

MVI

28 September, 1951

(THOMAS TRACY -
VALCOUR a-5 Bd.)

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

Subj: Marine Board of Investigation; Collision involving SS THOMAS TRACY
and USS VALCOUR (AVP 55) off Cape Henry on 14 May 1951 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. On 14 May 1951 the SS THOMAS TRACY, a Liberty type collier of 6,643 gt. departed from Newport News, Va. for New York and the USS VALCOUR (AVP 55), a light seaplane-type tender, 2,700 tons loaded displacement, departed from Hampton Roads, Va., towards sea to engage in individual ship exercises. After clearing Cape Henry Junction buoy the VALCOUR passed the THOMAS TRACY off her port side, distance about one-quarter mile. Shortly thereafter the VALCOUR suffered a complete power failure with six or seven degrees right rudder and swung to starboard across the bow of the THOMAS TRACY. At about 1024 the THOMAS TRACY collided with the VALCOUR at the after end of the VALCOUR'S No. 2 engine room, opening that compartment, cofferdam and gasoline stowage tank immediately aft to the sea. An explosion and fire occurred on board the VALCOUR and a fire occurred in the forepart of the THOMAS TRACY. Five crew members on board the VALCOUR lost their lives as a result of this casualty. The weather conditions at the time of collision were excellent.

3. The Board made the following Findings of Fact:

"1. That the SS THOMAS TRACY, O.N. 247868, rig steam crew, type EC-2 Liberty collier, gross tons 6,643, built 1945, home port New York, N.Y., owned and operated by the M and W. Tracy Col, Inc., One Broadway, New York, N.Y.

"2. That the SS THOMAS TRACY departed from Newport News, Va. at 0735 hours L.S.T., 14 May, 1951 bound for New York, N.Y. with a cargo of coal.

"3. That the loaded draft of the vessel on departure was 29' 00" forward and 28' 05" aft.

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- "4. That departure was taken from Old Point Comfort Lighthouse at 0825 hours L.S.T., 14 May, 1951.
- "5. That the vessel was proceeding at 10 knots or 59 r.p.m. as it passed down Triangle Shoal Channel clearing same at 0941 hours.
- "6. That on the bridge of the SS THOMAS TRACY were the master, [REDACTED], who was piloting, [REDACTED] third mate, assisting and [REDACTED], A.B., who was steering.
- "7. That the master, third mate and helmsman were in the vessel's wheelhouse, the master and third mate standing by the front windows, one of which was open.
- "8. That the weather was clear, wind light NNE, sea small with good visibility.
- "9. That the SS THOMAS TRACY passed Cape Henry Junction Buoy close aboard to starboard and then set a course of 082 degrees true at 1014 hours L.S.T.
- "10. That the boatswain and two seamen aboard the SS THOMAS TRACY were engaged in painting the forward main deck, portside, shortly after passing Cape Henry Junction Buoy.
- "11. That the USS VALCOUR, AVP-55 is a light seaplane type tender, 311 feet in length, 2700 tons loaded displacement, 6500 shaft horsepower, twin screw Diesel engines with a maximum speed of 18.2 knots.
- "12. That the USS VALCOUR, drawing 12'9" forward, 13'6" aft, was proceeding from Hampton Roads, Va., toward sea to engage in individual ship exercises and was overtaking the SS THOMAS TRACY.
- "13. That the USS VALCOUR passed Cape Henry Junction Buoy close aboard to starboard at 1016 hours L.S.T. and changed course from 090 degrees true to 075 degrees true with the helmsman instructed to steer nothing to the right of same.
- "14. That the speed of the USS VALCOUR was set at 15 knots, the pitometer log being checked for calibration by the Navigating Officer.

