

# MAINS'L HAUL

MARITIME MUSEUM ASSOCIATION OF SAN DIEGO

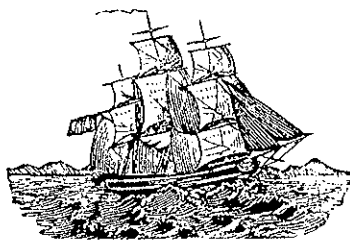
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# Collision at Sea: USNHS *Benevolence* and S.S. *Mary Luckenbach*

By Lionel C. Meeker

On August 25, 1950, the U.S. Navy hospital ship *BENEVOLENCE*, on what was intended to be a limited trial trip after reactivation from a layup fleet, steamed out through San Francisco's Golden Gate, and on her way back, collided with S.S. *MARY LUCKENBACH*, an outbound freighter belonging to the Luckenbach Steamship Company. The collision resulted in the deaths of 23 people, the sinking and total loss of *BENEVOLENCE* and the court-martial of her commander, Captain Barton E. Bacon, Jr. S.S. *MARY LUCKENBACH* suffered moderate damage and no loss of life. August 1992 was the 42nd anniversary of this tragic loss and the incident merits more comment than appeared in the news media of the time.

The ship *BENEVOLENCE*, originally the *MARINE LION*, or Maritime Commission type C4 S B2, was launched on July 10, 1944 at the Sun Shipbuilding Company of Chester, Pennsylvania. Originally laid out for use as a bulk carrier, the vessel was taken over by the Navy and converted in 1945 to the hospital ship *BENEVOLENCE* with the prophetic number AH-13.

*BENEVOLENCE* was 520 feet long—not a large ship compared with our modern oil-carrying monsters, but she had accommodations for 800 patients and a large medical staff in her beamy 71-foot-wide hull. Her top speed was 17.5 knots driven by a single screw geared turbine, and she displaced 15,000 tons fully loaded. Her original cost of \$14,000,000 seems low by the standard of today's inflated dollar, and her 1950 replacement value was estimated to be \$18,000,000. After her loss, and following hearings with the leading salvage companies, *BENEVOLENCE* was written off and deemed not worth more than \$50,000, based on the price of scrap iron at \$18 a ton at that time—a figure, in my estimation, grossly underestimated.

Following service in the closing days of World War II in the Pacific and in "Operation Crossroads"—the atom bomb tests at Bikini Atoll—*BENEVOLENCE* had been decommissioned in September 1947 and added to the San Francisco Reserve Group—or what is commonly known as the "bone yard." The Korean War produced an urgent need for her services and she was reactivated at Mare Island Shipyard on an "earliest possible" basis.

When the ship was deemed to be in proper working order and seaworthy, she was to be turned over immediately to the Military Sea Transport Service (MSTS). It seems odd that a large hospital ship built, operated and equipped to naval procedures should be turned over to a quasi-military organization and operated by a civilian crew including master and officers. I might digress for a moment by saying that shortly after World War II, the Navy may have been a little peeved that the Army was operating ships—the Army's navy! Thus, the old Army Transport Service, previously under the Transportation Corps (formerly the old Quartermaster Corps), became the Military Sea

Transport Service under the Navy but with a carryover of Civil Service administrators and civilian officers and ship crews. Hence when the *BENEVOLENCE* was reactivated at a naval shipyard but to be manned by civilians, many of the shipyard people at Mare Island were not completely familiar with Coast Guard requirements adopted by all MSTS vessels.

The end result brought on by wartime urgency saw *BENEVOLENCE* being put to sea without proper lifeboat installation, bypassing of essential training and indoctrination of those not familiar with this type of vessel—and worst of all, no drills or assignment of emergency stations to naval personnel aboard. It appears that *BENEVOLENCE* put to sea in an unseaworthy condition. The term "seaworthy" in the modern steamship era has endless ramifications. The public image of jolly tars hauling on ropes while the helmsman squints at the shivering luff of a sail is not valid and the legal profession has shown that many a steamer was not properly rigged, operated or manned for reasons that seem farfetched but nevertheless—"unseaworthy."

