

"EMPRESS OF CANADA" INQUIRY

Captain Colbeck on Efforts to Check List

FAILURE OF COUNTER-FLOODING

From Our Own Correspondent

LIVERPOOL, Tuesday
When the Ministry of Transport Inquiry into the loss by fire of the *Empress of Canada*, which was adjourned on Dec. 22, was resumed at Liverpool to-day, Deputy Chief Fire Officer R. K. Barlow, of Bootle Fire Service, was recalled and gave further evidence on the initial stages of the fire fighting operations. Captain W. R. Colbeck, Marine Surveyor and Water Bailiff, Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, gave evidence on the list and said that a conference was held which put the safety limit at 17 deg. The firemen were withdrawn when that limit was reached. Counter-flooding was attempted, but the list increased to the neighbourhood of 30 deg. and later the ship fell on her side. The fire occurred on Jan. 25, 1953, in No. 1 branch, North Gladstone Dock, Liverpool. Mr. K. S. Carpmael, Q.C., is sitting as Wreck Commissioner with Captain Lewis Parfitt and Messrs. W. J. Nutton, I. J. Gray and F. Dunn as assessors.

[The previous proceedings were reported in LLOYD'S LIST of Dec. 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22 and 23.]

Mr. J. B. Hewson and Mr. Gerald Darling are representing the Ministry of Transport. Mr. George Bean is appearing for Bootle Corporation. Mr. J. V. Naisby, Q.C., and Mr. R. J. H. Collinson are representing Canadian Pacific Steamships, Ltd. Mr. Glyn Burrell and Mr. Norman Sellers are appearing for the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. Mr. Trevor Davies is appearing for Harland & Wolff, Ltd. Mr. P. F. Broadhead (instructed by Messrs. Ingledew, Brown, Bennison & Garrett, London) is instructed to watch the interests of the members of the Mercantile Marine Service Association and the Navigators and Engineer Officers' Union.

POSITION OF HOSES

Mr. BARLOW said that at 4 50 p.m. there were four hoses operating on D deck, three through the shell door on B deck and two, later increased to four, on the capstan deck of B deck. Of the three hoses through the shell door on B deck there was one operating aft. He considered that at that time one hose was sufficient in that position. He did not want to use more water than was necessary in the ship. He never considered it advisable to bring more water to bear at that point, the main reason being that in advancing aft down the alleyway it would drive the men from their positions aft. That would have driven the fire right through aft and he did not want that to happen because there would be no way of holding the fire, nor did he want to take hoses from the shell door and drive the fire forward with hoses from the capstan deck. His object was to surround or box the fire between the hoses from the shell door and those from the capstan deck. For that reason he was prepared to keep the same number of hoses in use and increase them aft if necessary, provided they did not drive the men from the shell door.

In reply to the Wreck Commissioner witness said it occurred to him early on that the fire on B deck was not being maintained by fuel on B deck alone. This was subsequently proved correct.

Mr. HEWSON: As an experienced fire fighter you considered that the fire raging on B deck was not being fed solely from B deck?—The heat from the deckheads above us was instrumental in keeping the fire going on B deck.

Because of the fire on A deck you were getting heat through to B deck?—Yes, and vice versa.

Questioned on this point by Mr. Naisby, Mr. BARLOW said he was of the opinion that the heat from A deck helped to keep the fire intense on B deck.

Mr. NAISBY: I still do not understand the plan you were pursuing with regard to the starboard alleyway on B deck. I appreciate that you held the fire on the starboard side. The worst part of the fire was in the neighbourhood of the cross alleyway near the shell door. You were attacking that point through the shell door and from aft?—Yes.

I still have difficulty in seeing why you did not make a real effort to do more than hold the fire in the starboard alleyway and advance aft and put it out?—That was our purpose but conditions were such that it could not be done.

The only thing you could do was to hold your own and make no advance?—Yes.

Mr. Barlow said he could have put more hoses down but decided not to increase the amount of water going into the ship at that point.

