



**DEATH OF A LADY**—The liner Morro Castle, by now a burned-out hulk, rests on the beach at Asbury Park, N. J., an object of awe for sight-seers. With her were lost 134 of 500 persons aboard.

## Thirty Years Ago—

**A ship named the Morro Castle burned in a classic mystery story of the sea.**

By **SHERWIN D. SMITH**

**N**OBODY ever called the Morro Castle a happy ship, although the Ward Line's press agents for her maiden voyage in 1930 said the \$5 million liner was, among other things, "the finest and most luxurious . . . the safest ship of her size that it has been possible to build." She proved herself spectacularly unsafe in the early hours of Saturday, Sept. 8, 1934, when she burned a scant eight miles off the New Jersey shore. Of some 300 passengers and 200 crewmen aboard, 134 persons died—a disaster that ultimately prompted an overhaul of safety standards, in construction and inspection, for all American-flag vessels.

She had been an unhappy ship from the start. Wages were low (\$35 a month for ordinary seamen) and working conditions bad (18 hours a day) even for the times. Discipline was lax. The Morro Castle regularly ran guns to assorted Cuban revolutionaries on her outward voyages, and many of the crew members smuggled dope on the return trips.

Morale was poor among the officers. At the outset of the fatal cruise, the second radio officer had tried to organize a strike for better food and pay. He failed, but rumors of further trouble—some kind of sabotage—persisted. Captain Robert Wilmott took to eating

alone in his cabin and locking himself in at night.

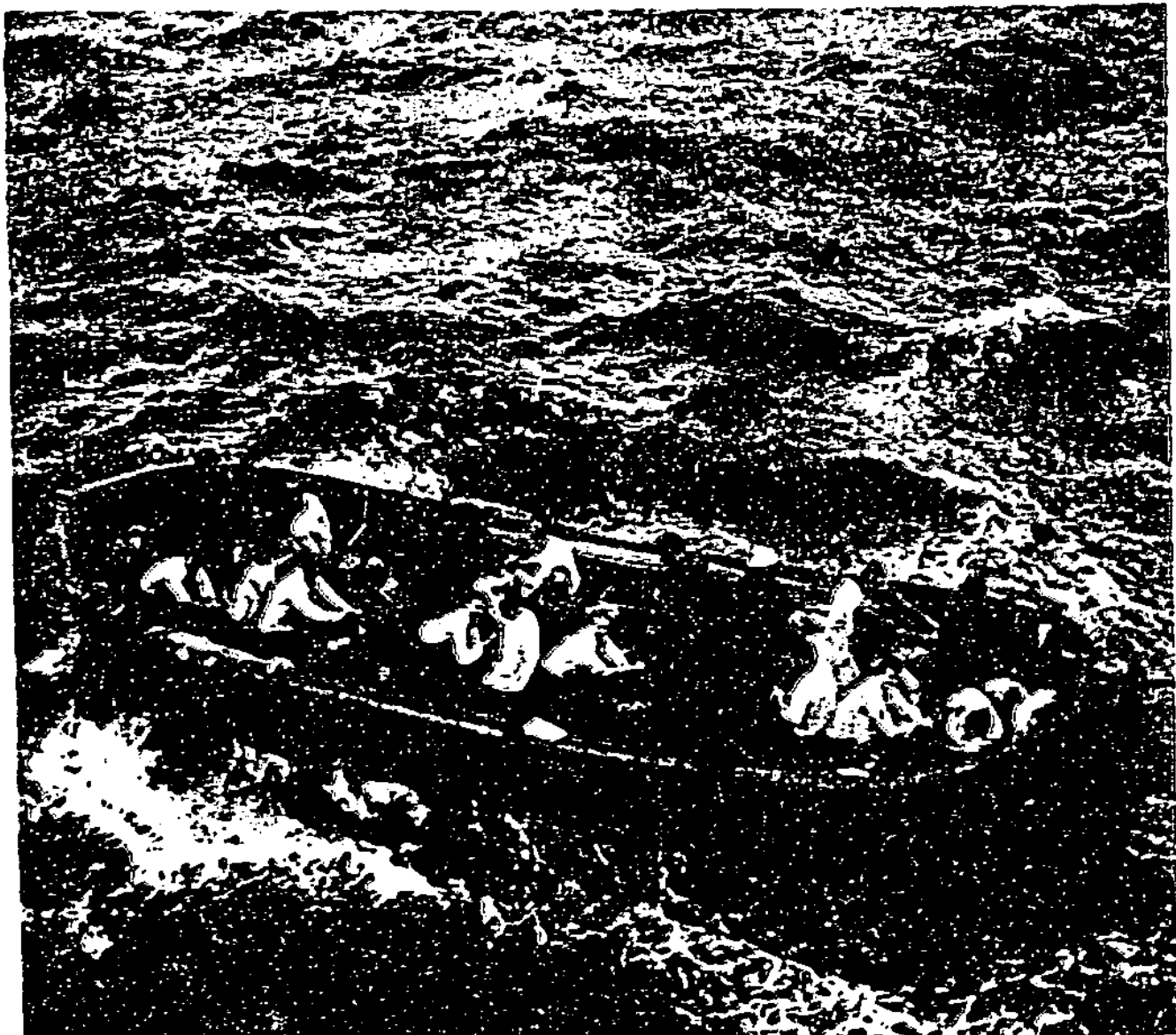
And the chief radio operator, a 250-pounder named George Rogers, was a man who was eventually to be described by the staff psychiatrist at the New Jersey State Hospital for the Criminally Insane as "a psychopathic personality."