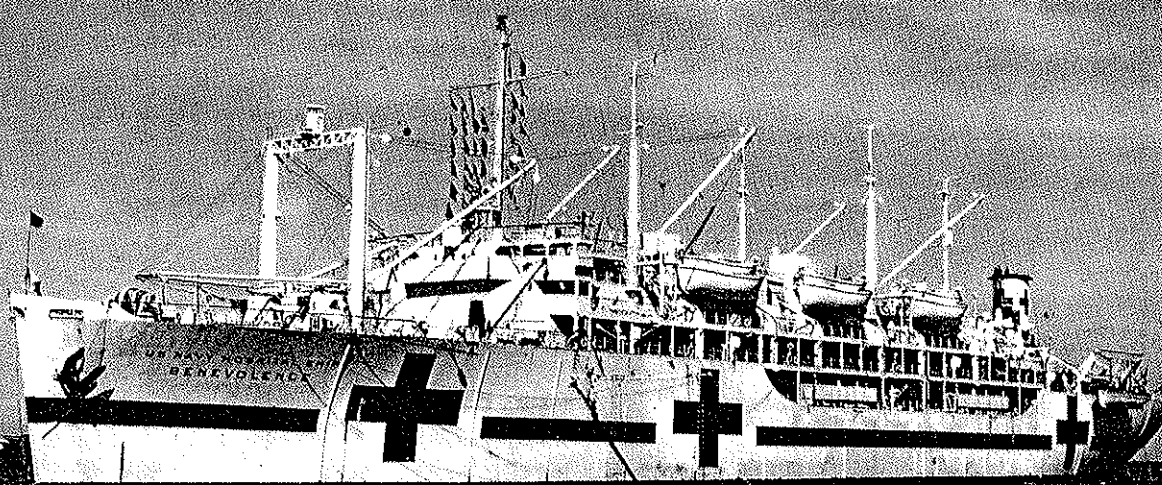
Captain Barton E. Bacon, Jr., USN, was then Commander of the Mare Island Group, Pacific Reserve Fleet, and Commander SubGroup One, of the Mare Island Group, with additional duties as Commander Submarine Forces, Pacific Administration, Mare Island. A Naval Academy graduate of 1925, he had been in the service for over 25 years. His sea experience had varied: battleships, Commanding Officer of the *WARHAWK*, a Maritime Commission C-2 type conversion, but mostly in submarines.

With most of the minor deficiencies corrected, *BENEVOLENCE* was ready to begin her acceptance trials on schedule.

Captain Bacon, as senior member of the Mare Island Group, appointed himself commanding officer of *BENEVOLENCE* with the full approval of his superiors. He thought it best to have a person of his rank aboard during the trials with all the facts and figures on hand to be able to deal better with his high-ranking opposites on the MSTS side.

It may have crossed Captain Bacon's mind, too, that this would be an ideal way to get away from the office and the sultry August heat of upper San Francisco Bay. It would be his chance to be skipper of a large ship, if only for a day or two. The days would be cool and pleasant with congenial people on board including 16 nurses. Since the MSTS stewards would be serving meals, the trial runs would be almost like a seagoing picnic. Things turned out differently.

At 0800 on August 25, everything was set for Captain Bacon to take *BENEVOLENCE* out on her final day of trials before turning her over to the MSTS authorities on the 26th. The ship had made a previous run on August 22 in the Bay but there were indications of salt in the feed



*USNHS BENEVOLENCE (AH-13), victim of disaster off the Golden Gate.*  
*National Archives*

water system and she had to return to the shipyard at a very slow speed to prevent salting up of the boilers. After the deficiencies were set right, BENEVOLENCE could make her engine trials, maneuvering and anchor tests.

BENEVOLENCE left the shipyard with a dual crew of naval and civilian personnel. The civilian crew included Captain William Murray, better known around the waterfront as "Pineapple Bill," and his hand-picked mates and engineers. His crew totaled some 125 people, and with the naval personnel including the medical department, there were 526 persons aboard when the ship left the dock.

The inordinate number of persons aboard with little or nothing to do generated some criticism and the Navy hastened to justify the presence of nurses on board; there was even a chaplain. It might have been easier to embark all these people the next day at the Oakland Supply Center where the ship would be stored rather than to have

everyone transported all the way to Mare Island. During the time these people were aboard, there were no drills or indoctrination on shipboard emergency procedures.

