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Not-So-Benign Neglect: The Marine Electric and the Rema

The *Marine Electric* was not a safe ship. Hastily built as one of the “Liberty Ships” for the U.S. merchant fleet during World War II, at thirty-eight years old she was showing her age. There were holes in the hatch covers, a hole in the hull, and large cracks in the deck. Nevertheless, seafarers sought to ship out in her. One reason may have been that she had a reputation for serving good food. But the main reason was that her regular route never took her much more than 30 miles from shore. “If we get in trouble, the Coast Guard will come out and rescue us,” was the word among the crew. Also, the voyages were short, so the crew could go home to their spouses, friends or lovers, and families every few days rather than every few weeks, as was the case for crews on trans-Atlantic voyages. And the owners of the *Marine Electric*, Marine Transport Lines, never pressured the crew to overload the decrepit carrier. Many of the thirty-four men on board the ship for the *Marine Electric*’s last run knew each other from previous voyages, and there seems to have been a good spirit of camaraderie among them.

The celebrated Liberty Ships were built to carry troops and supplies to the theaters of war overseas in World War II. They were built hastily because German submarines and planes (and those of Japan in the Pacific) took a horrendous toll on these unarmed ships. Their lifetimes were not expected to be long. But after the war, the U.S. government found itself with a large number of these ships on its hands, and it sold them to private entrepreneurs. The *Marine Electric*, having escaped German torpedoes on the Atlantic run, was one of these ships.

She was built in 1944 as an oil tanker of the T-2 class (the class is significant because many ships of the T-2 class sank at sea when their embrittled hulls gave way). ... In 1947, with the war two years in the past, she was sold by the government to the Gulf Oil Company. ... She carried oil for another fourteen years until a commercial shipping line, Marine Transport Lines (MTL) bought her in 1961. MTL had big plans for the middle-aged tanker, involving radical surgery. Her midsection was cut out in

a Boston shipyard, and a new, German-built midsection 387 feet long was welded in, bringing her total length to 605 feet.. Along with her new midsection, she acquired a new name, *Marine Electric*, and a new career. She became a coal carrier and spent most of the next twenty-two years shuttling between the coal-loading piers at Norfolk, Virginia, and an electric power plant at Somerset, Massachusetts. It was a short run—only 422 nautical miles after she cleared the headlands of Chesapeake Bay, thirty-six hours each way. ...

The iron of the *Marine Electric* was very tired after thirty-eight years at sea, and her crew knew it. Some of them had a standing joke: “Do you think they’ll be cutting her up for razor blades [scrapping her] after this trip?”

“Can’t make razor blades out of rust,” was the stock reply.

Even for short coastal voyages, the crew always embarked with a sense of trepidation. Occasionally, MTL would get a government contract for the *Marine Electric* to carry surplus grain to Israel. When these long, deep-ocean trips came up, some of the crew would arrange to take their vacations.

This was the situation when the *Marine Electric* lay at the coal-loading dock near Norfolk, Virginia on a cold, rain Thursday night—February 10, 1983, to be precise. First Mate Robert Cusick was supervising the loading, taking care that the loading cranes spread the coal evenly to avoid shifting and to ensure an even balance. Not only did the old collier have to be level from side to side, but the bow and stern had to be level with each other. Cusick was an expert; he had served on colliers for twenty-eight years, six of them on the *Marine Electric*. ...

The sea was running high when the *Marine Electric* cleared Chesapeake Bay and entered the open sea. A gale-force wind was blowing, and the air was thick with driving snow. But the ship had been out in worse weather before and survived. The waves soon increased to 25 feet. The *Marine Electric* plowed ahead at low speed, barely making headway. Attempting to make speed under such conditions would have been suicidal, and Corl was a competent and conscientious captain. ...

[The *Marine Electric* gets a radio call from the Coast Guard asking her to turn back and stand by a fishing vessel whose pumps are failing. By the time the Coast Guard releases the *Marine Electric*, the storm is raging more violently than ever.]

Ordered by the captain to give up his attempts to steer, Dewey jammed the rudder hard to port and came down to the boat deck. Meanwhile, Corl sent his last message: “We are abandoning ship right now! We are

abandoning ship right now!”...It had taken Corl only seven minutes to reach his decision. Captains abandon their ships only with the greatest reluctance; they know that management does not like this course of action and does its best to penalize them if they take it. But sometimes making this extreme decision is necessary.

Kelly blew the ship’s whistle, the signal to abandon ship, and began heaving life rings into the dark water. If the crew were lucky, the life rings would not drift away before they could reach them. Suddenly the ship turned on its starboard side with a horrid sucking noise, flinging the surprised men into the water.