

TRANSLATION

TRANSCRIPT

of

MARITIME DECLARATION.

Year 1942, the 29th December, Maritime Inquiry was held, according to appointment, at The Royal Norwegian Consulate General at Torshavn in connection with the motor ship

"VARDEFJELL"

of Oslo (signal letters: L.K.L.K.), having been torpedoed on the 13th December 1942.

The proceedings were presided over by Deputy Consul, Captain Per Wendelbo, attached to the Consulate General. Quarter-Master in the Royal Norwegian Navy, Alfred Strandenes, and Norwegian Master Mariner Harald Olsen acted as Nautical Assessors.

Appeared Boatswain Einar Halvorsen, born at Skien the 26th June 1906, who stated that he was boatswain on board the motor ship "Vardefjell" registered in Oslo, of 8315.99 tons gross, 4938.99 tons net register, and with signal letters: L.K.L.K. The "Vardefjell" was built at Eriksberg, at Gothenburg, in 1940. The boatswain was of opinion that the vessel was built to the highest class in The Norwegian Veritas. The crew consisted of 41 men. The vessel left the Clyde River on Friday the 11th December in the afternoon. The vessel was in convoy and was on departure in every respect in completely seaworthy condition. The cargo consisted of fuel oil and port of destination unknown.

Boatswain Halvorsen, who had been chosen by the rescued crew as their delegate, stated that no log book could be produced as the log book was amidship with the ship's officers.

Halvorsen stated that nothing of importance concerning the vessel happened until Sunday the 13th in the evening at twenty minutes past eleven o'clock when he heard a violent explosion and understood that the vessel had been torpedoed. At that time the boatswain was lying in his cabin reading, fully dressed. The cabin was situated in the forward part of the super-structure aft. The boatswain ran up on to the boat deck on the starboard side after having first been in the mess-room to put on his lifesaving suit. Men were then occupied with lowering the lifeboats and two of them were thereupon lowered. Both boats were smashed and all those who were in them fell into the sea, but with the exception of two

men they all managed to get hold of the lifesaving nets on the ship's side and climbed on board again. It was quite dark with rain mist so that it was impossible to see anything. The boatswain, who did not get into either of the boats, actually advised the men not to go into the boats, and he remained standing on board shining his torch in order to help the others. The boatswain gave as his reason for acting in this way that it was clear to him that there was no immediate danger seeing that the vessel was keeping afloat after the torpedoing. It was clear to him that the vessel had broken in two and that the after part would probably, somehow or other, keep afloat. The two men who disappeared at the time were Chief Engineer Rolf Ugelstad of Brevik and Fireman Otheim, domiciled in the West Country, who were seen no more. The former was married at Brevik. The wife's name is Valborg. There are two children of the marriage. The boatswain cannot definitely say whether these two men lost their lives or not, but he considers that this is likely.

All the men, 29 in all (not including the two who lost their lives), who had been on the after deck when the casualty occurred, now stayed on board the floating wreck until Christmas Eve when two Faroe fishing vessels came out from Vaag and rescued them all. It was then between 12 and 1 o'clock noon.

On four occasions British aeroplanes were over the wreck, the first time on Friday the 18th. That aeroplane disappeared and did not return. The "Vardefjell" was flying the Norwegian flag on the after mast, and on the boat deck, by the sides of the bulkheads, there was painted in large clear letters:- Vardefjell. Send help. Can't steer. S.O.S. The boatswain was in no doubt about that aeroplane having understood the position as the aeroplane came down to a low altitude. On Sunday the 20th two aeroplanes arrived, presumably scouting aeroplanes, both of which came down to a low altitude and circled over the wreck for about two hours without in any way trying to get in contact with the ship-wrecked men. When they flew away they dropped two red smoke bombs but no one on board understood what they were intended to convey. In this connection the boatswain stated that from time to time those on board had sent up smoke bombs, but as they always had to bear in mind that German submarines might be in the vicinity they could not do anything in particular to attract the attention of the outside world. From time to time during the day they fired the heavy machine guns on the ship. On Tuesday the 22nd a large Sunderland aeroplane

arrived at about noon. The aeroplane came down to a low altitude and Morsed, but no one understood what the Morse signals meant. The aeroplane circled round the wreck for about 2 hours, after which it disappeared and came back during the evening and dropped red flares. No one could properly understand what the meaning was, but they were all hoping that help would at last actually be coming.

On being questioned, Boatswain Halvorsen stated that there were ten men in all in the forward part of the ship as to whose fate he was unable to make any statement. He stated that for several hours during the night, after the torpedoing, he could see the forward part of the ship afloat, but that later, when daylight came, nothing could be seen. On the forward part of the ship there were two lifesaving rafts and 2 lifeboats fully equipped. In spite of watches having been arranged by the boatswain on the after part of the ship they had not been able to see anything of the forward part of the ship or of lifeboats. In the forward part of the ship were:-

Captain Ambjørnsen of Tönsberg.

Chief Officer Christian Riege of Porsgrunn who was married and has grown up sons who are at sea.

2nd Officer Lervaag from the neighbourhood of Sogne.

