

Lloyd's List
Tuesday - Nov. 22, 1949

THE "NORONIC" FIRE

Owners and Master Found in Default

COURT'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GREAT LAKES VESSELS

OTTAWA, Monday

In the Supreme Court of Canada Mr. Justice R. L. Kellock to-day announced the findings of the commission which inquired into the fire in the Great Lakes passenger steamer *Noronic*, at Toronto, on Sept. 17 last when 119 people lost their lives. He suspended for one year the licence of Captain William Taylor, master of the *Noronic*, and ordered Canada Steamship Lines, Ltd., the owners, to pay the costs of the investigation.

In a 30,000-word report to the Canadian Transport Minister, tabled in the House of Commons shortly after delivery of the findings, Mr. Justice Kellock blamed the disaster on the wrongful default of owners and master. He found the loss of the ship and the loss of life had resulted from their failure to take adequate precautions against fire. He censured them for failure to provide proper means of detecting and fighting fires while in dock and for getting passengers off the ship in the event of a fire in port. Mr. Justice Kellock also made a series of recommendations for tightening up the safety regulations for vessels such as the *Noronic*. Observers here expect the finding to pave the way for a series of civil actions which might go on for years.

Before reading the Commission's findings, Mr. Justice Kellock explained that the Canada Shipping Act required that the report of any investigation which might affect the licences or certificates of seamen must be read in open court "no matter which way the decision lies." No other licences in addition to that of Captain Taylor were affected by the order.

Immediately after it was read, Mr. Frank Wilinon, the owners' Counsel, asked if it would be possible for Captain Taylor to get a certificate at a lower rank during the period of his suspension. Mr. Justice KELLOCK said that was a matter for the Federal Transport Department.

LACK OF ORGANISATION

The JUDGE said the fire patrols on the *Noronic* were inadequate, and only 15 of the crew of 171 were required to be in the ship at the time of the fire, the remainder being free to go ashore. The Commission found that "no one in a responsible position in connection with the ship, either in the ship or ashore, had applied his mind in any serious way to the handling of a situation such as arose on the outbreak of fire on the night in question. Complete complacency had descended upon both ship's officers and management. The fire found officers and crew without an organisation designed to deal with such situation." It was added that "it is clear there was no training of the crew with respect to fire or its detection, or what should be done after detection."

"In the Commissioners' opinion, lack of any effective system of patrolling for the purpose of fire detection and lack of a proper warning system accounted for the loss of life which ensued. There was no prearranged plan for rousing passengers and getting them off the ship. Such efforts as were made to fight the fire were scattered and ineffective, and the heavy loss of life shows clearly the failure of the crew to rouse those sleeping passengers who were unable to escape from the burning ship." The Commission found that Captain Taylor should have "taken general charge of the situation and directed in an organised way the rousing of passengers instead of acting himself as an ordinary sailor in such parts of the ship as he could reach."

In finding both owners and master in default, the report said: "While it is true that the owners knew and approved of the organisation, or lack of it, designed to deal with the outbreak of fire in the ship while she lay in dock with sleeping passengers on board, the master was not in any way precluded by any instructions from the owners from taking proper steps himself."

The Commission made eight recommendations for strengthening safety precautions in Lake vessels. These were: (1) Provision of fire resisting bulkheads, (2) a system of fire patrols and automatic alarms, (3) proper training of the crew in emergency duties, including fire fighting, (4) fitting of a sprinkler system, (5) proper display of muster charts, (6) fitting a public address system, (7) provision of more than one means of exit to the shore when ships were in dock, and (8) requiring passenger ships docking for any extended time to be connected with the local telephone system.

Tabling the report in the House of Commons in the absence of the Transport Minister, Mr. Lionel Chevrier, who was ill, Mr. C. D. Howe, Minister of Trade, read lengthy excerpts. He described the investigation as "searching, impartial and thorough." Reuter.

2020

Lloyd's Register
Foundation

W1027-0127