

This Date in Safety History: July 25, 1956–The Sinking of the Andrea Doria



This month marks the 69th anniversary of one of history's most infamous maritime disasters—the collision of the SS *Stockholm* and the SS *Andrea Doria*.

It happened at 11 PM on July 25, 1956. Italy's largest and most famous luxury liner, the SS *Andrea Doria*, hailing from Genoa – the same hometown as Christopher Columbus – was cruising westbound to New York carrying 1,134 passengers and 572 crew members. It was a foggy night and Captain Piero Calamai, a lifelong sailor who fought in both world wars, was navigating the liner through the waters off the coast of Nantucket. As safety procedures demanded, he closed *Andrea Doria*'s watertight doors and activated her fog warning whistle. He also reduced speed, but only slightly to 21.8 knots. It turned out to be a fatal decision.

On a Collision Course

Cruising in the other direction was the Swedish-American liner MS *Stockholm*, which was just starting its journey from New York to Sweden and hadn't yet entered the fog bank. Guided only by radar, the 2 ships steamed toward each other, each one aware of the other's presence, but neither establishing radio communication in accordance with maritime protocol. Because the ships were in different weather conditions, the *Stockholm*,

under the watch of third officer Johan-Ernst Carstens-Johannsen, didn't realize that the other ship was a passenger liner and mistook it for a fishing boat or other small vessel.

Failure to make radio contact wasn't the only breach of protocol. Maritime rules dictate that 2 ships approaching each other should pass port-to-port. Accordingly, Carstens-Johannsen steered the *Stockholm* 20° starboard. But for some reason, Captain Calamai prepared for a starboard-to-starboard pass and steered *Andrea Doria* to port. Rather than widening the passing distance, these navigation maneuvers put the ships on a collision course.

This only became apparent at 11:10 PM when the ships caught sight of one another. By then it was too late to avoid a collision. The *Stockholm's* ice-breaking prow sliced open the starboard side of the *Andrea Doria*, ramming 40 feet through 3 cabin decks. Forty-six *Andrea Doria* passengers and 5 *Stockholm* crew members were killed in the collision. Many of the *Andrea Doria's* watertight containers were breached and damaged fuel tanks began to fill with seawater. Within minutes, the ship was listing at least 18°.

Andrea Doria carried enough lifeboats to accommodate all passengers and crew. Unfortunately, the list rendered half of those lifeboats useless. And the remaining lifeboats couldn't be accessed easily or safely. They had to first be lowered to the water before being boarded by the passengers, who had to find a safe way down the exterior of the ship before they could board the lifeboats.

The toll would have been much higher had not numerous ships of all sizes responded to the ship's distress call. By daybreak, the *Andrea Doria* was evacuated. At 10:09 AM, she capsized and sank.

The Aftermath

The investigation determined that while heavy fog was the main cause of the accident, the failure to follow proper radar procedures and “rules of the road,” among other things, were also contributing factors. As a result of the collision, it became mandatory for shipping lines to provide training on the use of radar equipment and approaching ships to establish radio contact with each other.