BENEVOLENCE departed her berth at Mare Island and steamed down the Bay, gradually increasing her speed to 85 RPM or 15.5 knots, standard speed for this type ship. Compasses were compensated and the anchors and windlasses tested off Treasure Island. Then BENEVOLENCE stood out the Golden Gate at standard speed assisted by a  $2\frac{1}{2}$  knot current.

If any personnel aboard had misgivings that day about putting to sea in a ship not yet thoroughly tested to USCG standards, nobody gave a hint that things might not work out well.

The ship's engines and equipment performed well and the MSTS inspection team would have been willing to forego the speed tests at 85% and 90% of full power had they been so requested by Captain Bacon. The radar, com-

passes, and steering gear checked out, and all the lifeboats were in place—but so well in place they couldn't be launched.

At first the weather was fine and clear. Captain Bacon requested a weather report and got one stating the visibility at the San Francisco Lightship to be 18 miles—obviously an error, more like 1.8 or .8 miles. At that time of year, one can almost set his watch by the time the fog bank comes rolling into San Francisco Bay. When BENEVOLENCE went under the Golden Gate Bridge, Point Bonita and Mile Rocks were still visible but the fog bank was quickly enshrouding the Main Ship Channel. The fog would be patchy, with visibility varying from one mile to almost nil.

Captain Bacon must have felt secure in his new responsibility. He had made a special effort to engage Captain Lyle G. Havens, a highly recommended San Francisco Bay pilot, to dock and undock, navigate the Bay channels, and go out to and around the San Francisco Lightship. Even if Captain Havens was the best man for the job, he was conning the ship only in an advisory capacity. The responsibility for the safe navigation of the ship rests solely with the commanding officer, who may overrule any order from the pilot.

To enlighten the reader unfamiliar with the entrance to San Francisco Bay, the Main Ship Channel extends westward starting with Buoy 7 and Flashing Red Whistle Buoy 8, 5.8 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge. The buoy pairs average about 1500 yards apart and end seaward at Buoys 1 and 2. The channel is about 850 yards wide. Located 3.1 miles beyond the last buoys was the San Francisco Lightship painted red and marked in large white letters, "SAN FRANCISCO." There is plenty of room for ships to pass safely and good seamanship demands vessels keep to the right. However, by design or neglect, large and small vessels find themselves dangerously close to one another in meeting or passing. In 1950, there was no statutory rule about keeping on the right side of the channel.

After having cleared the buoys which were plainly visible both on radar and by sight, BENEVOLENCE rounded the Lightship 20 minutes later, about 1400 yards off. The markings on the Lightship were plainly visible to all.

As she re-entered the channel, BENEVOLENCE's troubles were about to begin. At 1630, BENEVOLENCE steered a course of 60 degrees true. Captain Bacon estimated the visibility to be about 1500 yards, yet Buoy No. 4 at 1300 yards was not visible when Buoy No. 2 was abeam 10 minutes later. The ship hauled to the right of the channel as Buoy No. 2 was passed between 75 and 100 yards. Captain Bacon then thought the visibility had fallen to a mere quarter mile but ordered an increase of speed to 90 RPM. There were mutterings that the Old Man was going too damn fast!

This increase in speed had no apparent reason except perhaps to offset the ebb current estimated at 1.4 knots. At 1650, BENEVOLENCE veered left to head for the Golden Gate Bridge on a course of 65 degrees true. The captain's and the pilot's attention was suddenly distracted by the

need to veer off to the right to overtake a fishing boat. This encounter was a close call, missing the boat by about 7 to 15 yards. When the BENEVOLENCE was finally settled back on her 65 degree course she was getting near Buoy 8, the last of the starboard-hand series.

About 1654, Pilot Havens suddenly ordered "ALL STOP" and said he heard a whistle up ahead. (There is conflicting evidence here: the engines may have been on stop at 1644 or 10 minutes previously. This may be true as BENEVOLENCE seemed very sluggish going into her final right turn.)

