

Case No. 552  
SS CHINA MAIL  
Official #241239

804 Custom House  
Philadelphia 6, Pa.

Merchant Marine Hearing Unit  
United States Coast Guard  
Naval District  
Philadelphia, Pa.  
30 December 1943

Address reply to  
District Coast Guard Officer (omi)  
Fourth Naval District

Refer to file: MIN-628-C-1225

INVESTIGATION INTO THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING  
THE PLACING OF ARMED GUARDS ABOARD THE SS CHINA MAIL  
The SS CHINA MAIL, H. L. Halverson, Master, arrived  
in Philadelphia, Pa., on 22 December 1943 after a voyage which  
began 3 January, 1944 July 1943.

Pursuant to a complaint received by this office, an  
investigation was conducted aboard the vessel by Benjamin Hines, Jr.  
Lt. (j.g.) USCGR. As a result of this investigation, the following  
is Subj: H. L. Halverson, Master S. S. CHINA MAIL

There is inclosed herewith report of investigation into the circum-  
stances surrounding the placing of armed guards aboard the S. S. CHINA  
MAIL, which is forwarded for HQ information. The U. S. Navy  
Port Director's office in Philadelphia has been advised of the parti-  
culars in this matter. Departing from Philadelphia, the vessel  
was stopped by a patrol boat in the river and given another set  
of routing instructions. It appears that the second set of routing  
instructions were, in a large part, different from the first set.

*William Gallagher*  
WILLIAM GALLAGHER  
By direction

When off the Florida coast, the vessel was encountered by a patrol boat  
encountered, and during this time the automatic flash lights  
attached to the life rafts were found to be lighted. These lights  
were hung in canvas straps and the sail twine by which they had  
been secured on a former trip had been removed by order of the  
Master. On the occasions some of these lights had been found  
hanging out of their sockets and it was thought that the Master  
believed an attempt might have been made to signal shore. A  
few days following this incident, the vessel's navigation lights  
were turned on without authorization. This lighting circuit is  
controlled by a master switch operable from the pilot house, with  
each light provided with its individual switch.

Incl.  
Report of investigation (2 copies)

When the ship entered Lion Bay it was stopped by a patrol  
boat which stated that no orders had been received permitting the  
vessel to pass, and the patrol boat ordered the Master to head  
back to sea. The Master had given the identification signal but  
this may have been the result of failure to follow the second set  
of running instructions issued while leaving Philadelphia. The  
Master requested permission to report to the station ship, which  
permission was denied him, and he then threatened to run his ship

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Case No. 562  
SS CHINA MAIL  
Official #241239

Merchant Marine Hearing Unit  
United States Coast Guard  
Fourth Naval District  
Philadelphia, Pa.  
30 December 1943

INVESTIGATION INTO THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING  
THE PLACING OF ARMED GUARDS ABOARD THE SS CHINA MAIL

FACTS: The SS CHINA MAIL, H. L. Halverson, Master, arrived in Philadelphia, Pa., on 22 December 1943 after a voyage which began here on 2 July 1943.

Pursuant to a complaint received by this office, an investigation was conducted aboard the vessel by Benjamin Himes, Jr. Lt.(j.g.) USCGR. As a result of this investigation, the following facts were adduced:

The Master, H. L. Halverson, was making his second ocean voyage after a period of 12 years, during which time he had been sailing on the inland waterways of the West Coast. At the commencement of the voyage routing instructions were handed the Master by the Naval Port Director. Departing from Philadelphia, the vessel was stopped by a patrol boat in the river and given another set of routing instructions. It appears that the second set of routing instructions were, in a large part, disregarded.

When off the Florida coast strong northeasterly winds were encountered, and during this time the automatic flash lights attached to the life rafts were found to be lighted. These lights were hung in canvas straps and the sail twine by which they had been secured on a former trip, had been removed by order of the Master. On two occasions some of these lights had been found hanging out of their sockets and it was thought that the Master believed an attempt might have been made to signal shore. A few days following this incident, the vessel's navigation lights were turned on without authorization. This lighting circuit is controlled by a master switch operable from the pilot house, with each light provided with its individual switch.

