

THE FOREIGN SERVICE
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1943 OCT 22 PM 1 42

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CONFIDENTIAL

AMERICAN CONSULATE
Nuevitas, Cuba, September 26, 1943

SUBJECT: Grounding of the American SS. CAESAR RODNEY at
Manati, Cuba.

THE HONORABLE

THE SECRETARY OF STATE,

WASHINGTON.

SIR:

I have the honor to report that the United States Naval Liaison Officer at Nuevitas, Cuba, advised the writer at noon on September 19, 1943, that the American vessel SS CAESAR RODNEY, which had sailed from this port on the previous afternoon had run aground at the entrance to Manati harbor. He also stated that the master was drunk and that it was possible that the master would have to be relieved of his command.

The port of Manati, Cuba, is about twenty miles by sea, East of Nuevitas and in the Province of Oriente. It is under the jurisdiction of the American Consulate at Antilla, Cuba. However, because of the urgency of the matter and it was realized that it would be possible for me to reach the scene much sooner, and more conveniently than the consular officer at Antilla, I departed from Nuevitas the same day at 1:00 p.m. aboard a United States Coast boat which was taking the United States Naval Liaison officer to the stranded vessel.

We arrived along side the SS. CAESAR RODNEY about 5:00 p.m. the same afternoon and immediately boarded the vessel. The vessel was aground on the East side of the harbor channel and clear of traffic.

Upon boarding the vessel I inquired for the master. The first mate reported that the master was in his cabin and that he had not been on deck since shortly after the ship went aground which was about twenty two hours before my arrival aboard. I then went to the master's cabin and found him asleep in his bed. After waking him up and in the presence of the first mate I tried to question him as to just what had happened. However, it was quickly realized that he was still too drunk to give an intelligent answer. After a few minutes of talking with the master he went back to bed and I proceeded to question the ship's officers including the U. S. Navy Armed Guard Officer.

It was found that just before the vessel sailed from New York the previous master became sick and Mr. Sverre A. MICHAELSEN, who was the first mate at the time was then appointed master. The vessel sailed from New York in ballast for Nuevitas to load a part cargo of raw sugar the balance of

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cargo

To safeguard the security of the information contained herein, please initial and return to Intelligence for filing when it has served its purpose

File 23

cargo to be taken at Manati, Cuba.

The vessel arrived at Nuevitas, Cuba, on September 16, 1943, and loaded 39,237 bags of raw sugar. It departed from Nuevitas at 4:20 p.m. on September 18, 1943, and arrived at the entrance to Manati at 6:32 p.m. and went aground at 6:39 p.m. The pilot came aboard at 6:45 p.m.

According to the information obtained from the ship's officers the master, Sverre A. Michaelsen, came aboard the ship at Nuevitas just before sailing in a drunken condition and continued to drink rum or some other intoxicating liquor on the trip from Nuevitas to Manati. The first mate who was on the bridge with the master when the ship was approaching the entrance to Manati stated that the ship approached the entrance at full speed and that he called the master's attention to the fact and suggested that the speed be reduced. He said the master replied that he would show these Cubans how to bring a ship in and continue at full speed. The mate stated that he could see the pilot boat off the starboard side and the pilot waving with his hands trying to indicate to the ship that it was headed for the beach and to bring the ship to starboard. The mate told this to the master who ignored it and within a few minutes the bow of the ship went aground. The master gave full astern but the ship was already up on the reef and the wind and tide swung its stern to port and up on the reef also. The pilot came aboard some ten minutes after the ship had gone aground and after trying for some time to get the ship off under its own power, without success, it was decided to let things alone until the next high tide. Another attempt was made to get the ship off under its own power on the next high tide about 1:00 a.m. September 19, 1943, but without results. This latter attempt was made by the first mate and the pilot as the master did not come out of his room. During the maneuvering the ship began to move and the pilot ordered the port anchor to be dropped. It was dropped as ordered and fouled right under number one hold. Because this mistake by the pilot it was later necessary to detach the anchor when refloating the ship and it was not possible to pick it up again.

It was realized during my investigation that the condition of the master and his actions were being caused by something other than just alcohol. He appeared to be in a stupor, his memory was very bad and he asked many foolish questions, such as where he was and if we knew him etc. Therefore, I decided to check the narcotics. Upon checking the last inventory of narcotics and after determining that no one had been treated with narcotics since the last inventory was made, which was just before the ship sailed from New York, it was found that seven 1/4 grain tablets of morphine sulphate were missing. The narcotics were kept in the safe in the master's quarters and it must be presumed that the master had taken them. It is believed that after the master realized the difficulty that he was in, he took the morphine in order to sleep and try to forget, thus accounting for his actions and stupor. On the night previous to making this inventory the master jumped overboard and went in swimming and had to be pulled aboard by the crew. Shortly afterwards he could not remember anything about having been in swimming. In view of the

circumstances

circumstances it was decided to relieve the master of his command which was done on September 21, 1943. Captain Michaelson agreed to being relieved and there are attached true copies of the signed release.