The Stop order was acknowledged, and all those on the open catwalk forward of the wheelhouse bulkhead listened intently and the bow lookouts were warned that something was ahead. The engines had been stopped for about two minutes when Havens ordered "RIGHT FULL RUDDER"—as we shall see, a fatal error. The Rule that applies to head-to-head situations is only applicable when vessels are in sight of one another. The fatal order by Havens to go "Full Right" was given when the two converging ships were in close proximity, headed for inevitable collision. This should have demanded that the first ship aware of this situation keep her course and present the least amount of contact. Pilot Havens had not realized that his situation was IN EXTREMIS.

Captain Bacon, straining his vision towards the fog-enshrouded waters, first saw a "roil" or disturbance in the water, then the ugly black stem of a large ship bearing down on them.

Bacon estimated the distance to be about half a mile and a little off to the left or port side; other observers said dead ahead. As the ship continued to bear down on BENEVOLENCE with no apparent change of course or speed, Pilot Havens ordered "Two Thirds Speed Ahead" (60 RPM) to hasten the action of the rudder. But it was too late. BENEVOLENCE, into her turn about 15 degrees, was struck on her port bow by a ship later identified as the freighter MARY LUCKENBACH. A witness heard Pilot Havens exclaim, "It looks like he's going to hit us!" Those were his last words before he was hauled out of the water, dead.

Moments before the collision, Captain Bacon sounded the alarm to close all watertight doors. For an essentially passenger-carrying ship, watertight doors should have been ordered closed the minute the ship approached the fog bank!

The initial impact was a tremendous jolt, BENEVOLENCE having been struck by a fully loaded freighter of over 14,000 deadweight tons at a combined speed that could have been as high as 24 knots.

In this situation, MARY LUCKENBACH's skipper testified he had given Right Full Rudder and Full Astern on his engine. A deep-loaded ship like the MARY LUCKENBACH would be slow to respond to her helm even at top speed. Instinct on the part of both bridge watches might elicit a right turn, but in the confines of a few seconds, in bad weather, with perhaps other distractions, a master or pilot has a difficult time judging whether or not his ship is in extremis, demanding a departure from the Rules of the Road to

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void collision.

The terrific impact of the two ships knocked a few observers off their feet; others grabbed rails or stanchions to keep their footing. The initial jolt raised both ships rapidly to starboard as the MARY LUCKENBACH careened along the port side of BENEVOLENCE. On the latter ship, there was a jagged 20 foot by 30 foot hole torn into the side abreast of No. 2 hatch near the waterline, plus another massive bounce aft near frame 190. Following the collision, MARY LUCKENBACH disappeared into the fog.

BENEVOLENCE immediately took a 15 degree list to port, settled a little, then took more list to port as tons of seawater poured into her hull. In a matter of minutes, the list was 45 degrees and worsening, and in the surprisingly short time of 43 minutes, BENEVOLENCE heeled over and sank in 75 feet of water.

Captain Bacon kept calm in spite of the ear-splitting screech of steel plates being torn asunder, the clamor of alarms and sirens and the general confusion. Immediately appraising the tight situation his ship was in, he ordered all hands to don life jackets and stand by the lifeboats. No order was given to abandon ship because Bacon was certain the ship would settle in 53 feet of water with part of the hull over the surface, giving his people a solid refuge. As it happened, BENEVOLENCE settled on her port side in 75 feet, the water coming about four feet deep over the hull. The last to leave waited until the water rose above their ankles before being washed over the side.

A few minutes after the collision, the radio staff managed to get off a message to San Francisco requesting "emergency assistance," but it was a while before port authorities were able to grasp the scope and urgency of this request. Captain Bacon, after having sounded the alarm, shifted the helm to port in a futile effort to ease the list, then dropped the port anchor and ordered lifeboats prepared for launching.

