

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

MVI  
10 December 1952  
(SPARETIME a-11 Bd)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; explosion and sinking MB  
SPARETIME (27 J 805), Catalina Channel, 27 July 1952,  
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. Early on the morning of 27 July 1952, the MB 27 J 805 (SPARE-TIME), length 33', beam 9'6", draft 3'6", propelled by a gasoline engine, built in 1950, departed Santa Monica for a fishing excursion at sea in the vicinity of Santa Catalina Island with 11 passengers for hire and the owner/operator on board. During the morning, various passengers prepared their breakfast using the expressed petroleum cooking system on board. During the day the gasoline engine powering the bait tank pump did not function properly and various efforts were made to repair it, including the dismantlement of the carburetor. At approximately 1600 while returning to Santa Monica, at trolling speed, a sudden violent explosion occurred which literally blew the boat to pieces without signs of any flash fire. As a result of this casualty the unlicensed owner/operator and eight of the passengers, as listed below, lost their lives:

Wesley Wiggins, owner/operator  
Gerald Drenner, passenger  
Everett Turnipseed, passenger  
Mervin Vollmer, passenger  
Al Barber, passenger  
Stanley Munn, passenger  
Carl Jackson, passenger  
Leonard Yoshino, passenger  
Jack Sukenaga, passenger

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3. The next were the following Findings of Fact:

"1. That the American MB SPARETIME, Award Number 27 J 805, of Los Angeles, California, was built of wood by the owner at Santa Monica, California, in 1950. Length 33', beam 9'6", draft 3'6", propelled by a Chrysler Crown gas engine, Serial No. SM 7-18803 of 115 horsepower. A raised cabin forward contained two bunks, toilet, and a butane stove. Aft the cabin bulkhead and below the cockpit deck were located the generator, a one cylinder gas-driven Wiggs and Stratton bait tank pump, the main engine and the fuel tanks. A bait tank was located in the after end. The wheel and engine controls were just abaft the cabin bulkhead on the port side and a small butane tank was on the starboard side. The boat was registered 12 July 1950, by Constance Wiggins and Wesley W. Wiggins, 2008- 21st Street of Santa Monica, California, for commercial fishing. Available information indicated that the SPARETIME was sturdily built by Wesley Wiggins who was a professional carpenter and, that the boat was equipped in compliance with the Motorboat Act of 25 April 1940.

"2. That Wesley Wiggins did not possess a motorboat operator's license issued by the Coast Guard, having been rejected for the reason of being color blind, but that he had operated boats for about five years. Occasionally he took some friends along for a day of fishing and once or twice a week he took out parties for a lump sum consideration, the money usually being collected from the individuals by some one member or organizer of the party although the SPARETIME was licensed for commercial fishing only. The boat was not advertised as being available for charter parties.

"3. That the owner/operator of the MB SPARETIME, Wesley Wiggins and the following persons:

- (a) Harold D. Haley, 3113 Pontiac, La Brea, Calif.
- (b) Alfred L. Sachse, 624 Hilldale, W. Hollywood 46, Calif.
- (c) James B. Knight, 9015 Hubbard St., Culver City, Calif.
- (d) Gerald Drenner, 3716 Cardiff St., Palms, Calif.
- (e) Kverett Turnipseed, 2117 Marvin Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.
- (f) Marvin Vollmer, 6243 Damash St., Los Angeles, Calif.
- (g) Al Barber, 833 Coronados Terrace, Los Angeles, Calif.
- (h) Carl Jackson, 390 11th St., San Pedro, Calif.
- (i) Stanley Munn, West Los Angeles, Calif.
- (j) Jack Skenaga, 2944 S. Orange Drive, Los Angeles, Calif.
- (k) Leonard Yoshino, 12764 W. 22nd St., Los Angeles, Calif.

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headed the boat back at Santa Monica Pier at or about 0400 on 27 July 1957, and proceeded to the vicinity of the NW end of Santa Catalina Island for a day of fishing.

"4. That on this occasion Everett Turnipseed was the organizer of the party and collected \$4.50 from each of the surviving passengers.

"5. That the gasoline engine driven bait tank pump did not function properly and that Wesley Wiggins and Stanley Munn, a mechanic by trade, worked on it several times during the trip and on two occasions removed the carburetor. It was last worked on between 1400 and 1430 at which time the fuel line was disconnected because of apparent lack of fuel supply.

"6. That because fishing was poor the SPARLINE was headed back for Santa Monica at or about 1430 and proceeded at trolling speed. At or about 1600 a sudden violent explosion occurred which literally blew the boat to pieces without signs of any flash fire.