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- "15. That at the time the USS VALCOUR passed abeam of Cape Henry Junction buoy and altered course from 090 true to 075 true, she crossed the wake of the SS THOMAS TRACY which was estimated by ship's officers to be one-half to three-quarters of a mile ahead.
- "16. That at the time of crossing the SS THOMAS TRACY's wake the Navigating Officer noted the TRACY's mast in line and calculated her course to be 084 degrees true.
- "17. That on the bridge of the USS VALCOUR at this time were the Commanding Officer, Officer of the Deck, Navigator, Quartermaster of the watch, Quartermaster striker, Helmsman, Talker, Chief Quartermaster of watch, Boatswain's Mate of Watch and Quartermaster First Class standing by and port and starboard lookout men.
- "18. That the USS VALCOUR passed abeam of the SS THOMAS TRACY on the port side at a distance of about one-quarter of a mile.
- "19. That at 1021 hours, E.S.T., when the SS THOMAS TRACY was about two points abaft the starboard beam of the USS VALCOUR, the gyro alarm in the pilothouse of the USS VALCOUR sounded.
- "20. That the navigation officer hearing the gyro alarm immediately pushed the reset switch but without results.
- "21. That the helmsman who had been steering by gyro compass was ordered to steer by magnetic compass.
- "22. That the helmsman immediately informed the Officer of the Deck that he had lost steering control, the rudder indicator being stopped at between six and seven degrees right rudder angle.
- "23. That the USS VALCOUR was equipped with electric hydraulic steering gear.
- "24. That immediately upon the helmsman's announcing loss of steering control the alarm switch for after steering detail to take over was thrown in.
- "25. That the sound-powered phones on the USS VALCOUR did not function from the time of power failure to time of collision.

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- "26. That after power failure no messenger, although available, was sent from the bridge to the engine room or to after steering.
- "27. That at about 1021, the commanding officer ordered all engines back full.
- "28. That the electric telegraph was immediately set in compliance with the order but no response was received from the engine room.
- "29. That the emergency bell system on the side of the telegraph was pushed without results.
- "30. That a complete electrical power failure had occurred.
- "31. That at about 1021 3/4 the commanding officer of the USS VALCOUR sounded a series of four or more short blasts on the steam and air whistles.
- "32. That the navigating officer ordered two black balls hoisted to denote the vessel was out of command.
- "33. That the USS VALCOUR did not hoist the international danger signal of two black balls prior to collision.
- "34. That attempt to contact the engine room and after steering station on sound-powered phones was made without success.
- "35. That the sound-powered phones were dependent upon electric powered call bells to attention of the stations called.
- "36. That the sound-powered phones were the only means of communication from the bridge to the engine room and after steering station after the electrical failure occurred.
- "37. That material condition of the USS VALCOUR just prior to collision was modified Baker i.e. watertight and secured below water line but with only vertical closures on second deck.
- "38. That the commanding officer after sounding a series of short blasts on the air and steam whistles sounded the siren which denoted collision alarm.

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- "39. That while the commanding officer sounded the siren the navigating officer continued to sound short blasts on the steam and air whistles.
- "40. That the USS VALCOUR under six to seven degrees right rudder then swung in an arc to the right heading across the path of the SOUTHSTAR TRACY.
- "41. That ten to fifteen minutes before power failure difficulty was experienced in use of XIJV telephone circuit to bridge in No. 2 engine room.
- "42. That the USS VALCOUR was equipped with four diesel driven generators; two in No. 1 engine room and two in No. 2 engine room.
- "43. That the USS VALCOUR upon leaving Norfolk had in operation No. 1 and No. 2 diesel generators on the forward (No. 1) engine room.
- "44. That permission to shut down No. 2 generator had been requested from the bridge by the engine room and such permission had been granted.
- "45. That No. 2 generator was taken off the line when the USS VALCOUR was off Fort Wool at the head of Thimble Shoal Channel.
- "46. That the USS VALCOUR was operating with one generator from Fort Wool until time it failed (1021 hours) shortly before collision.
- "47. That just prior to the power failure the No. 1 generator slowed down dropping the generator frequency below 55 cycles.
- "48. That NOLAN (RN-44), a striker, on the switchboard watch attempted to raise the frequency of the No. 1 generator by means of the governor control, and when this failed he tripped out the No. 1 generator circuit breakers which resulted in a total loss of electrical power.
- "49. That the switchboard had not been stripped of non-essential loads prior to the tripping out of the No. 1 generator circuit breakers.
- "50. That NOLAN without direct orders to do so by anyone, determined that the No. 1 generator should be cut off.