On the evening before the Morro Castle was to reach New York, she was fighting her way through a wild northeast storm. A third of the passengers were seasick. Numbers of the others were getting drunk on the rum they had bought in Havana for \$4 a gallon; so were many of the crew. Captain Wilmott had just finished his solitary dinner when he collapsed and died. The ship's doctor diagnosed heart failure induced by acute indigestion. The time was 7:45 P.M.

**T**HEREUPON, Chief Officer William F. Warms became Acting Captain. He was a veteran of 37 years at sea, 16 of them with a master's license. Because of the storm, he had been on duty for 30 hours without sleep—and he was to have eight hours more, in command, before disaster struck.

At 2:50 A.M., a steward, Daniel Campbell, entering the writing room, saw smoke  
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**RESCUE**—A lifeboat from one of the ships that answered the Morro Castle's SOS carries survivors to safety.

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coming from a locker used to store stationery and a pile of winter blankets. "I opened it," he said later, "and what I knew once as a locker was one mass of flames, flames from top to bottom and from one side to the other side."

Clearly, the fire had been burning for some time; it had already spread behind the decorative false ceiling of the writing room. It might have been spotted earlier if Captain Wilmott had not ordered the smoke detectors turned off (he feared the system might pick up the smell of a cargo of wet hides in the forward hold and annoy the passengers). Even so the fire might have been controlled if Wilmott had not ordered many of the ship's fire hydrants sealed (so they could not drip onto the decks), or if he had not countermanded proper fire drills for the crew (he thought they alarmed the passengers).

**A**S it was, the fire spread with unbelievable speed and fury. It was fanned by a wind of nearly 40 miles an hour, for Acting Captain Warms, fatigued and not realizing the seriousness of the situation, held on course at more than 18 knots straight into a 20-knot wind. He failed, also, to order the fireproof corridor bulkheads closed. As a result, the flames swept unobstructed the length of the superstructure, trapping passengers in their cabins.

"I was lying down in the petty officers' room," an oiler recalled, "[when] I was suddenly awakened by screams for help. . . . I opened the door. Flames were everywhere. [It] was a bedlam of fighting men. Three times I started up the stairs and three times my legs were grabbed and I was dragged down as men fought like beasts to get up the narrow ladder."

Above decks, the living were driven aft by the advancing wall of fire. Few reached the lifeboats. One who did was Chief Engineer Eban S. Abbott, who had taken time after the alarm to put on his full-dress whites, but not to visit the engine room; he cast off

with 29 crewmen and three passengers in his boat. On the stern, the less lucky prayed, sang "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here" and fought over life preservers. As the flames grew closer, they began to jump.

In the radio shack on the topmost deck, Chief Operator Rogers sat at his sending key, nearly suffocated by smoke, his feet tucked up on the rungs of his chair above the boiling battery acid that sloshed across the floor, and waited patiently for the captain's order to send an S O S.

It came at 3:18, nearly half an hour after the discovery of the fire. By then, Warms had swung the ship toward shore—too late for the shift in wind direction to help localize the fire. Then the steering failed, and Warms ordered the anchor dropped. Rogers pounded out his message: "S O S. Twenty miles south of Scotland Light. Cannot work much longer. Fire directly under radio. Need assistance immediately."

A Coast Guard boat from Sea Girt, N. J., was the first to reach the scene, shortly before dawn. She was followed by others: by passing liners and freighters, by a fleet of Jersey fishing boats that put out despite the storm. The waves seemed mountainous, and the water thick with bodies; it was hard to tell whether they were alive or dead. The rain cut visibility to less than 400 feet, but the rescuers could steer by the glow of the burning ship. All along the Jersey shore, volunteers improvised first-aid stations—and morgues.

