

ACTIVITY: Sea disaster

CASE: GSAF 1954.10.07

DATE: Thursday October 7, 1954

LOCATION: In the Atlantic Ocean about 150 miles southeast of Cape Henry, Virginia, USA.

NAME OF VESSEL: *Mormackite*, a 6,214-ton American freighter.

NARRATIVE: The *Mormackite* was bound from Buenos Aires to Baltimore when she capsized in heavy seas and sank. She went down so fast that she couldn't even send an SOS.

Survivors spent four hours in the sea. Life rafts were dropped by rescue aircraft. One survivor said that he saw a shark take off a man's leg, and the second cook was said to have been taken by a shark. Survivors told of fighting off sharks as they clung to floating wreckage and rafts, and an airman reported he saw some bodies in the water which were apparently being attacked by a mob of milling sharks.

One of the survivors, John A. David, was on a makeshift raft. Davis said, "There were three men with me. Thursday evening, a shark bit one man's legs almost off. We got him on the raft and tried to get a line around his legs, but he died before we could do anything."

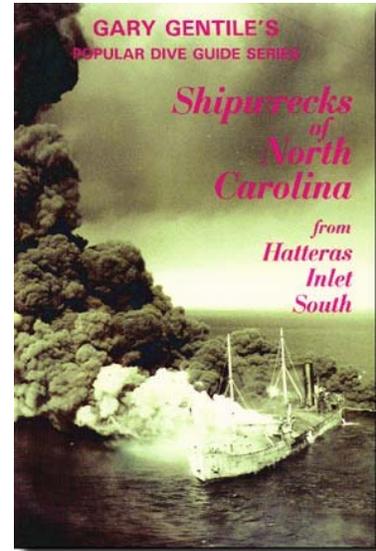
Survivors were rescued by destroyers, Coast Guard cutters and merchant ships.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Not identified

SOURCES: Long Beach Independent, Monday, October 11, 1954, page 9; The loss of the *Mormackite* is described in *Shipwrecks of North Carolina* by Gary Gentile (<http://www.ggentile.com/>)

Victor M. Coppleson (1958), page 197

Victor M. Coppleson (1962), pages 213 and 259; Item 62 of the U.S. Coast Guard Marine Board of Investigation of the foundering of the *Mormackite* reports that some of the crew were attacked by sharks.



Eleven Fought Sharks, Lived as 37 Perished

NORFOLK, Va. (UP) — The captain and helmsman died at their posts along with 35 other crewmen when a gale sank the freighter Mormackite in shark-infested Atlantic waters so swiftly there was no time even to send out an SOS, a haggard survivor of the tragedy said Sunday.

The gale struck the 6,214-ton ore freighter with such lightning suddenness that the captain did not have a chance to give an order to abandon ship, another survivor related.

Rescued nearly 50 hours after the freighter went down Thursday, 11 survivors gasped out their stories in exhausted whispers. They were brought here so beaten by their ordeal that they were permitted to talk only a few moments.

The U. S. Coast Guard renewed the search for other possible survivors, but found no traces of the missing men. Blimps, planes and surface craft were sent out to search the waters about 150 miles southeast of Cape Henry, Va. in the Gulf Stream.

So far, 12 bodies had been plucked from the sea, along with 11 men who were rescued from makeshift life rafts to which they had clung for more than 48 hours. One of the bodies was that of a man whose legs were nearly bitten off by a shark.

"Some guys were bit by sharks," gasped Thomas Leamy from his hospital bed here. "I

wasn't bothered, but I was worried, though, with my legs hanging over the side."

John A. Davis, a deck utility man, said Capt. Patrick J. McMahon, 38, Valley Stream, L. I., stayed at his post until the ship heeled over. He was trapped, Davis said, and went down with the ship.

Davis said Capt. McMahon and Helmsman Leonard Kelder of Brooklyn, N. Y., tried desperately to grasp the outstretched arm of the chief mate, Harold Richardson, Hempstead, N. Y.

"Richardson was hanging up on the starboard side along with most of the crew," Davis said. "He reached down for them but they couldn't get up. It was like climbing up a wall. Then Richardson was washed overboard along with most of the crew."

Davis did not see the skipper again.

"I guess the captain was trying to save the ship if he could," he said.

"The ship was at about a 60-degree angle at that time. Everybody was on deck. A sea hit her and jarred the rest of the ore cargo over to port. She lay flat

on her side and started going down by the stern. The captain and one A.B. (able-bodied seaman, Kelder) went down with the ship.

"The captain kept one man on the wheel to the very last. When she went over it was like climbing up a wall.

"When I hit the water, I swam away so the suction wouldn't pull me down. There was a lot of wood in the water from the deck, but I grabbed a mattress first. There were about eight or nine guys hanging on it. Then we started making a raft.

"Later on, the men got separated. There were three men with me. Thursday evening, a shark bit one man's legs almost off. We got him on the raft and tried to get a line around his legs but he died before we could do anything."

Davis said he saw search planes during the hours he clung to his makeshift raft but they did not see the survivors.

"Friday night, a boat came up near me. I hollered at it, but it

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didn't hear," he said. "Then we were picked up."

Leamy said he saw a ship about 400 or 500 yards away and planes overhead Friday noon, but they went away. When the rescue vessel arrived, he said, "I pushed my way to the ship. I was afraid it would run away and leave me."

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