"7. That immediately following the explosion eleven of the party were accounted for in the water. Carl Jackson had disappeared with the blast. Wiggins, the owner, retrieved eleven life preservers from the cabin section and distributed them to the survivors with the exception of Al Barber who disappeared before he could be reached. The survivors clung to parts of the wreckage. At or about 1700 Wiggins left the scene stating that he would try to swim for help. Jack Sukenaga subsequently also struck out for shore at or about 2030. During the night various members died and disappeared leaving Sachse and Haley on one piece of wreckage and Inight on another piece of wreckage a short distance away but out of sight from each other. The visibility was good until early morning of 28 July at which time it was less than one mile. The sea was choppy.

"8. That sometime after 1900 on 27 July, Lieutenant Preston Peterson of the Santa Monica Lifeguards while on duty commenced receiving telephone calls from concerned relatives regarding the MB SPARLINE because she was overdue. Thinking that the boat might have been delayed by engine trouble or other common causes, Peterson allowed a usual waiting period of three hours after the first phone call before he notified the Coast Guard and gave them pertinent information concerning the boat.

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The Coast Guard duty officer evaluated the case as either a disabled boat adrift in a large area in moderate weather or as a boat that had put into an anchorage for the night and decided on air search supported by surface craft at daylight when visibility permitted. The Coast Guard broadcast an Urgent Marine Information on the SPARETIME at 0055 on 28 July. At 0730 the Coast Guard duty officer called the Harbor-master at Avalon and asked him to check the ports on Catalina Island. At 0853 a plane from the San Diego Air Station was dispatched to search the area between Santa Monica and Catalina Island. A few minutes later the cutter MORRIS was ordered to leave San Pedro to search the area in support of the plane. At or about 0908 the Santa Monica Lifeguards reported wreckage found fourteen miles, 200 degrees magnetic from Santa Monica. At 0929 the patrol boat 83337 was ordered to the scene. At 1050 the plane reported that it was over the wreckage and searching the area for survivors. At 1143 and 1150 the two Coast Guard vessels arrived in the vicinity and commenced searching under the direction of the plane's pilot. At 1157 word was received from Santa Monica Lifeguards that three survivors had been picked up from wreckage in the area. Active search for possible other survivors was conducted by the Coast Guard until 2030 on 30 July.

"9. That Lieutenant Preston Peterson of the Santa Monica Lifeguards left Santa Monica in his privately owned boat at or about 0700 on 28 July to search for the SPARETIME and sighted wreckage in the previously stated area. He made a preliminary search for survivors and took position bearings before returning to Santa Monica for additional assistance. On his second trip out he found and rescued three survivors clinging to pieces of wreckage and brought them into Santa Monica Pier. Mr. Peterson reported numerous sharks in the area. Pieces of wreckage and life preservers and other debris were subsequently brought to Santa Monica for identification of the SPARETIME. The body of one Marvin Vollmer was found on 28 July. Eight other bodies have not been accounted for.

"10. That the following named persons were rescued:

Harold D. Haley, 3113 Pontiac, La Crescenta, Calif. (passenger)  
James B. Knight, 9015 Hubbard St., Culver City, Calif. (passenger)  
Alfred L. Sachs, 824 Hilldale, W. Hollywood 46, Calif. (passenger)

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11. The following named persons lost their lives:

Walter Bremer, 3710 Cardiff St., Palms, Calif., (passenger)  
Walter Burdick, 1117 Marvin Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.,  
(passenger)  
Bernie Toliver, 6213 Demark St., Los Angeles, Calif.,  
(passenger)  
Al Barber, 823 Coronados Terrace, Los Angeles, Calif.,  
(passenger)  
Stanley Mann, West Los Angeles, Calif., (passenger)  
Carl Jackson, 390 11th St., San Pedro, Calif., (passenger)  
Leonard Tocchio, 1275 1/2 W. 22nd St., Los Angeles, Calif.,  
(passenger)."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. That the explosion was not caused by butane gas accumulation, as the stove had been secured at the butane cylinder since an early breakfast had been served.

"2. That the explosion of the MB SPARETIME was caused by a gasoline leakage and resultant accumulation of explosive mixture in engine space below cocks which was ignited by some unknown cause.

"3. That the MB SPARETIME was operated in violation of its Motorboat registration which limited its service to commercial fishing.

"4. That Wesley Higgins, the owner/operator violated the Motorboat Act of April 25, 1940, 46 USC 526f, by carrying passengers for hire or charter without holding a motorboat operator's license for such service.

"5. That Wesley Higgins, 2009 21st St., Santa Monica, Calif., and Jack Sakenaga, 2911 1/2 S. Orange Drive, Los Angeles, Calif., lost their lives in attempting to swim ashore."

