

AIR MAIL
NO. 80

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AMERICAN CONSULATE

Tampico, Mexico, June 2, 1942.

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STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Subject: Explosions Occurring in the Tanks of the American Tanker Cacalilao While in Port at Tampico, Mexico.

The Honorable The Secretary of State, Washington.

Sir:

I have the honor to refer to my telegrams of May 31, 9 a.m. and June 1, 9 a.m. relative to the explosions which took place at approximately 1 a.m. Sunday, May 31, 1942 in the tanks of the American tanker Cacalilao while she was berthed a few miles down the Panuco river from Tampico at the docks of the Ciudad Madero Refinery of Petroleos Mexicanos.

At the time the explosions occurred, the Cacalilao was lying at the above mentioned docks (the old Agulla Refinery docks) and workmen, employed by Petroleos Mexicanos, were engaged in flushing out the vessel's tanks with water from a hose as a part of the cleaning process undertaken to prepare the tanks for a cargo of gas oil which the Cacalilao was scheduled to transport to New York City. The tanks had previously been flushed out with gasoline and, subsequently, with steam to rid them of any dangerous gases which might have been left in them as an aftermath of the cleansing with gasoline. All of the tanks were open.

One of Petroleos Mexicanos' workmen was standing on a ladder about 7 or 8 feet from the top of tank No. 4 playing a stream of water into the tank from a hose. A chemist, in the employ of the Mexican company, was on board the vessel supervising the cleaning operations. Other workmen, employed by Petroleos Mexicanos, were nearby, assisting in the work. The Master of the vessel, the Third Mate, the Second Assistant Engineer, the Radio Operator, and most of the crew were on board, either on watch or preparing to turn in for the night. The First and Second Mates, the Chief Engineer and perhaps a half a dozen members of the crew were on liberty ashore.

Suddenly,

Ignatius Camiolo, Radio Operator, next of kin given on the crew list as Mrs. Mary Camiolo, widow, 135 Barton Street, Buffalo, New York.

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Suddenly, at about one o'clock Sunday morning, a rumbling explosion shook the vessel and fire broke out in the affected tanks and in the superstructure over them, housing the galley, mess hall, and captain's quarters. The first explosion was followed in about a minute by a second and, according to some accounts, by a third and fourth. I, personally, heard only two explosions, as did Vice Consul Blake; but our homes are at some distance from the scene of the disaster, and it is quite possible, even probable, that there was, at least, a third explosion, as three of the vessel's tanks were blown out. The first explosion evidently occurred in tank No. 4, the tank in which the workman was using the hose. The force of the explosion either blew out or weakened the walls between tank No. 4 and tanks Nos. 3 and 5, and explosions in the latter two tanks followed in short order. The force of the explosions was upwards and outwards. The deck over No. 4 tank was ripped out, and there is a gaping hole in the starboard side of the ship about 45 feet wide and extending from the deck to a point beneath the water. The forward superstructure, housing the galley and the captain's quarters, is completely burned out, and the girders and metal work in this part of the ship have been warped and twisted either by the force of the explosions or by the fire which followed them. The ship has a pronounced list to starboard, but efforts are being made to correct this by filling the tanks on the port side with water.

The damage, so far as has yet been ascertained, was confined to that which has already been mentioned, with the exception of the instruments and steering apparatus on the bridge. While these were ruined in the fire, the vessel is equipped with an emergency steering apparatus aft, which is believed to be in good working order. The engines were not damaged by the explosions, nor by the ensuing fire which did not extend aft to any extent. Water was seeping into the engine room through some damaged or defective packing, but orders have been given to have the leak repaired, and mechanics are understood to have been put to work Monday morning at this task.

It is the opinion of various marine men who have viewed the ship that the damage done is too great to be repaired here, or any place in Mexico. However, it is believed that, with some temporary shoring in the hole in her side, the Cacalilao can be navigated, possibly with the assistance of one or two tugs, to an American port having dry-docking facilities.

Three members of the Cacalilao's crew lost their lives in the disaster, and one is missing and believed drowned. The known dead are:

I. M. Martinusen, Master, home address not given on the crew list, wife understood to have been notified by the vessel's operators by telephone;

Tom Jacobsen, Third Officer, person to be notified given on the crew list as an unnamed friend, residing at 30 Whitehall Street, New York City;

Ignatius Camiolo, Radio Operator, next of kin given on the crew list as Mrs. Mary Camiolo, mother, 135 Barton Street, Buffalo, New York.

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In addition to the three known dead, William Blue Barth, an oiler, is missing. Several of the crew report having seen him drop into the water from a rope down which he was lowering himself. He is known to have been unable to swim, and is believed certainly to have drowned, although his body has not yet been recovered. His next of kin is not shown on the crew list, but a statement does appear there to the effect that a Miss Nettie M. Steinmann, a friend, residing at 409 West Street, Union City, New Jersey should be notified in the event of anything happening to him.

The remainder of the crew of 34 has been accounted for and, although some are suffering from burns or other injuries, their injuries are not believed to be serious. It should be mentioned, in this connection, that the Cacalilao's complement, counting all ratings, totalled 34, rather than 33, as stated in the Consulate's telegram of June 1, 9 a.m. The names, ratings, and addresses of the next of kin of the members of the crew surviving the disaster may be obtained, if wanted, from the original of the crew list on file with the Bureau of Marine Inspection, Department of Commerce. The following changes in the ship's crew have occurred, however, since the original crew list was prepared: Oswald A. Sorensen, originally signed on as Third Mate, was discharged at Habana, May 4, 1942; Tom Jacobsen, already referred to earlier in this despatch as having lost his life in the explosions, was signed on at Habana on May 2 as Third Mate to replace Oswald A. Sorensen; and Leon Herschman was signed on as a wiper at Tampico on April 27, giving his next of kin as Morris Herschman, relationship not stated, residing at 806 East 151st Street, New York City.

