

Cason

Maritime Chemical Accident

1987, December 5

Off the coast of northwestern Spain

Sodium (Class 4) in drums; Sodium is a metal that floats and reacts violently with water or moisture to produce highly flammable **hydrogen** which may autoignite during the reaction. Sodium is corrosive to skin and eyes.

Summary: On a voyage from Antwerp to Shanghai, the cargo of the Panamanian container ship **Cason** caught fire. Cason first sent a distress message, and one hour later reported that the fire was out of control and that the ship was being abandoned. During the evacuation, 23 of her 31 crew died. Cason carried several different types of chemicals. But the fire probably started in one of the 11 containers of altogether 1430 drums of 126 tons of **sodium**. A tug tried to salvage Cason, but adverse weather and the fire on board stopped the operation, and Cason went aground 100 m from the shore. A **response team** started to unload ortho-cresol and formaldehyde drums. But bad weather stopped this work and caused more of the sodium drums to break and catch fire. Soon, the whole ship was on fire. Sodium drums that had fallen into the water were also burning. The fire could be seen far away at sea. Seven days after the initial fire, it was possible to enter the stranded wreck again. The cargo could successively be recovered from Cason and from the shores. The operation was delayed several times because of the weather and technical difficulties. After three weeks the recovery of dangerous goods was regarded as completed. No ecological damage was observed.

Cause of Accident: Fire broke out during adverse weather in a freight container with sodium drums, which probably were inappropriately stowed.

Comments on Response: The cargo of sodium made the whole operation very complex and dangerous. The **great hazard of sodium** made it impossible to carry out efficient response work before all the sodium had disappeared through reaction with water. Adverse weather, however, prevented response work also afterwards. Recovery of dangerous goods stowed under deck was difficult and delayed the operation. As a result of this accident, the opinion was raised that shipped sodium should be better packed and secured. Another result from the work was that the use of **trade names** is highly inappropriate as it causes identification problems. The international co-operation during the response to this accident proved very positive. This is specially valid for the co-operation and advice received from the Marine Environment Division of IMO and from the group of experts of the special "Task Force" created by EEC.

Source of Information: An anonymous and undated report titled "The CASON case, December 1987, Northwest Spain" obtained from EEC.
(Abstracted April 1991 by Björn Looström, Swedish Coast Guard H.Q.)