5. The Board made the following Recommendations:

"1. That all motorboats carrying passengers for hire or charter parties involving payments of monies, in addition to all prescribed lifesaving equipment, should be equipped with approved life floats to accommodate the number of persons carried, and that each float have secured to it a watertight metal can containing a suitable number of red distress flares and daytime smoke signals.

"2. That local authorities, operators, or owners of piers and boat landings advertising and catering to the sport fishing public should exercise greater supervision to determine if the boats operating from their respective landings are properly licensed for such service and in possession of a valid seaworthy inspection card or a certificate of inspection issued by the Coast Guard and also that the operators have a valid Coast Guard operator's license.

"3. That motorboats engaged in carrying passengers should carry adequate insurance for protection of passengers against injuries and loss of life.

"4. That Constance Higgins, whose name appeared on the motorboat registration card, was listed as co-owner for inheritance purposes only and did not exercise any control of the boat's management or operation, and that because Wesley Higgins, owner and operator is deceased, it is recommended that no further action be taken and that the case be closed."

#### REMARKS

6. The Board's Finding of Fact, paragraph 2, states that the MS 27 J 805 (SPAR TID#) was licensed for commercial fishing only and the Board's opinion, paragraph 3, states that she was operated in violation of her motorboat registration which limited her service to commercial fishing. The basis for this Finding of Fact and Opinion is the statement "Service Commercial Fishing" contained in the application for a number for an undocumented motor vessel and the probable fact that the Certificate of Award of Number for an Undocumented Vessel issued to the vessel contained a similar statement. The statement of service on the application for a Certificate of Award of Number and the statement of service on the Certificate of Award of Number to an Undocumented Vessel is intended for statistical purposes. The statement of service appearing on such application or certificate in no way confers any authority for or limitation upon the operation of any vessel with respect to any specific trade undertaken. Accordingly, the Finding of Fact and Opinion of the Board, as above stated, are disapproved.

7. Opinion, paragraph 1, of the Board states that the explosion was not caused by butane gas accumulation. Since the Board made the Finding of Fact that the vessel exploded with a sudden violent explosion which literally blew the boat to pieces without signs of any flash fire, which occurrence is consistent with the explosion of compressed-liquefied petroleum vapors, the probability of the explosion of the compressed petroleum gas in the cooking system cannot be irrevocably ruled out as a probable cause of the subject casualty. In this connection it must be observed that the provisions of

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R.S. 4472, as amended, (46 USC 170) and regulations thereunder, 46 CFR 146, 147 prohibit the use of compressed petroleum gases for cooking systems on all vessels carrying passengers for hire, whether above or below 15 g t.

8. Recommendation, paragraph 1, of the Board that motorboats carrying passengers for hire, presumably on ocean or coastwise waters, be equipped with life floats containing suitable distress flares and daytime ~~radio~~ signals, is concurred with. However, since there is no statutory authority authorizing the promulgation of regulations requiring such equipment on motorboats carrying passengers for hire, the effectuation of such recommendation to the extent possible is a matter under the jurisdiction of the District Commander and should be encouraged through all available educational channels.

9. Recommendation of the Board, paragraph 2, suggesting that local authorities, operators or owners of piers exercise supervision with respect to safety of motorboats carrying passengers for hire, and Recommendation, paragraph 3, that motorboats engaged in carrying passengers for hire carry adequate insurance for the protection of passengers is not germane to the purposes for which marine casualties are investigated pursuant to the provisions of R.S. 4450, as amended, and regulations thereunder or to the scope of the functions of the Coast Guard.

10. The evidence in the record of investigation of subject casualty indicates that the US 27 J 805 (SUNSET) for a period of approximately two years, carried passengers for hire on fishing excursions at sea and that during all this time the owner and operator of the vessel did not have a license, as required by statute and regulations, and that the vessel was equipped with a compressed gas cooking system, contrary to the provisions of R.S. 4472, as amended, (46 USC 170) and regulations thereunder, 46 CFR 146, 147, without detection. It would appear that the procedures for the detection of such violations may have been inadequate, and a report with respect thereto should be forwarded to Coast Guard Headquarters as a supplement to the record of investigation of subject casualty.

11. 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/P. O. OVENDEN  
P. O. OVENDEN

Chief, Office of Merchant Marine Safety  
Commandant

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(SPAR TIME 6-11 3d)

FIRST INFO. REPORT TO MVI memorandum of 10 December 1952

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16 December 1952

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with loss of life

Forwarded, recommending approval.

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

APPROVED: Dec 18 1952

/s/ MARLIN O'NEILL  
~~REPL~~  
Vice Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard  
Commandant