

SFXaminer

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Cuba Sinks U.S. Ship

MIAMI — (AP) — A Miami-based freighter which radioed today that it was attacked by a Cuban gunboat apparently was rammed and sunk in the Atlantic off the eastern coast of Cuba, the U.S. Coast Guard announced.

The fate of the 15 crewmen was not immediately known, said Cmdr. Howard Istock. But he said Jose Villa, the skipper of the Johnny Express, reported he had been shot in the back and two crewmen had been wounded.

Istock, chief of intelligence for the 7th Coast Guard District, said the last radio message from the Johnny Express said "that the ship had been rammed and was sinking."

Planes Searching

Istock said two Coast Guard planes from Florida and a Navy plane from Guantanamo Bay Naval Base were en route to the scene. "But if the boat sank and the Cubans took the crew aboard, there's nothing we can do."

The attack occurred two miles due west of Little Inagua Island in the Bahamas and about 100 miles off the eastern coast of Cuba, some 350 miles southeast of Miami.

"It definitely took place in Bahamian waters," Istock said.

The Johnny Express, operated by Miami-based Bahama Lines, was en route from Haiti back to Miami. Bahama Lines officials said the ship was unarmed.

At the Bahamas Lines office, the drama of the inci-

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dent was played out over a little radio in the corner of the room, with Capt. Villa radioing in an excited voice, asking for help and reporting first that Cuban power launches — apparently several of them — had gone off, then come back.

"The deck is full of blood from the wounded. Send them (the Coast Guard) very quickly because they are badly wounded," said Villa.

Then he added: "I'm dying, Chico (boy, or buddy). Tell them to come quick."

"They are now ramming the ship with the launches and they are shooting at us. Is the Coast Guard coming?"

He was told by the office radio operator that the Coast Guard had "been advised." Villa also was advised to try to find an island to beach the ship and make a run from the Cubans on land.

"We'll Keep Going"

"We're going to keep going until they sink us," the captain radioed back.

He was told to try to administer first aid to the wounded, and Villa answered: "There is no first aid for this. The wounds are

too great. Tell them to come quickly. How long are they going to take? Tell them that they're wiping us out.

"We've got dead and wounded."

On Dec. 7, Havana radio broadcast that the 1500-ton cargo ship Layla Express—owned by the same firm—had been seized by Cuban forces and the 14 crewmen aboard charged with "criminal activities."

The broadcast charged that the Layla Express had been "utilized on numerous occasions by the CIA to carry out various piratical actions against our country, infiltrating counter-revolutionary groups, agents, arms and explosives."

The broadcast also referred to the Babun brothers, operators of the Bahamas Ship Lines, as "known counter-revolutionary elements."

The brothers prospered in pre-Castro Cuba as ship line operators and, since the Castro regime, have developed interests in Miami and the Caribbean.