It quickly became apparent that the lifeboats could not be launched on either side before the increasing port list made it impossible. BENEVOLENCE was fitted with Welin-type gravity davits. Each set of davits held two boats; one on a pendant beneath the davit heads with the lower, larger boat hooked directly to the boat falls. But before the davit mechanism could be released to roll down its track, the gripes had to be freed and the davit carriage locking bars had to be pulled out, then the first boat launched and the falls re-rove and attached to the upper boat which would then be lowered. All this should take about 15 minutes—if things went well. But the old saying, "Fouled up like a fire and boat drill" was in deplorable evidence here. The gripes fitted with quick release pelican hooks were jammed tight by welding rods placed through the keeper ring where ordinarily a wooden peg is used. Some of the pelican hooks were missing and had been replaced with screw shackles that, as any seaman can attest to, usually need a spike to loosen. Some of the boat cranks were missing and these were needed to raise the boats manually using about four men to a crank, necessary here because the boat davits were jammed against the locking

bars. There was no power to the davits as the engine plant had been secured, and power would have been needed to re-wind the boat falls in a reasonable amount of time! There were plenty of lifeboats available for all 526 people on the ship but only one boat was successfully launched and that was a motor whaler equipped with manually operated Welin Crescent Type davits. The men were able to start the motor and spent considerable time towing life rafts and rescuing people.

Despite no orders to abandon ship, it was obvious the boats couldn't be launched anyway but there were plenty of life rafts mounted on the sides in tiers of three for quick release. As the list got worse, each raft had to be pried loose. There was no panic; everyone cooperated and willing hands got the rafts over the side. Everyone had to cling to the rails or structure, then climb down the starboard side of the hull until the rising water forced those who could swim out to a raft or float. Practically everyone had a life jacket but most were poorly dressed for their ordeal of several hours in 58-degree water, plus the fear of being abandoned in the dark to drift out to sea or be hit by a boat propeller when finally the rescue teams arrived. There were 23 lives lost, while many others were badly injured.

Help did not arrive for over an hour even though BENEVOLENCE was only a few miles from the Coast Guard Station. The ship did not sound any distress signals or fire any rockets. There was some doubt as to where the pyrotechnics were stowed, but with all the experienced seagoing talent on the bridge, at least one could have looked on the flying bridge and shot off a few rockets and flares probably visible in spite of the fog patches. A distress message was not sent by radio over 500 Kc because the antenna had been disconnected!

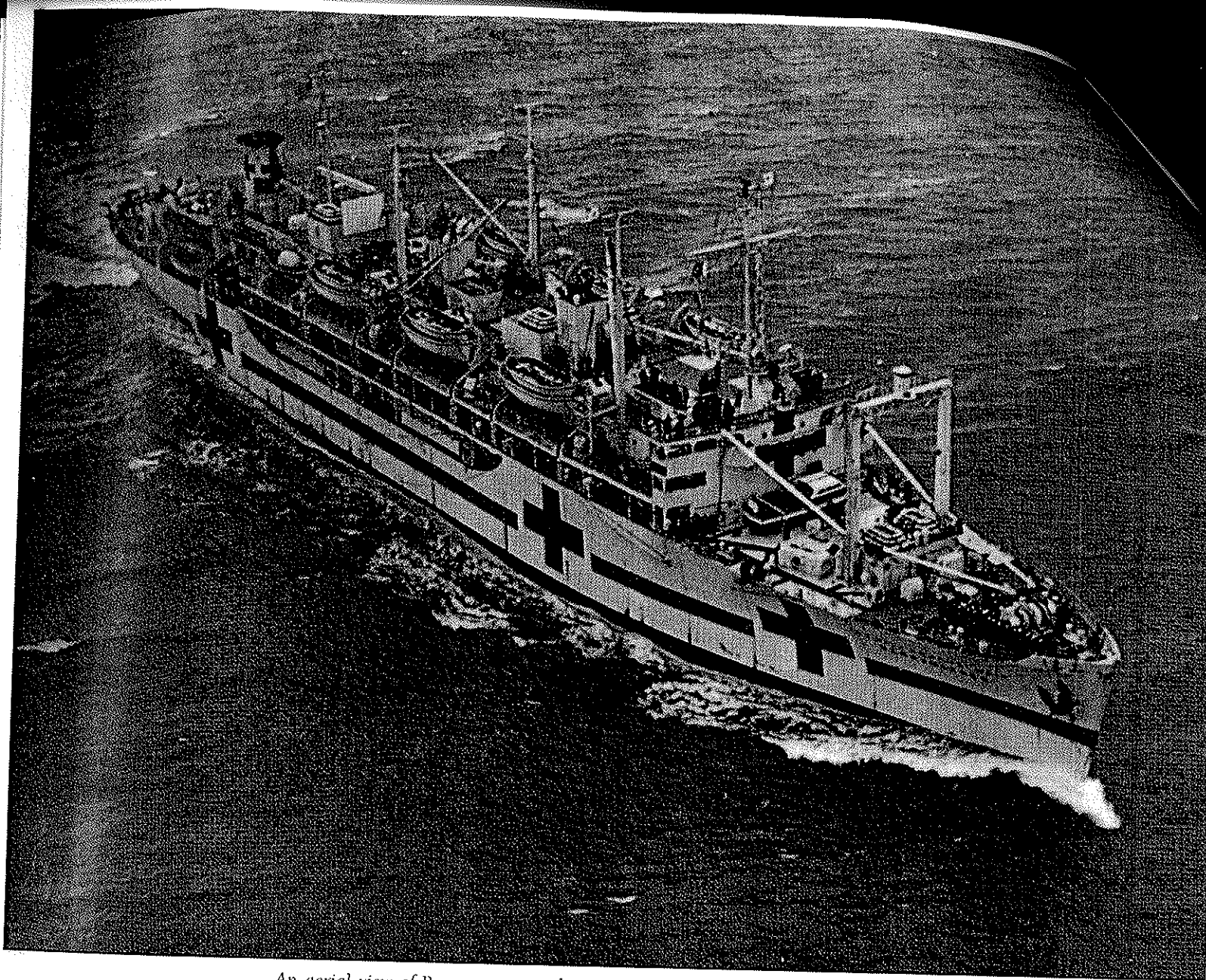
When help finally came, it consisted of about 13 Coast Guard patrol boats, Army tugs, and even the pilot boat and USS AREQUIPA (AF-31), which were outward bound at the time.