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- "51. That attempts to restart the No. 1 generator prime mover were unsuccessful.
- "52. That No. 2 generator was started but not placed on the line prior to the collision.
- "53. That after power failure the X107 phones in the engine rooms were not manned continuously.
- "54. That there were ample personnel available in each engine room to man this circuit had the order been given to man the phones.
- "55. That the USS VALCOUR was capable of being operated in a condition called split plant operation. In this condition one generator in each engine room is in operation and in the event of failure of one of the generators the other generator would automatically assume the entire electrical load.
- "56. That the master of the SS THOMAS TRACY heard the first signals of the USS VALCOUR and understood them to indicate a drill being conducted.
- "57. That the master of the SS THOMAS TRACY continued to observe the USS VALCOUR for about one minute before realizing that something was wrong aboard that vessel.
- "58. That at 1023 hours the master of the SS THOMAS TRACY rang emergency full astern with bridge telegraph which was executed immediately by the engineers on watch.
- "59. That upon ordering full astern on the engines the master of the SS THOMAS TRACY ordered the rudder hard right and sounded the general alarm.
- "60. That at 1024 hours P.S.T. the stem of the SS THOMAS TRACY contacted the starboard side of the USS VALCOUR at about a 90 degree angle.
- "61. That the collision occurred on the high seas outside the boundary line of the inland waters.
- "62. That the bow of the SS THOMAS TRACY contacted the USS VALCOUR at the after end of the number two engine room, opening that compartment, cofferdam and gasoline stowage tank immediately aft to the sea.

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- "63. That the USS VALCOUR was holed from about seven feet below the water line to the boat deck with seven to eight feet penetration.
- "64. That the deepest penetration was between frames 104 and 106.
- "65. That the speed of the USS VALCOUR had not appreciably changed from its 15 knots set speed at the time of collision.
- "66. That the speed and course of the SS THOMAS BRACY had not altered materially at the time of contact.
- "67. That immediately upon contact high test gasoline aboard the USS VALCOUR caught fire with burning gasoline spreading over the sea.
- "68. That heavy smoke immediately enveloped the two vessels.
- "69. That the after engine room of the USS VALCOUR was evacuated without loss of personnel before same flooded.
- "70. That crew members of the USS VALCOUR who had assembled on the quarter deck upon hearing the siren collision alarm were engulfed in flames.
- "71. That crew members of the USS VALCOUR jumped into the sea to avoid the mounting flames of burning gasoline.
- "72. That the SS THOMAS BRACY backed clear of the USS VALCOUR after several minutes.
- "73. That burning gasoline had entered a hole in the SS THOMAS BRACY's bow which was opened up by the collision, setting fire to rope and various stores located in the forepeak.
- "74. That the burning gasoline on the water caused the paint on the starboard side of the SS THOMAS BRACY to catch fire.
- "75. That the Coast Guard Cutter CHASCO was about one mile astern of the SS THOMAS BRACY when the collision occurred.
- "76. That the USS HULAN (AKA) was about one mile to the starboard of the SS THOMAS BRACY at the time of collision.
- "77. That the CGC CHASCO and USS HULAN immediately lowered boats to recover the USS VALCOUR's men from the sea.

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- "78. That the CGC CHEKOKIE after recovering all men visible in the water then went alongside the USS VALCOUR on her port side and fought the fire aboard with water hoses.
- "79. That the US. SUN ILL secured alongside the USS VALCOUR on its starboard side and fought the fire.
- "80. That the fire aboard the USS VALCOUR was fought for five or six hours before same was extinguished.
- "81. That the crew of the SS THOMAS TRACY manned fire hoses and fought the fire aboard that vessel as it pulled clear of the US VALCOUR.
- "82. That the fire on the deck and sides of the SS THOMAS TRACY was extinguished by crew members.
- "83. That as the SS THOMAS TRACY proceeded back toward Hampton Roads the U. S. Navy tug YT 282 proceeded alongside pouring water into the TRACY's open bow where fire was still burning.
- "84. That the fire in the SS THOMAS TRACY's forepeak was brought under control by the U. S. Navy tug YT 282.
- "85. That the SS THOMAS TRACY proceeded into Hampton Roads under her own power and unaccompanied.
- "86. That one seaman [REDACTED] who had been on the forward deck of the SS THOMAS TRACY painting, immediately before the collision suffered a sprained back caused by the impact of the collision when he entered the ship's shelter deck space.
- "87. That four (4) crew members of the USS VALCOUR are known to have lost their lives as a result of the collision namely, Hoyle J. Britt [REDACTED] SHC, Dale E. Caley [REDACTED] SA, Carl C. Clemons (659 42 13) SD3, Clayton Counce [REDACTED] ALAN and [REDACTED] SA missing and presumed dead as indicated by Appendix "C".
- "88. That the USS VALCOUR was assisted back to Hampton Roads after the fire aboard had been brought under control.