3rd " from the North Country.

Steward Fjukstad from the neighbourhood of Trondheim (Namsos).

Gunner Henry Hansen of Stavanger

Ordinary Seaman Walter Williams (English)

The Saloon Boy, who was a Scot, also two Wireless Operators, an Englishman and a Canadian.

Read and approved, after which the boatswain withdrew.

Appeared as

1st Witness: Harald Skorstad, 20 years of age, domiciled at Arendal, gunner on board the "Vardefjell".

2nd Witness: Ivar Finnskog, 23 years of age, domiciled at Mosjøen. A.B. seaman on board.

In the present circumstances it was not found desirable to let the witnesses be sworn, but both of them were enjoined to speak the truth. The boatswain's statement was read out, in its entirety, to the two witnesses

who had nothing in particular to remark.

Skorstad stated that he was on watch at the gun and became aware of a hollow sound, he at once noticed the smell of oil and it was clear to him that the vessel had been torpedoed. He ran down the stairs on the port side below deck and told all the men to come on deck. He told them that the vessel was broken across and that she had undoubtedly been torpedoed. He had seen that the forward part of the ship had swung sideways and therefore understood what had happened.

Thereupon he ran up on the boat deck on the port side and, together with the second witness, cut the lashings on the lifeboats. But when they saw the forward part of the ship was turning round to port, they at once ran across to the starboard side where it would be safer to get the lifeboats into the water. The after starboard boat was lowered first, but was smashed, whereupon, after about 5 minutes, the forward boat was lowered with 15 to 20 men in it. The boat was smashed, however, and all the men fell into the sea. Engineer Hgelstad and Fireman Otheim, both of whom were in the boat, disappeared and they were not seen any more. The lifeboat had been filled by a heavy sea which washed over the vessel from the port side.

Finnskog was on watch on board. He was out on deck when the torpedoing occurred and his face was covered with oil. He otherwise referred to what had been stated by the 1st witness. As soon as Skorstad had come on deck they were at work together at the lifeboats. He himself was in the No. 2 lifeboat when it was filled with water, but he caught hold of the lifesaving net and climbed on board.

Both witnesses were in agreement in their praise of the lifesaving net on board and Finnskog, speaking for himself, emphasized that without doubt it was due only to the lifesaving net that he and all the others were able to save their lives.

Read and approved, after which the two witnesses withdrew.

Thereafter appeared as

3rd witness, Anders Olai Skotheim, 35 years of age, domiciled at Bergen,

2nd Engineer on board the "Vardefjell".

Witness stated that he had kept the vessel's engine room scrap

log book and he handed in the attached extract from that log book:-

E X T R A C T

from

THE ENGINE ROOM SCRAP LOG BOOK

OF THE M/S "VARDEFJELL" OF OSLO

Sunday the 13th December 1942.

Heavy sea. At 23.20 o'clock a violent shaking was noticed in the vessel. The telegraph was rung HALF ASTERN and the order was carried out, but the telegraph continued ringing. After ringing several times on the telephone, to which there was no reply from the bridge, the chief engineer was called. We were informed that the vessel had been torpedoed or broken in two. The engine was stopped. All the men on deck. The vessel was broken to such an extent that the forward part of the ship came drifting down on the port side so that the starboard lifeboat was launched. The after starboard lifeboat was overturned while being lowered. The forward one was put out and the crew went into the boat. Owing to heavy sea and rolling it was difficult to get it out, the after lifeboat being in the way. The men climbed up again, but 4 men fell into the water when the boat capsized. Bråthen and the pump-man were picked up, but Fireman Otheim and Chief Engineer Ugelstad disappeared. The vessel was tilting heavily forward so that the auxiliary motor was stopped owing to the risk of becoming heated, the boiler was shut off at 24.00 o'clock. At 4.00 o'clock the next morning the steam was put on and the steam dynamo in use for lighting. High sea and hurricane. A vessel was passing us and there was Morse and replied, but she passed on. During the forenoon wind and weather abated and another vessel passed us, from which there was also replied. During the evening weather and wind increasing. Lifeboat and raft were taken in tow aft. The vessel is leaky and oil is running out into the sea. (The forward part of the ship with the master, the officers, the steward, the saloon boy and A.B. seaman and an ordinary seaman had drifted away from us and was last seen at 7.00 o'clock in the morning). All the men taking turn in the engine room for the firing of the boiler.

Monday the 14th December

The port boiler in use for lighting and pumps. Heavy sea.

Tuesday the 15th December

Pumped up air and started both auxiliary motors.

Made ready and started the main motor at 16.00 o'clock. Slow speed astern, keeping 2 hour watches.

Wednesday the 16th December.

Going astern with slow speed. Heavy sea and rolling.

Thursday the 17th December 1942.

Proceeding slowly astern. Heavy sea.

Friday the 18th December 1942.

Heavy sea, slow speed astern. An aeroplane sighted us at 12.00 o'clock and stop in the engine, working at 14.00 o'clock.

Saturday the 19th December 1942.

Heavy sea, going astern with slow speed before the seas.