The master of the MARY LUCKENBACH, Captain Leonard Smith, did not stop and render assistance or even try to appraise the damage his ship had done, but steamed off a short distance out of sight and anchored. Later on, the tug SEA PRINCE's captain and harbor pilot, George E. Melanson, boarded MARY LUCKENBACH, which had already taken on survivors from rescue craft and now had a lifeboat in the water rescuing people. The Coast Guard later on closed the channel until all hands could be accounted for and any floating debris picked up.

Outward bound, S.S. MARY LUCKENBACH, of the Luckenbach Steamship Company, a Maritime Commission Type C-2 cargo ship, with a length of 441 feet and a 63-foot beam, was loaded with almost 10,000 tons of cargo. She was under so-called "enrollment" whereby Captain Smith, holding a first class pilot's endorsement for San Francisco Bay, could conn his own ship to sea without the aid of a Bar pilot.

MARY LUCKENBACH passed beneath the Golden Gate Bridge at 1635 steaming at least 14.4 knots making good





*An aerial view of BENEVOLENCE under way. The arrangement of her boats can be clearly seen in this and the preceding photo.*

*Photo courtesy of the author*

a course of 242 degrees true. The visibility here was about 1200 feet or less than three ship lengths. MARY LUCKENBACH, even though sounding correct fog signals, did not have a proper lookout. Captain Smith's later statement that he had reduced speed and reversed engines before the collision was not believed by the court. He was also declared to be at fault for not using his radar, even though there was strong evidence of its malfunction. Captain Melanson, who had boarded the ship after the collision, testified he could smell burning insulation on the radar power cable.

Although a few witnesses declared to have noticed the use of alcohol on the MARY LUCKENBACH, Captain Melanson saw none of her officers under the influence as he brought the ship in.

MARY LUCKENBACH was on the "wrong side" of the channel and her course did not allow for the considerable set of the current crowding her over in BENEVOLENCE's track.

Captain Smith, in a dual capacity of master and pilot, failed to give proper attention to the conning of his ship as was brought out in the Coast Guard hearing. He did not take any evasive action either before or after colliding; and claimed he did not know he had hit a hospital ship or made a large hole in her side! Captain Smith or his officers did not think the hospital ship had been seriously damaged or was in need of assistance, and made no effort to contact her by radio!