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"89. That the flooding of the aft engine room and cofferdam aft of same along with ammunition lockers which were flooded caused a slight list to starboard on the USS VALCOUR.

"90. That the USS VALCOUR's draft upon return to port was 16 feet forward and 17 feet aft.

"91. That one crew member of the USS VALCOUR who was rescued by the CGC CHELSEA was noted to be wearing a life jacket which had not inflated due to the CO₂ cartridge being missing."

4. The Board expressed the following Opinions:

"1. That the responsibility for the casualty herein investigated rests solely upon the U.S.S. VALCOUR, AVP-55 in that she assumed the risk of collision in passing the SS THOMAS TRACY close abeam with only one generator on the line.

"2. That there is no evidence of any negligence or inattention on the part of the master or crew of the S.S. THOMAS TRACY which contributed to the collision.

"3. That the maneuvers of the U.S.S. VALCOUR and the S.S. THOMAS TRACY from the time each vessel passed the Cape Henry Junction Buoy until the vessels collided are illustrated on the attached course and speed diagram.

"4. That the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter CHELSEA acted with dispatch and efficiency in carrying out her mission of rescue operations."

5. The board made the following recommendations:

"1. That no action under R.S. 4450 be taken against the licenses or certificates of any of the personnel attached to the S.S. THOMAS TRACY.

"2. That U.S. Coast Guard vessels of the AVP type be provided with some auxiliary means of communications to prevent a loss of communications in the event of a failure similar to the one suffered by the U.S.S. VALCOUR.

"3. That all U.S. Coast Guard vessels not now provided with adequate maneuvering data be required to obtain or develop maneuvering data and to have same in a readily usable and available form, such data to include crash stop distances at different speeds, tactical diameter, transfer, advance, etc.

"4. That owners and masters of ocean and coastwise vessels be encouraged to obtain or develop adequate maneuvering data to be made available to masters and mates of such vessels.

"5. That in view of the fact the U.S. Navy is conducting a separate investigation into this casualty and will deal summarily with any neglect on the part of the U.S. Navy personnel involved, it is recommended that no further action be taken and that this case be closed."

REMARKS

6. The recommendation of the Board that U. S. Coast Guard vessels of the WAMP type be provided with some auxiliary means of communications to prevent a loss of communications in the event of a failure similar to the one suffered by the VALCOUR will be referred to the Office of Operations and Office of Engineering for appropriate consideration and action following approval of this record of investigation.

7. Recommendation 3 of the Board that Coast Guard vessels to provided with adequate maneuvering data, including crash stop distances at different speeds, tactical diameter, transfer, advance, etc. is not relevant or material to the investigation of subject casualty since no Coast Guard vessel was involved.

8. Recommendation 4 of the Board that owners and masters of ocean and coastwise vessels be encouraged to obtain or develop adequate maneuvering data to be made available to masters and mates of such vessels will be made the subject of an article in the "Proceedings of Merchant Marine Council."

9. The observation of the Board in recommendation 5 that the U.S. Navy will deal summarily with any neglect on the part of the U. S. Navy personnel involved in subject casualty is disapproved. The action or method of procedure in taking action on the part of the U. S. Navy with respect to the naval personnel involved in a casualty involving a naval and merchant vessel is a matter under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Navy and beyond the consideration of the Board.

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10. 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. A. OVENDEN
P. A. OVENDEN
Acting

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23 October, 1951

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

Forwarded, recommending approval.

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

APPROVED

24 October, 1951

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