Sunday the 20th December 1942.

Heavy sea, hurricane, going astern with slow speed.

Monday the 21st December 1942.

Heavy sea, stop in the engine. about 4 hours aeroplane observed and going astern with slow speed.

Tuesday the 22nd December 1942

Heavy sea during the night, calming down during the forenoon, at 13.15 o'clock aeroplane observed, which circled about, stop in the engine from 10.00 till 10.45 o'clock, SLOW ASTERN 11.50 till 13.00 going astern before the weather.

Wednesday the 23rd December 1942.

Heavy sea and hurricane, going with slow speed before the weather, at 2.00 o'clock in the evening we could see land. Tried to go clear of an island, but caught sight of land on both sides and were afraid of going aground, preparing an emergency anchor.

Thursday the 24th December 1942.

All the men at work the whole night bringing up spare material and all kinds of iron objects in order to rig up emergency anchor. Heavy sea

and hurricane during the night, but abating during the day. At 12.00 o'clock we could see two vessels coming out to rescue us. Lowered the lifeboat and were taken on board a fishing vessel, left the ship at 13.05 o'clock.

At 16.00 o'clock the 2nd engineer, together with men from the s/s "Smiril" went on board and tried to bring the ship in. The engine was used, but it was difficult to get her to steer. Broke three wires during the attempt. Left the ship during the night at about 3.2 o'clock.

Skotheim referred to what had been written in the before mentioned extract and referred to the vessel's 4th engineer who was on watch in the engine room when the torpedoing occurred.

Read and approved, after which the witness withdrew.

Thereafter appeared as

4th and 5th witnesses, John Lien, 34 years of age, domiciled at Sanne, Vestfold, 4th engineer on board the "Vardefjell",
also Oddvar Andersen, 24 years of age, domiciled at Vang, Hedmark, motorman on board the "Vardefjell".

The 2nd engineer's extract from the engine room log book was read out to the two witnesses.

Lien, who was on watch in the engine room, stated that at 23.20 o'clock he first noticed a heavy shaking of the vessel and directly afterwards a somewhat lesser one. He waited for orders on the engine telegraph, but no orders came. The engine was working at half speed ahead, but as no fresh orders came continued at the same speed. As the vessel commenced tilting considerably forward, Lien stopped the motor and went to the chief engineer whom he met on the engine room ladder. Lien asked what he was to do and received the reply:- Go down again. This he did. Having come down again Lien saw that the mine cable switch board had commenced burning, thereafter again went up to the chief engineer and asked the latter to help him. The chief engineer then went down with him and himself switched off. Both remained standing at the manoeuvring gear until, shortly afterwards, the telegraph indicated half speed astern. They both understood that the vessel must be leaky as she was tilting heavily forward. The telegraph showed steady half speed for perhaps a couple of minutes, but then suddenly began

ringing. Lien tried to find out where the pointer might be on the dial, but this was found to be impossible. He therefore stopped the motor, took the telephone and rang to the bridge, but received no reply. Lien then ran up. The chief engineer had already done so a little earlier. He went to his cabin and fetched a leather jacket and a lifebelt and got up on the boat deck where all the men were occupied with getting into the lifeboats. He was about to lower himself down when he saw the boat being smashed, in consequence of which he remained on the boat deck.

Oddvar Andersen had nothing in particular to remark, but referred to Lien's evidence.

Both witnesses wished to emphasize that they were convinced that it was only due to the continuous watches in the engine room and to the continual manoeuvring with the engine during the 11 days at sea that it was possible to get the vessel near land and thereby save all the men who were on board.

Read and approved, after which the two witnesses withdrew.

Appeared again the "Vardefjell's" 2nd engineer, Anders Olai Skotheim, who produced copy of a declaration of the 26th December 1942 from the Parish Magistrate for Vaag and other parishes reading as follows:-

" The undersigned Parish Magistrate for Vaag and other parishes hereby states as follows:-

At 16.00 o'clock on the 24th inst. 2nd Engineer Skotheim of the tanker "Vardefjell" proceeded out in the s/s "Smiril" in order to try to save the vessel, but did not succeed in this, after which the "Smiril" returned on the 25th at 4.45 o'clock.

On the 25th inst. the weather was so bad that we could not proceed out in a motor boat.

On the 26th inst. together with the 2nd and 3rd engineers, I have been out searching for the vessel, but we could not see anything of her.

The Parish Magistrate for

Vaag-Porkere, Hove and Sumbo Parishes.

Vaag, the 26th December 1942

B. MORTENSEN (sgd.)

The witness referred to what had been stated in this declaration and had no further statements to make, after which the witness withdrew.

The Maritime Inquiry was thereupon terminated.

Per Wendelbo (sgd)

Royal Norwegian Consul

Harald Olsen (Sgd)

Alfred Strandenes (sgd)

The correctness of the transcript certified.

THE ROYAL NORWEGIAN CONSULATE GENERAL

at Torshavn, the 6th January 1943

For the Consul General,

sgd. Per Wendelbo

Consul

Stamp of
The Royal,
Norwegian
Consulate,
TORSHAVN.