**B**Y 8 o'clock in the morning, about all that could be done for the survivors—and the dead—had been done. The rescue ships pulled away. Only Acting Captain Warms and a dozen or so men—passengers and officers, Rogers among them—remained on the fore-castle of the Morro Castle, swinging helplessly on her anchor chain, her plates red hot and hissing when the waves and rain struck them.

Up steamed the Coast Guard cutter Tampa, offering to tow the Morro Castle into New

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**SKIPPER**—William F. Warms, captain of the Morro Castle when it burned, testifies at the investigation.

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York. It took five hours to make all ready. Warms and his companions abandoned ship and collapsed aboard the Tampa. But by then the storm had worsened. In no time, the tow rope snapped, and the Morro Castle's hulk, driven by wind and tide, washed up broadside on the beach at Asbury Park, not 150 feet from the resort's brand-new Convention Pier.

The next day, Sunday, dawned serene, and the first of hundreds of thousands of sensation-seekers began to flock to the site. Asbury Park ice-cream vendors and parking-lot concessionaires found themselves with an unexpected post-Labor Day boom. It lasted until the hides in the forward hold began to smell.

Eventually, the Federal Government towed the hulk away—at a cost to the taxpayers of \$120,000. The Union Shipbuilding Company of Baltimore bought it for \$33,605 as scrap.

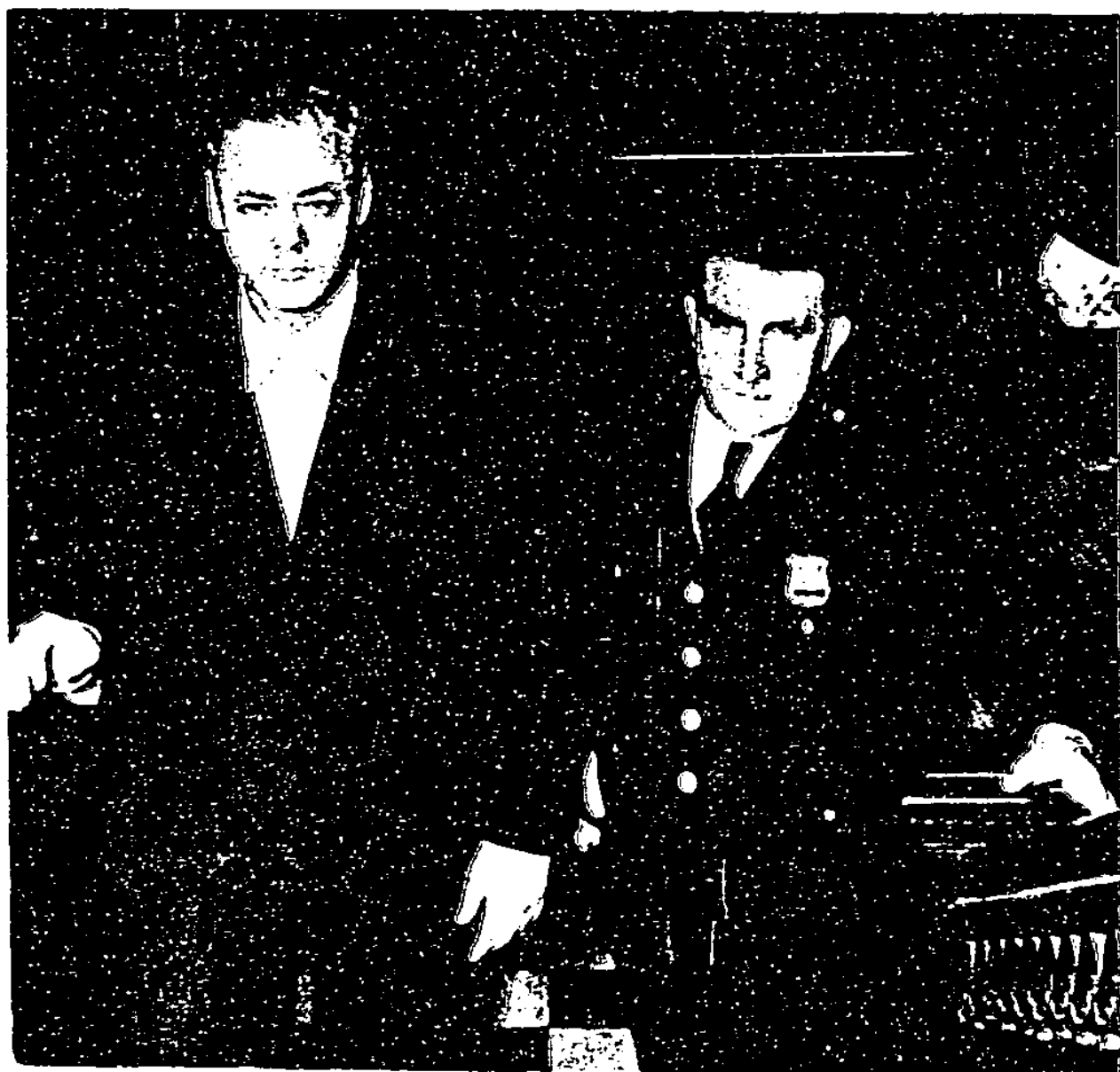
**T**HE personal aspects of the case were less easily settled. The public, demanding a scapegoat for the disaster, was given a spectacular investigation—the first of its kind to be broadcast. (One witness seized the microphone in the midst of his testimony and shouted: "Hey, Mom, how'm I doing?")

