

April 9, 1981

STATEMENT

OF

RADM HENRY H. BELL, U. S. COAST GUARD

TO THE

COMMITTEE ON MERCHANT MARINE AND FISHERIES

U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Good Morning. I am Rear Admiral Henry H. Bell, Chief of the Office of Merchant Marine Safety at Coast Guard Headquarters. May I also introduce my colleague, Rear Admiral John D. Costello, Chief of the Office of Operations at Coast Guard Headquarters.

We appreciate this opportunity to share with you our present understanding of the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the SS POET and her crew of 34 American seamen.

The Coast Guard shares the concern of Congress, ship owners and operators, family members, unions, sailors and the public over the disappearance of the POET and her crew. We are very aware of the need for an exhaustive and thorough investigation of all relevant information that may allow us to determine how and why this tragic incident occurred.

In that regard, the Coast Guard convened a Marine Board of Investigation under the provisions of 46 USC 239 on 19 November 1980 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The National Transportation Safety Board is participating in all phases of this investigation under the authority of the Independent Safety Board Act of 1974, 49 USC 1903. A great deal of testimony and documentary evidence was collected during these public

proceedings from former crew members, the pilot that navigated the vessel from Philadelphia to its departure point from Delaware Bay, the vessel's owner and operator, the American Bureau of Shipping, the National Cargo Bureau and our own personnel and records. No physical evidence is available to the Board because the ten day aerial search for the POET which covered 300,000 square miles did not yield any debris or trace of the vessel. I wish to emphasize that this investigation is still ongoing as the members of the Marine Board of Investigation continue to research various lines of inquiry and analyze all of the evidence collected. The Coast Guard is of course amenable to suggestions that would act to enhance our investigative efforts.

The history of the SS POET began with its construction at Richmond, California in 1944. The POET was originally built for the U. S. Army Transportation Corps as a troopship and was employed in that service as the GENERAL OMAR BUNDY until her retirement from that service in 1948. The vessel was placed back in service as a cargo vessel from layup status in 1965, after conversion work was accomplished in Baltimore, Maryland. From that point until her departure from Philadelphia in October 1980 the vessel remained in service under the alternative names of PORTMAR, PORT, and finally the POET. During her active service the POET underwent required periodic inspections by the U. S. Coast Guard and surveys by the American Bureau of Shipping. These examinations were made in compliance with applicable national and international standards at the times they were conducted.

The SS POET was last inspected for Coast Guard Certification by our Marine Safety Office in Port Arthur, Texas on 6 March 1980 and found to be fit for her assigned service and route. At that time the POET also underwent a drydock examination and was found to be in satisfactory condition. The inspection records show that during these inspections several deficiencies were detected and corrected to the satisfaction of the attending inspector.

The POET arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in October 1980 to take on a cargo of bulk corn. The cargo loading and stowage was supervised by the National Cargo Bureau and the vessel subsequently was piloted via the Delaware River and Bay to her point of departure at Cape Henlopen, Delaware, at which point the River Pilot disembarked. The POET departed Cape Henlopen, Delaware at 8:30 a.m. on 24 October 1980.

The Coast Guard was first advised of concern for the vessel's safety on Monday 3 November 1980 when the agents for the vessel advised the Rescue Coordination Center in New York that the POET was unreported on a trip from Cape Henlopen, Delaware to Port Said, Egypt. The POET was due in Port Said on 9 November. The Search and Rescue System was activated upon receipt of the agent's phone call at 0959 a.m. on 3 November 1980, and well established procedures were immediately put into effect. These procedures included a check of the Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue (AMVER) system computer for information on the POET. This check revealed that no reports from the POET to the AMVER system had been received since the vessel's departure message on 24 October 1980.

Wide ranging communications checks were begun by RCC New York in an effort to turn up any information on the possible whereabouts of the POET since, by this time, she could have been anywhere in the Atlantic Ocean. Urgent marine information broadcasts were commenced and continued until 7 January 1981, along with more widespread broadcasts by the Defense Mapping Agency's navigational warning system. Lloyds of London intelligence services were queried. The U. S. Naval Ocean Surveillance Information Center (NOSIC), Suitland, MD was checked. The last information they had on the vessel was its departure message to the U. S. Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System (USMER). This message was also received by AMVER. The U. S. Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System (USMER) is a mandatory reporting system for all U. S.

flag vessels and some foreign flag U. S. owned vessels. The system is operated by the Maritime Administration for the U. S. Navy for national defense purposes. Coast Guard communication facilities handle USMER traffic and USMER reports are also placed in the AMVER system. The radio station (Chatham Radio) normally worked by the POET for commercial messages was checked but they had been unsuccessful in trying to establish communications with the POET. The Delaware Bay Pilots were contacted for any clues that they might have obtained on the departure of the ship. There were none. Lloyds signal station at Gibraltar was checked through their intelligence services. Lloyds Gibraltar station had no contact with the POET. On 7 November information was obtained from NOSIC that the POET had reported every 48 hours during previous voyages; later analysis showed that the POET occasionally missed required reports. It was known that a storm of gale force winds had intersected the POET's dead reckoning track on 25 to 26 October. Based on increasing concern caused by the lack of information on the POET, the alleged regular reporting to USMER on previous trips, and the information about the storm, an aerial search was planned for the next day.

The aerial search continued for 10 consecutive days using aircraft from the Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force and Canadian Forces flying 55 missions and covering 300,000 square miles, including track searches from Cape Henlopen to the Strait of Gibraltar, and area searches from the eastern U. S. seaboard to midway between Bermuda and the Azores. Nothing was seen or heard that could be identified as coming from the SS POET.

Sir, this summary is necessarily brief because the Marine Board still has the matter under investigation. To speculate on its findings, or conjecture on one aspect of the incident out of context, could be counter productive. The Coast Guard is very concerned over the disappearance of the POET. We do not take our Search and

rescue responsibility or other maritime safety responsibilities lightly. Indeed, it is because of our great concern and our statutory mandates that the Coast Guard investigation has been convened. That investigation should be permitted the time necessary to explore comprehensively this unfortunate incident. Naturally, the final investigative report, and all evidentiary material, will be made a matter of public record and copies will be furnished to all interested parties. I would only ask that final judgments be withheld until the work of the Marine Board of Investigation is complete, and a determination then be made if further inquiry is warranted.

Mr. Chairman, Admiral Costello and I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.

Thank you