After leaving the scene of the collision, MARY LUCKENBACH anchored and her officers, both deck and engine, spent the first hour and a half making up their logs and preparing other documents and evidence. According to Lieutenant Commander Paul Borden, Captain Bacon's counsel, these "were all 'prepared pat stories.'" Captain Smith may have known the BENEVOLENCE to be a hospital ship, but not necessarily her name. Under fog conditions, it was well MARY LUCKENBACH anchored in a position so

is not to risk any more collisions.

In collision cases of this kind, witness accounts may vary widely. With 108 witnesses for the Navy, the court gave due weight to the testimony of individuals, taking into account their sea experience, duties, position on the ships or on other vessels in the channel.

All the BENEVOLENCE testimony declared the MARY LUCKENBACH was approaching them at a great rate of speed. Captain Vreeland, a pilot observer, and Captain Bacon agreed likewise. Captain Smith's story, as we have seen, greatly differed from accounts on the BENEVOLENCE side. He also claimed he had swung his rudder from "Hard Right" to "Hard Left" after the collision so as to swing his stern away. As it happened, the last severe jolt to BENEVOLENCE near frame 190 occurred before the last rudder order could take effect.

In spite of his defense at the Coast Guard Marine Board proceedings, Captain Smith was found guilty of negligence; his license was reduced down to third mate, which was then suspended for a year. Fired from the Luckenbach Steamship Company, his was the greater fault of the two skippers.

Captain Bacon was later tried by court-martial and found guilty of negligence but faced a more benign judgment: he was reprimanded and forfeited 200 numbers on the captains' seniority list. At least he still had a job and his pay went on.



For about 14 months, BENEVOLENCE lay on her side in the sand burying herself deeper and deeper. During a storm, the wreck shifted and the Crowley tug RELIEF towing MSTS NECHES to a San Francisco shipyard ran afoul of the wreck and parted her towline. NECHES followed and tore out several of her bottom plates.

The Navy finally abandoned the wreck—turning it over to the Army Corps of Engineers, which has charge of dredging and clearing channels. The Engineers solicited bids on a "no cure, no pay" basis and the award went to a Delaware salvage firm for the very low figure of \$297,000; estimates for this job could have been as high as \$1,000,000.

In the case of the BENEVOLENCE wreck, lots of pressure was applied to the salvors to destroy the wreck as soon as possible, if for nothing else than to clear the channel besides wiping out any "evidence" embarrassing to the Navy.

There were no questions during the extensive hearings about fuel oil in the water after the collision; the only source of this information came from newspapers. Fuel oil spillage meant that the ship's deep tanks, settling tanks or even double bottoms had been ruptured. Such damage would cancel out what little stability BENEVOLENCE had, from what witnesses said about excessive listing and slow recovery from heeling after a sharp turn. According to one expert witness, the ship sank from loss of buoyancy—a profound bit of wisdom!

And what about the course recorder chart on the BENEVOLENCE? Or even the one on the MARY LUCKENBACH?

Nothing was said or asked about these two important pieces of evidence. Even during the sinking of the ANDREA DORIA in 1956, her officers had the presence of mind to rip out the course recorder chart for use as evidence.

The loss of the log book is no surprise. Possibly not yet written up even after 1600, these books are large and unwieldy, hardly meant to be carried by anyone in risk of drowning.

A most pertinent question not asked until deep into the Navy's hearing into the cause of the collision was: Why couldn't Radio Technician Wesley Jackson, manning the radar, see the pip of the MARY LUCKENBACH on the chartroom radar scope? Other pips—of fishing boats, buoys, and the Lightship all showed up well and the radar was in proper working order at all times as officers and technicians testified much later on in the proceedings. At no time did Jackson see an obviously large pip that would, if properly ranged and tracked, ensure the safety of BENEVOLENCE. It was quite possible Jackson could have been using a too-close-in scale where a large "target" (that unfortunate word) would be possibly lost in the sea return, or would have been seen had the set been left on a scale to scan much farther out. Jackson had been stationed at the radar by Lieutenant Commander Schocken—and it was of paramount importance considering the fog and excessive speed of BENEVOLENCE that the radar scope be more expertly monitored.