The hearings proved nothing, but rumors persisted: Had Captain Wilmott's sudden death been natural? (After all, his body, along with all other possible evidence, had been destroyed in the fire.) Had the fire been deliberately set? (Its intensity, and such additional details as the fact that the fuel lines from a pair of emergency gasoline tanks—located just outside the radio shack—had been deliberately uncoupled, suggested that it had.)

**T**HEN Warms and Abbott were tried for criminal negligence and sentenced to four and two years in prison, respectively. (The Ward Line and its executive vice president were also tried. They were fined \$10,000 and \$5,000.) Warms and Abbott appealed and—three years after the disaster—won acquittals. Warms, the appeals court held, "had maintained the best traditions of the sea by staying on the vessel until the bridge had burned from under him." As for Abbott, the judges decided that his behavior resulted from his being incapacitated by smoke.

Meanwhile, some 400 survivors and relatives of the dead filed claims against the Ward Line for \$13,500,000. The com-

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**RADIOMAN**—George Rogers, once acclaimed the hero of the Morro Castle fire, was later convicted of a bombing and a double murder. Here he is brought into court in 1938.

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pany offered \$890,000, and in 1937 the sum was accepted. Then the Ward Line and its insurance company spent another four years wrangling over who should pay. In the end, the insurance company won, with a court ruling that the Ward Line itself, not "the negligence of the officers and crew," had been responsible, and that therefore the insurer was not liable.

**Y**ET the story was not quite over. Chief Radio Operator Rogers had emerged from the fire as its only hero—the man who stayed at his post, doing his duty by the book, patiently awaiting orders to send the S O S. He enjoyed a brief career on the R.K.O. vaudeville circuit, narrating his adventure, and then retired to Bayonne, N.J., as a radio-man for the city police force.

There, in 1938, he was arrested, tried and convicted on charges of attempting to murder his boss, Lieut. Vincent Doyle, with a homemade bomb disguised as a fish-tank heater. His presumed motive: to get Doyle's job. Rogers was sentenced to a term of 12 to 20 years in prison.

When World War II came along, he was paroled; he said he wanted to serve his country, which needed radiomen. His parole was continued, and he set up shop in Bayonne as a radio-TV repairman. Then, in 1953, two of his neighbors—an elderly man named William Hummel and his spinster daughter—were found bludgeoned to death in their house. They had been about to move to Florida, and Rogers was identified as having spent several of the \$100 bills Hummel had just withdrawn from his bank. This time, Rogers was sentenced to life imprisonment. He died of a stroke in the New Jersey State Penitentiary in 1958.

**B**Y then, Rogers's record was a matter of public knowledge. It went back to 1914, and his appearance at the age of 12 in a juvenile court in California for theft. Subsequent entries included such items as charges of sexual perversion and his presence at or near suspicious fires—altogether a pattern that psychologists associate with a pathological arsonist. One of his hobbies was chemistry, particularly explosive and incendiary mixtures.

Although Rogers never confessed, the theory persists that he set the Morro Castle fire. But why? Thomas Gallagher, a novelist who became fascinated by the case, talked at length with Rogers in prison and wrote a book about the subject called "Fire at Sea." He believes that Rogers poisoned Wilmott because the captain had spotted him as the chief trouble-maker aboard, then burned the ship to hide the murder. It is as good an explanation of the Morro Castle disaster as one can find.