When the ship entered Limon Bay it was stopped by a patrol boat which stated that no orders had been received permitting the vessel to pass, and the patrol boat ordered the Master to head back to sea. The Master had given the identification signal but this may have been the result of failure to follow the second set of running instructions issued while leaving Philadelphia. The Master requested permission to report to the station ship, which permission was denied him, and he then threatened to run his ship



aground rather than head out to sea. The Master stated that another patrol boat had informed him that there were submarines in the vicinity, but nevertheless he was not permitted to approach the station ship and he was informed that Fort Sherman had 14 inch guns trained on him and to remove his vessel from that vicinity. He was not permitted to approach the station ship, but finally entered and passed through the Panama Canal.

After leaving the Canal Zone the Master had a consultation with the Gunnery Officer and the Senior Officer Present of the Army personnel. The circumstances surrounding the navigation lights and the automatic buoyancy flash lights off the Florida coast were discussed and as a result of this conference, a guard was organized from the Army personnel and the civilian passengers aboard. This guard was equipped with firearms and stationed at companionways and doors leading to the decks and other places about the vessel. They had orders to challenge all persons, regardless of rank, between the hours of sunset and sunrise. The guards were assigned, civilian and military, without regard to their knowledge of, or experience with, the firearms that were issued to them. On 3 specific occasions members of the Naval gun crew, while performing their duties, were accosted by guards and guns pressed against their bodies. These facts were reported to the Gunnery Officer, but due to no definite assignment plan of guards, the acts of the man or men involved, could not be determined at the time. The presence of armed passengers serving as guards caused great uneasiness among the officers and men, both of the Merchant Marine crew and the Naval gun crew, due to the fact that some of the civilian passengers were missionaries totally unfamiliar with the use of firearms, and that these special guards, with loaded firearms, were stationed in all parts of the vessel during the time of complete blackout. This state of preparedness existed for approximately 2 months when it was discontinued after information was received that aboard another ship a mate had shot one of the armed guard.

These facts herein briefly mentioned, outline the occurrences of the voyage. An investigation was made by an examining officer of the U. S. Coast Guard, but after an examination of the Statutes this office is unable to find any instance in which the navigation laws or Federal Statutes have been violated, with the possible exception of the permitting unauthorized persons to be in the pilot house and navigation bridge of the vessel. The compliance with Navy routing instructions is touched on briefly as it is felt that this is a matter for the Naval authorities.

It is felt, however, that the armed guard is placed aboard the vessel under the charge of the U. S. Naval Officer for the



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

COMMANDANT'S OFFICE

Memorandum for  
military security of the ship at sea and that, if in the judgment of the Master it was necessary to place additional guards about the vessel, this procedure should have been done under the direction of the Naval Armed Guard Officer.

The efforts of the Master to safeguard the interest of his vessel, the lives of its crew and the passengers, may have been made with laudable intent. Whether or not there was any attempt at sabotage, disclosure of the vessel's position, or attempt to signal to the enemy, is open to question. In any event, it is the opinion of this office that it is an unsafe practice to arm as guards persons who are unfamiliar with and untrained in the use of firearms and to place them in a position of armed watchfulness over merchant officers and merchant seamen on a blacked out ship at sea during the nighttime. It is also felt that if any untoward intent during the voyage from Philadelphia to the Canal Zone excited the suspicions of the Master, the proper procedure would have been to notify the Naval Intelligence in the Canal Zone and for the Naval Intelligence to make the investigation and the proper recommendations, not, as was done in this case, after the Canal Zone had been left behind, to take these extraordinary precautions in the Pacific for an incident occurring in the Atlantic Ocean.

*William Gallagher*  
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By direction