Vice Consul Blake, who went over the ship at 11 a.m. Sunday, first of all examined the safe in the wreckage of the Captain's quarters where, it is known, the ship's ciphers and other confidential papers were kept. The upper left hand corner of the front wall of the safe had been curled back, exposing a portion of the interior of the safe. It appears as if the opening had been made by a person wielding a crow bar, or some similar tool, while the steel was still somewhat soft as a result of the intense heat to which it had been subjected. The combination dial was missing, having apparently been knocked off with a chisel, or some similar instrument. Arrangements have been made to have the safe removed from the ship, and brought to the Consulate where an examination will be made of its contents. When this has been done, the Consulate will report its findings to the Department.

Opinion differs as to the cause of the explosions. There seems to be a tendency on the part of two Americans, with whom I viewed the ship, to regard the extent of the damage as out of line with the quantity of gas which, they estimate, could have remained in the tanks after their cleansing with steam. They point out that the workmen engaged in flushing out the tank where the first explosion occurred was able to descend at least 7 or 8 feet into the tank without, apparently, suffering any ill effects from the inhalation of gas, and they regard it as unlikely that he could have done so, had gas been

placations took place Monday morning, June 1, in my presence, in Tampico's Trinidad Cemetery, members of the Cacal present

crew

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present in the tank in sufficient quantity to cause the devastating explosion which shortly occurred. They point out, also, that the force of the explosions was almost exclusively outwards and upwards, and they regard this fact as supporting the possibility that a delayed action bomb of some kind may have been placed in No. 4 tank, near the top and close to the vessel's hull. The officials of Petroleos Mexicanos and the Chief of Police of the State of Tamaulipas believe that the explosions were caused by a bomb, or bombs, and not by gas in the tanks of the ship.

However, the Chief Engineer of the vessel, the Second Assistant Engineer, and the First and Second Officers are all of the opinion that the explosions were caused by the ignition of gas, and that the ignition was accidental, though due to negligence. They point out that the certificate of the vessel as a tanker does not permit the use of gasoline; that 10,500 barrels of gasoline were pumped into the vessel for cleansing purposes; that, according to the ship's gauges, only 10,000 barrels were pumped out; that open cluster lights were used in the tanks, which are also prohibited; and that the electric cable along the deck, to which were attached the wires leading to the cluster lights, was in a thoroughly bad condition, patched with tape and likely to give off sparks. When these irregularities were pointed out to the official of Petroleos Mexicanos in charge of the work, he replied that he knew that things were not as they should be, adding, by way of explanation: "This is war time".

While on the subject of the possible cause of the explosions, consideration must be given to the fact that the Captain had been having trouble with a pumpman, one Angelo Paleologo, a naturalized American citizen born in Egypt of Greek parents. Paleologo wished the Captain to sign him off on the ground that he was ill. This, the Captain refused to do as he was of the opinion that the seaman was not ill, but was merely suffering from fear. Three or four days before the explosions, the two met in the offices of Petroleos Mexicanos in Tampico, and an argument ensued. During the course of the argument, Paleologo is stated to have made threats against the Captain and the vessel which ended up in his being placed under arrest. It was the Captain's thought to have the seaman held safely in jail until just before the vessel sailed, and then to have him delivered on board by the local police. However, the local authorities released Paleologo after having held him for a day or two, and he was observed by several people in various places around Tampico on Saturday, May 30th. After the explosions occurred, orders were issued to pick him up, and he was rearrested at his hotel early Sunday morning, and subjected to extended questioning. He denied having been in any way responsible for what took place on the Cacalilao and, in fact, the authorities have been unable to prove, at least so far, that he visited the ship subsequent to his release from jail.

The burial of the three American victims of the explosions took place Monday morning, June 1, in my presence, in Tampico's Trinidad Cemetery, members of the Cacalilao's

crew

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crew having acted as pall bearers. The body of the Master, I. M. Martinusen, was buried in grave No. 570-D; that of Tom Jacobsen, the Third Officer, in grave No. 571; and that of Ignatius Camiolo, the Radio Operator, in grave No. 574.

Another body was interred in grave No. 575 which was said to be that of William Blue Barth, an oiler, previously mentioned in this despatch as missing. The body was recovered from the river badly mutilated. The Second Assistant Engineer of the vessel who viewed the remains stated he believed they were those of Barth, but that he could not be certain because of disfigurement. The local authorities evidently were convinced that they were and they were interred as such. Several Mexican workmen lost their lives in the explosion - the exact number is not yet known - and some of the bodies recovered could not be identified. There is the possibility, therefore, that the body interred as that of Barth may not have been his.

Cross-file UNI

Letter from

Date

Subject

The Consulate is watching further developments closely, and will report on them promptly as they occur.

Respectfully yours,

Thomas McEnelly
American Consul

File No. 885.7
TMCE-MWE/lmp

In sextuplicate to the Department.
Copy to the Embassy, Mexico City.

Original filed under

Date



Number

Handwritten signature: Muriel Foster