

NYTimes DEC 16 1971  
**Freighter Radios She Is Sinking  
 After Attack by Cuban Gunboat**

NYTimes

By The Associated Press

MIAMI, Dec. 15—A Miami-based freighter radioed today that it was sinking in the Atlantic after being attacked and rammed by a Cuban gunboat off the eastern coast of Cuba, the United States Coast Guard said.

The fate of the 15 crewmen was not known.

"We have a plane at the scene, but it hasn't found anything," a Coast Guard spokesman said about six hours after the Johnny Express radioed that she was under attack.

"It's possible it's sunk, been captured or is under way elsewhere," the spokesman said. The search was continuing in darkness.

Comdr. Howard Istock said



The New York Times/Dec. 16, 1971

that José Villa, skipper of the vessel, reported he had been shot in the back and two crewmen had been wounded.

Commander Istock, chief of intelligence for the Seventh Coast Guard District, said that the last radio message from the

Continued on Page 21, Column 1

vessel, the Johnny Express, came at 2:40 Eastern standard time.

"It said that the ship had been rammed and was sinking," he said.

Two Coast Guard planes from Florida and a Navy plane from Guantanamo Bay Naval Base were on the way to the scene, Commander Istock said. He added:

"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, about 350 miles southeast of Miami.

"It definitely took place in Bahamian waters," Commander 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.

The 235-foot vessel is a sister of the freighter, Lyla Express, which was seized by the Cuban navy on Dec. 5 on charges that some of its crew members were Cuban counter-revolutionaries.

Commander Istock said the shipping line had reported that it received the Johnny Express's first distress call shortly before 1 P.M. He said the ship reported that it was between Little and Great Inagua when a Cuban torpedo boat approached 50 yards off and opened fire with a machine gun.

"After the first round of firing," Commander Istock said, "the gunboat closed again and hit the ship with a second barrage. Our last report was that the vessel had been rammed by the gunboat and was sinking."

#### Four Brothers Own Line

Teofilo Babun, president of Bahama Lines, is one of four brothers who are Cuban exiles and who own the shipping concern, which the Cuban Government has said is involved in anti-Cuban operations.

Mr. Babun and Miguel Grunol, an official of the shipping concern, stayed close to their marine radio. "Captain Villa told me he would never surrender," Mr. Grunol said. "He said he planned to fight it out to the end."

At first, the Coast Guard said that it did not plan to send any ships or planes to the scene because "it's not a United States ship and not in United States waters."

But after the captain radioed that there were wounded men aboard, a Coast Guard spokesman said that it was decided to dispatch two planes "to provide medical assistance to the captain and crewmen and those who need it."