Mr. NAISBY: What you are saying is that your plan of operation was not to extinguish the fire but to confine it?—Correct.

In reply to Mr. Bean, Mr. Barlow said that each hose would supply 12 tons of water per hour and at all times there was a sufficient supply of water for the fire service requirements.

Captain COLBECK said that at about 5 p.m. the vessel was listing 1 deg. to port. This increased slowly to 5 deg. at 6 p.m. He estimated that about 2000 tons of loose water spread between C deck and the lower promenade deck could produce a list of 17 to 17½ deg. and that that was about as far as they could allow the ship to go. A conference was held by himself and his staff, the general manager of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board and the naval architect and other representatives of the owners of the ship, and this estimate of a maximum list of 17 deg. was agreed.

Captain Colbeck said it was not possible to put the ship on the bottom of the dock, nor was there any hope of getting the ship out of the dock. All that could be done was for the fire service to continue trying to extinguish the fire and then cease when sufficient water had been put in. He gave a list of 17 deg. in the hope that the list might decrease and the firemen could go to work again.

HOLES CUT

Mr. HEWSON: Did you consider shedding water from the ship?—Yes, and we succeeded in putting a few holes mainly in B deck and some on A deck.

Can you give any idea of the size of the holes?—They were about 6 in. holes.

Captain COLBECK said that when it was reported that the ship had a list of 17 deg. all the firemen were withdrawn and the pumping of water into the ship was stopped. The fire service concentrated on preventing damage to the dock shed.

Mr. HEWSON: Do you know if counter-flooding was considered?—Yes, it was suggested we might increase stability and bring the ship more upright by flooding on the starboard side tunnel in the hold, forward of the bridge. That was done, but it was not successful. About 100 tons of water was put in and then the water started to run away, so pumping ceased.

Did you consider No. 2 hold?—Yes, but that was right across the ship and was of no use.

Captain COLBECK said the list increased to nearly 20 deg. shortly after they had attempted counter-flooding and at about midnight it was about 21 or 22 deg. Between the time the firemen had withdrawn from the ship and midnight the list changed very little, but after midnight the list increased more rapidly. At 1 15 a.m. it was in the neighbourhood of 30 deg. and the ship went completely on her side at 1 38 a.m.

Mr. HEWSON: Can you account for the increase in the rapidity of the list?—Only conjecture. The only reason I can see is that the fire got down into D deck and some of the D deck ports collapsed.

Can you think of any other reason?—No.

ON BOARD AFTER THE FIRE

Captain Colbeck said he had been on board the ship several times since the fire. The accommodation on the starboard side of the promenade deck and A, B and C decks was burnt out. The situation on the port side was not yet clear because divers were working in very poor visibility, almost by sense of touch. Even with lights visibility was only a few inches.

Mr. HEWSON: Did you see any signs of an explosion anywhere?—No, but I know three different explosions took place during the course of the fire.

Captain Colbeck added that the first apparent explosion was while the firemen were on board the ship and a fireman was injured, the next was after the fire fighting had ceased and the third was one which was thought to be from a petrol tank at the emergency generator. Replying to a question about signs of damage to the structure of the ship he said there were two fractures on the starboard side about the line of B deck. One was about four feet and ran vertically, the other was about nine inches. It was not possible to say whether or not there were fractures on the port side because no examination to the port shell had yet been possible.

Captain Colbeck said that the counter-flooding attempt may have been stopped after 60 tons of water had been put in. His estimate of 100 tons was a rough one and probably excessive.

Mr. NAISBY: Can you help the Court as to where this fire started?—No.

Or its cause?—No. I have no evidence.

In reply to further questions by Mr. Naisby, Captain Colbeck said that the question of pumping water out of the ship was considered, but in his view it would not have been possible to pump out water in any sufficient quantity to relieve the risk of the vessel capsizing.

The hearing was adjourned until to-morrow.