

LOST TANKER INQUIRY.

Evidence by Former Chief
Engineer of La Crescenta.

EQUIPMENT IN GOOD
CONDITION.

WHEN the Board of Trade inquiry into the loss of the tanker La Crescenta was resumed at the Institution of Civil Engineers, Westminster, yesterday, evidence was given by a chief engineer who had sailed in the tanker.

La Crescenta, an oil tanker of 5,880 tons gross, 400ft. length, 53ft. beam, 32ft. 10ins. depth, was built in 1923 by the Furness Shipbuilding Co., Ltd., Haverton Hill-on-Tees, and owned by the Crescent Navigation Co., Ltd. (Messrs. Harris and Dixon, Ltd., managers, London). She was lost in December, 1934, with her crew of 30, during a voyage from California to Japan with a cargo of crude oil.

Lord Merrivale, Wreck Commissioner, presides over the court, and is assisted by Commander H. Stockwell, Commander J. R. Williams, Mr. Edmond Wilson (marine engineer), and Mr. E. H. Mitchell as assessors.

The parties to the inquiry are as follow:—The Board of Trade, represented by the Solicitor-General, Sir Donald B. Somervell, and Mr. G. St. C. Pilcher (instructed by the solicitor to the Board of Trade); the Crescent Navigation Co., Ltd. (the owners of La Crescenta) and Mr. Sydney Graham, represented by Mr. J. V. Naisby (instructed by Messrs. Middleton, Lewis and Clarke); Mr. R. F. Hayward and Mr. Harold Griffin (instructed by Messrs. G. F. Hudson, Mathews and Co.) for the relatives of the dead officers, and the following officers' and engineers' protection societies who are represented on the National Maritime Board:—Officers (Merchant Navy) Federation, the Imperial Merchant Service Guild, the Mercantile Marine Service Association, and the Marine Engineers' Association, Ltd.; Mr. Vere Hunt and Mr. Peter Bucknill (instructed by Messrs. Russell, Jones and Co.) represent the National Union of Seamen and the Transport and General Workers' Union; Mr. W. L. McNair (instructed by Messrs. Parker, Garrett and Co.) holds a watching brief for Lloyd's Register of Shipping.

CALLING OF WITNESSES.

Mr. Hunt said he would be calling two witnesses and he would like to know if the Board of Trade could tell them if their case would finish that day so that they could have the witnesses ready for to-day, as they came from Dundee.

Mr. Pilcher, in reply, said that he thought it unlikely that their witnesses would finish evidence before the end of the day and might not probably finish until lunch time to-day. He also understood that Mr. Naisby had one or two witnesses to call.

Replying to the President, Mr. Hayward said that he had no witnesses to call.

The President.—No doubt we shall sit for a time on Saturday. I know it is not convenient generally, but we will see.

The President (to Mr. Hunt).—What time will your witnesses want here?—It will be subject to the length of time the owners wish to examine them. I think one morning or one afternoon would finish them.

The President.—Let them come up tonight and be here to-morrow by mid-day.

Mr. Edward Gooch, examined by Mr. Pilcher, said he had held a chief engineer's certificate for the last 32 years. He first came into contact with Messrs. Harris and Dixon in 1927, and his first experience of La Crescenta was in February,

1932, and therefore had known Mr. Rogers since 1927. He was chief engineer in La Crescenta for two periods whilst Mr. Howey was away, firstly from February 26, 1932, to April 21, 1932, and secondly from January 8, 1934, until September 17, 1934. His first voyage in 1932 was to Port Arthur and back to Bordeaux, where the ship grounded, and on the second occasion he covered three voyages—from Dundee to Batoum and Vladivostok, from Los Angeles to San Antonio, and from San Pedro to Japanese ports.

COVERING OF HATCHES.

Mr. Pilcher.—I want to ask you particularly with regard to the last voyage on which you were in this vessel shortly before you left here. Can you tell us, first of all, about the hatch covers and tarpaulins on the bunker hatch immediately forward of the after bridge? What was your practice, Mr. Gooch, with regard to that particular bunker hatch?—Well, the covering of that hatch was solely in the charge of the chief officer. The hatch covers were in very good condition, as were the tarpaulins.

By Mr. Pilcher.—In fine weather the port side hatch was always left open for ventilation.

We have heard that on some occasion in 1932 it was the custom of the firemen to go down through this hatch to get galley coal?—I have not seen that, sir. There was an entrance from the alleyway into the bunker.

You personally don't know anything about hatch covers being left off that hatch for that purpose?—Not for firemen to get coal. I have never seen that done.

How many tarpaulins in your experience were kept on that hatch?—I have seen two.

Can you tell us from your recollection anything about their condition?—Well, in very good condition, sir.

You said in fine weather it was the custom to leave a cover off. What was the purpose for doing that?—For ventilation. But in bad weather the covers were all on and tarpaulins secured.

NO SERIOUS LEAKAGES.

The cross-bunker hatch, were covers usually kept on that?—That bunker hatch was always wedged down tight. I never saw it open.

What would you say about La Crescenta? Was she more or less subject to shell leakages than the ordinary tanker?—In my experience no more than what you would experience on an ordinary tanker of her age. There was nothing serious about any of the leaks.

I want to ask you about one particular point which is within your department. Can you tell us anything about the valve on the settling tank which we heard about, which is said to have been out of order so that the settling tanks could not have been used for their proper purpose? Will you tell us about that?—After leaving Dundee in February, 1934, I noticed one of the engineers pumping the settling tanks up, and I asked him why he did not pump the tanks up separately. He told me one of the suction valves on the starboard tank was defective. We continued to work under that condition, which made

no difference to the supply of fuel to the boilers. Both tanks were pumped up and both discharged simultaneously.

