were sustained nor was there any loss of life as a result of this casualty. The weather conditions at the time of the casualty were as follows: wind NNE, force 6; partly cloudy; rough northeasterly sea; visibility 7-10 miles.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. The Norwegian diesel-propelled tanker BJORGHOLM collided with the American steam freighter WESTERN FARMER at 1556 GCT on 20 August 1952, in a position 51°17'N, 01°55'E.

"2. The vessels involved were:

(a) The WESTERN FARMER of 7239 gross tons, official number 244284, a dry cargo freighter built in 1943, Liberty-type, operated by the Western Navigation Corp., 52 Broadway, New York, N. Y. The master was Gunnar Utvik, 1011 Ninth St., Galveston, Texas.

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(b) The motor vessel BJORGHOLM of 11,371 gross tons, home port Oslo, Norway, is a tanker owned by A. S. Habeldal of Oslo, Norway. The master was Olaf Hagen of Arendal, Norway.

"3. The weather conditions at the time of the casualty were as follows: wind NNE, force 6; partly cloudy; rough NE'y sea; visibility 7-10 miles.

"4. The WESTERN FARMER was en route from Norfolk, Va., to Bremerhaven, Germany, with a full cargo of coal, and drawing 27'0" forward and 28'0" aft. While in the English Channel on 20 August, slight tele-motor trouble developed at about 9:00 a.m., which rendered the vessel momentarily unmaneuverable, and the out-of-control signal was therefore hoisted. The steering gear was restored to normal in about 10 minutes time, and the vessel cleared the Straits of Dover, after which the course was changed to 61 degrees true. South Goodwin Light vessel was passed to port, and East Goodwin Light vessel was also passed to port at 1400, 3-1/4 miles off. The vessel approached Sandettie whistle buoy on a course of 061 true and when it bore 191 degrees true at 1540, a distance of about two miles off, the course was changed to 011 true. Up to this time the vessel's speed was calculated at 8.0 knots. Shortly after the vessel settled on the new course the BJORGHOLM was first observed four points abaft the port beam, two miles off. The WESTERN FARMER maintained her course, but the speed was considered reduced to 5.0 knots on the new heading, which was into the wind and sea. The relative bearings between the two vessels did not appreciably change, and when the oncoming vessel was about two shiplengths away, the master sounded several short blasts on the whistle followed by a one blast signal and directed his course to starboard. The WESTERN FARMER's wheel was also put hard right and the general alarm sounded. Simultaneously, the propelling machinery was also stopped. Immediately thereafter the BJORGHOLM collided with the WESTERN FARMER at an angle of about 80 degrees between the port side of the WESTERN FARMER and the starboard side of the BJORGHOLM.

"5. The impact holed the port side of number three hold, the penetration being about 18 feet into the main deck and the hull opened from the main deck to a point below the water line. The forward port section of the midship house was stove in and the numbers 2 and 4 lifeboats rendered useless. The starboard anchor was dropped with five shots of chain in the water to prevent the vessel from drifting on to Sandettie Bank. The numbers 1 and 3 lifeboats were swung out and the crew mustered. A collision mat was placed over the side but due to the size of the opening, this proved inadequate. At the time of collision an auxiliary steam line on the port boiler broke, filling the engine fireroom with steam, but the engineer on watch secured the main engine and the fires in the boilers before

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leaving at 1605. The oiler, Kaj August Veber, and the fireman watertender, Ernst Ekstrom, had left their station in the engine room and fireroom upon hearing the general alarm. A survey of the engine room was made about one-half hour after collision, again at 1900, and a final inspection at 2015, when it was considered that the forward engine room bulkhead would give way. A crack was also observed on the top of the port settling tank through which oil and water was leaking out. A 15-foot vertical crack was observed on the starboard side of the hull extending down from the main deck forward of the midship house, and several smaller cracks running thwartship were also observed on the main deck forward of the midship house. As the fractures became progressively larger and as new ones developed, the master decided that the vessel would break in two, and therefore ordered the ship abandoned at 2130. Nine men were rescued in the British Ramsgate rescue craft. Number 1 boat was successfully launched with ten men. At 2250 as number 3 boat was being lowered with 13 men aboard, the forward half of the WESTERN FARMER broke off. The number 3 boat was successfully launched and the remaining five men, including the master, abandoned ship at 2310 from the after deck, port side, into a rescue craft, standing by. After abandoning ship, the forward part of the vessel disappeared, but the after part remained afloat, and was subsequently salvaged by the French vessel and beached off Calais, France.

"6. Although no testimony is available from the BJORGHOLM, it was learned that the vessel was en route from Kuwait, Persian Gulf, to Antwerp, Belgium, with a cargo of 17,789 tons of crude oil.

"7. It is also evident that the vessel's life saving equipment, except for damage caused by the collision was in good order and ready for immediate use."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinion:

"1. In view of the absence of testimony from the foreign vessel, final conclusion is not made. It is, however, sufficiently apparent that the main contributory factor to this collision was the failure of the BJORGHOLM to keep clear. The WESTERN FARMER was unquestionably privileged under the Rules and had no burden to maneuver before she did. The master's action in trying to parallel his vessel with the oncoming tanker, when collision appeared imminent, although apparently ineffective, cannot be criticized and no licensed personnel or inspected equipment of the American vessel is considered to have contributed in any

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way to the collision. Except as noted below the conduct of the WESTERN FAIRMER crew was proper and beyond criticism. The action of the fireman and oiler on watch in leaving before they were ordered to do so is considered improper, and merits action under R.S. 4450, as amended. However, in considering all circumstances, both men were admonished for leaving their stations without orders. (Refer to reports A17-6 (MIS-45368 and 45369)). In further reference to the crew, the wheelman, Mr. Archie Z. Scarborough and the lookout, Mr. Lewis J. Goodwin, who were both ordered to appear before this Board as witnesses, failed to answer duly served subpoenas. Misconduct proceedings under R.S. 4450, as amended, have been instituted against both men, with charges for future hearings. (Refer to cases A17-6 (MIS-45416 and 45408))."

5. The Board made the following Recommendation:

"1. In view of the particulars set forth in the above Opinion, no further action is considered warranted, and it is recommended that this case be closed."

6. It is recommended that the Findings of Fact, Opinion and Recommendation of the Marine Board of Investigation be approved.

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

FIRST ENDORSEMENT to MVI memorandum of 2 October 1952

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7 October 1952

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

/s/ R. A. SMITH
R. A. SMITH
Acting

APPROVED: October 7 1952

/s/ A. C. RICHMOND
A. C. RICHMOND
Acting