In the mean time the representatives of the War Shipping Administration at Habana, Cuba, had been contacted by telephone and reported that Captain Rolf Barth was on his way to Manati to take charge of refloating the vessel. Captain Barth arrived by plane from Preston, Cuba, on the morning of September 21, 1943. Captain Rolf Barth was appointed the new master on September 22, 1943, by the undersigned.

Captain Michaelson was sent to Camaguey, Cuba, on the morning of September 22, 1943, with instruction to the American Consul at that city to arrange for his passage back to Miami, Florida by the first available plane and to advise the United States Immigration authorities at Miami of the expected time of his arrival there. It was also requested of the consul to state in his telegram that Michaelson should be sent to a hospital upon his arrival at Miami for observation and possibly treatment. The writer has since been informed that Captain Michaelson caught the afternoon plane leaving Camaguey on September 22, 1943.

Before leaving Nuevitas on the Coast Guard boat with Lt. George J. Miller, U.S.N.R. I suggested to him that the small tug and two barges operating at Nuevitas for the War Shipping Administration, and which were not being utilized at the moment, be sent right away to Manati to aid the vessel. Lt. Miller did not agree and the barges remained at Nuevitas. The tug went but as it is only a small tug it was unable to be of any use. It was then ordered back to Nuevitas to bring the barges over. Had my suggestion been complied with the vessel could have been refloated at least twenty four hours sooner and thus decrease the danger of the ship going further aground from bad weather.

The tug returned to Manati on September 21, 1943, at 2:25 p.m. with the two lighters. Lt. Commander John Kask, U.S.N.R. from Guantanamo Bay Naval Station came aboard at 6:00 p.m. and at 7:00 p.m. Captain Barth ordered the unloading of the cargo into the lighters from humber four and five holds. Fearing that the ship would change its position during the night, Captain Barth ordered the unloading stopped at 10:00 p.m. The next morning at 7:00 a.m. four gangs again began unloading the two holds. By 3:00 p.m. September 22, 1943, about 3,000 bags had been put into the lighters and with the approaching time for high tide, Captain Barth began to try to refloat the vessel. At 3:30 p.m. the vessel was again afloat and at 5:46 p.m. it was along side the dock at Manati.

The War Shipping Administration at Habana had ordered a large tug to Manati which was expected there in the early afternoon of September 22, 1943, but since the ship was beginning to float from lightening the cargo and the tide was high, Captain Barth could not wait for the big tug without further undangering the ship and it must be said that he did a fine job of salvaging, as the channel is not very wide and it was only with the utmost of skill and

seamanship

seamanship that he brought the ship safely to the dock. It should be stated that the able assistance of Lt. Commander J. Kask, U.S.N.R., was also very helpful in getting the ship afloat. The large tug arrived about one hour after the ship was along side the dock at Manati.

Since the ship showed no signs of serious leakage and arrangements had been made to have repairs made locally to the boilers which had several broken tubes, it was decided that the ship could complete a full cargo at Manati and proceed to a port in the United States to be dry docked before taking on another cargo.

A survey was called for by Captain Barth which was made by the Master and Chief Engineer of the American Tug M. Moran and by the local agent of Lloyds of London, England. Their recommendations were along the lines stated in the previous paragraph.

After making the survey and seeing that everything aboard ship was again well in hand I returned to my post arriving at Nuevitas at 4:00 p.m. September 24, 1943. Before leaving, loading operations had started and laborers from ashore were already working on the boilers. It is understood that the vessel will sail from Manati with its full cargo and Captain Barth who is the Port Captain of the United Fruit Company at Preston, Cuba, will be relieved by another Master upon the arrival of the ship at its first port of call.

Copies of the survey have been sent to the War Shipping Administration at Habana, Cuba.

Respectfully yours,

Edward S. Benet
American Vice Consul

Enclosure:

1. Release of Master.

885.7
ESB/jc

Original and Hectograph to Department.
Copy to American Embassy, Habana.
Copy to War Shipping Administration, Habana.

Enclosure to Despatch No. 2 from American
Consulate, Nuevitas, Cuba of September 26,
1943.

(copy)

Manati, Cuba

September 21, 1943

TO THE MASTER OF THE SS CAESAR RODNEY:

Sir:

In view of existing circumstances of which you are well aware, and by instructions of the War Shipping Administration at Havana, Cuba, you are hereby relieved of your command of the SS Caesar Rodney.

It is understood that this release also has your consent, and full details of the grounding of the ship at Manati, Cuba, will be explained to the owners or operators of the vessel upon your arrival in New York City.

(SIGNED) EDWARD S. BENET
EDWARD S. BENET
American Vice-Consul

Agreed: (SIGNED) SVERRE A. MICHAELSEN
Sverre A. Michaelsen
Master, SS. Caesar Rodney