The radar repeater in the wheelhouse was improperly fitted for daytime use. In order to scrutinize the scope display, a coat or jacket had to be thrown over the observer's head in order to blank out light so the scope display could be seen properly.

Nobody asked Captain Bacon why he didn't consult with the pilot before increasing speed to 90 RPM. The tacit forbearance of the pilot to this change should not be considered total approval!

Sometimes a commanding officer's force of personality and bold presence on a ship's bridge precludes any offer of "advice" about course and speed, let alone a deliberate countermanding of a direct order. However, there have been times when a pilot will definitely object to the skipper giving his own orders. The pilot will simply say, "If you can do this better than I can—take over!"

Mariners hate fog more than any other kind of bad weather. Fog is treacherous, misleading and more dangerous than just the disoriented feeling one gets. Judgment of distance is distorted and the well-known vagaries of sound in a fog are too common to mention here. On a modern fast steamer, the background noises surrounding the navigation bridge make distant fog signals hard to hear. There are vent blowers, exhaust fans, wind soughing through the rigging and superstructure, including the very sound of water swishing along the hull as the ship goes at "moderate speed." On a bridge crowded with supernumeraries and "observers," murmuring remarks, giving orders, repeating orders, crumpling papers and so forth, not only distracts from a keen and proper lookout, but makes it next to impossible to hear anything up ahead.

The inevitable court hearing after such a disaster would compare favorably with the Spanish Inquisition. Embarrassing questions are asked: At 16 knots how far can your ship move in five minutes? (Come now, quickly!) How far will your ship advance in the water after Hard Right or Left Rudder is applied? At 9 knots, 12 knots or 16? Captain Bacon did not have this tactical information on board (but it was available) at the time of the sea trial and probably felt complacent, putting too much reliance on the pilot. Another question posed by the court: How long will the screw keep turning at 60 RPM when the steam on the ahead throttle is off? According to Navy usage of that time, "Full Stop" meant turning off the steam with the propeller gradually stopping, the time varying according to sea conditions and drift. One expert wasn't even sure whether BENEVOLENCE's screw turned right or left.

The fact that Captain Bacon appointed himself commanding officer (and officer-of-the-deck) kept him too busy most of the time to have any meaningful exchanges of information or technical discussions with the MSTs officers and inspection teams. There were several other qualified naval officers in Captain Bacon's shore command to man the important O.O.D. post. Another alternative would have been the common practice of manning the ship with a skeleton crew from the shipyard along with a competent pilot, a civilian yard master to maneuver around the Bay and put to sea—with the common sense option of conducting speed trials way beyond the usual traffic lanes in case of fog.

The Navy's Bureau of Personnel had every right, of course, to order the complete staff of medical personnel aboard before the trial runs. But why? There were no patients; the main bulk of stores would not have been loaded until the ship returned the next day to the Naval Supply Center. All the extra people hadn't much to do except get acquainted and move into their quarters. No

instructions had been given regarding emergency procedures, no station bills had been posted assigning these people to lifeboat stations. In fact, it was declared not necessary for a trip of this short a duration.



Article 16 of the Nautical Rules of the Road should be carved in stone in front of every naval and maritime academy.

The Rule of moderate speed and "cautious navigation" continues to be a game of "nautical chicken." The attitude seemingly amounts to, "Everything you do at sea is all right—if you get away with it." Ships try to make schedule, meet the tide, or otherwise take chances and some mariners are reluctant to slow down ever.

"Every vessel shall, in fog, mist, falling snow or heavy rainstorms, go at a moderate speed having careful regard to existing circumstances and conditions.

"A vessel hearing apparently forward of her beam, the fog signal of a vessel, the position of which is not ascertained, shall stop her engines and navigate with caution until danger of collision is over."

This is the Rule "honored more in the breach than in the observance" And these two plainly worded paragraphs have got more men in trouble than any other rule of the road.

In 1951, I could look down from the heights of San Francisco's Sunset District and just barely see the large red cross on the sunken hulk of the BENEVOLENCE, a grim reminder of what a chain of circumstance can do.

(Ed. Note: This article first appeared in the magazine *Nautical Brass*, and is here reprinted with the author's kind permission.)