That valve being defective, does that mean it was always open?—Always open. The valve casing itself was in order.

During your last three voyages did your burners ever go out from any cause?—On the last voyage, about two days before we arrived at San Pedro, all the burners went out.

What was the cause of that?—Dirt in the oils.

Answering further questions on this subject, witness said that they opened the filters and found the gauze was broken. He patched the gauze up until they arrived at San Pedro, and he then ordered new gauzes, but he could not say if they were ever put in. The last voyage was the only occasion during which the burners went out together. There was a stock of burners kept, and new ones were put in as soon as one went out.

What method of lighting was provided in the pumproom?—Only by hand electric torches.

Would they be specially adapted for use in tankers?—One of the ordinary hand torches, sir.

FIRE EXTINGUISHERS ON BOARD.

Further questioned by Mr. Pilcher, witness said there were fire extinguishers on board. They were of the Minimax type.

Where were they kept?—They were in different parts of the vessel.

On July 29, 1934, there was a small fire on board in the boiler-room?—Yes.

What was it due to?—It was due to some sacking smouldering. The fire was put out by the hosepipe and one fire extinguisher was used in the stokehold.

After the fire extinguisher was used do you know if it was refilled?—The captain saw they were all in working order again the day after.

The President.—We have heard he was a very careful and efficient officer.

Witness.—He was a very hard-working man, and "saw that everything was done correctly or not done at all."

Mr. Pilcher asked about the steering gear, and witness said that the steering engine was situated aft and controlled by the hydraulic telemotor from the bridge. The steering engine worked direct on the quadrant.

So there were no chain and rod of any kind?—No.

As chief engineer, if there had been any failure in the steering gear you would have been called in?—I would. The steering gear was in fine condition. I never had any trouble with it.

THE AUXILIARY STEERING GEAR.

There is the question of the auxiliary steering gear. What type was provided?—She was provided with hand steering gear that worked direct on the control valve of the steering engine and the steering wheel on the after bridge. I tried it out, and saw it was in working order. It was very simple to use.

Witness added in reply to questions from the President that the power for working the "hand" steering gear was really steam power.

Mr. Pilcher.—If you lost steam in your main boilers you would have no method of steering the vessel?—That is right.

Mr. Pilcher went over some of the questions put in by the Board of Trade. Witness said the boats and life-saving appliances were in good condition. There was a lifeboat drill every Saturday afternoon.

What about the lifebelts, and so on?—They were in good condition and of sufficient number. The propelling machinery was in splendid condition. The pumps had been repaired by the Bethlehem Steel Co., and after that they never had any trouble with them. That was done at San Pedro.

Witness said that he could get 20 tons of fresh water out of the evaporator, and that was sufficient. It was ample. There was a shortage of water at Kobe, and they could never get supplies until late at night, when all the cafes were shut. The wireless in the vessel was in good condition. He never heard of any trouble with it.

The President.—But if the gangway went, the wireless went?—Yes.

Mr. Pilcher.—That would leave you with the battery set for the wireless?—Yes.

Did you ever hear of this battery set being used?—Not while I was there.

AMOUNT OF BUNKERS.

Mr. Hayward.—Do you remember any dispute as to the amount of bunkers on the 1934 voyage to Batoum?—No.

Did you tell the captain there was a certain quantity when there were 18 tons more?—I do not remember anything about that.

It is not unusual for a chief engineer to keep unofficial reserves for himself?

The President.—Well, this must depend on the relationship between the master and the chief engineer.

Mr. Hayward.—As you please, my lord. Witness said he also kept oil in the cofferdam for reserve purposes.

The engineers had their hands full on that ship?—Yes, there was plenty of work.

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The vessel was frequently only in port for a very short time?—That is so. It generally took eight hours to load. And the engineers were working day and night?—Yes, sometimes.

Mr. Hayward then referred to the affidavit from Mr. Hubert Garry (an ex-third engineer of La Crescenta).

A letter was read from Garry, dated November 21, 1934, just before the ship went on her fatal voyage. He wrote a letter to his father, who was an engineer in a ship in India.

"RAMSHACKLE TUB."

"This is a proper old ramshackle tub," he wrote. "But I am getting good experience for my ticket here, as far as running repairs and breakdowns are concerned. There is nothing the matter with the main engines, but it is all the auxiliaries and 101 other things."

The President.—Do you think what this man wrote was untrue?—Everything was put in order by the Bethlehem Steel Co.

Another part of the letter explained the "novel" job of getting a rivet into a plate under water with a cork floating on top. Wooden plugs were put into the rivet holes, said the letter.

Mr. Hayward (reading from a letter) said, "We had a fire in the stokehold about half-way across the Pacific. It was getting a good hold but we managed to get it under control after about half-an-hour. Most of the time was spent finding bits of hose." A further passage stated: "We tried to work the extinguishers, but only one would work."

Mr. Hayward (to the witness).—Did you see any fire extinguishers work?—One, that was all that was used.

Has the use of the evaporator any substantial effect on the oil consumption or not?—Very slight.

As to boats and life-saving appliances, you say they were in good condition. Did you ever get inside of them?—I was never in them, I saw inside of them.

Do you, for example, know what a life-boat is supposed to carry?—No.

At sea the pumproom is not normally in use I take it?—When the ship is loaded with oil the pumproom is not used.

So far as your use of it was concerned, I suppose it was confined mainly to day-light hours. You never had any cause to go into the pumproom with a torch?—Not at all.

FILTERS CLEANED EVERY WATCH.

Answering further questions by Mr. Hayward, the witness said that the filters were cleaned every watch, and occasionally the filters were full of filthy matter.

The President questioned witness about the records of the master and the chief engineer working on replacing rivets in the ship.

Is it usual for a master and chief engineer to do this?—No, it is not a usual thing.

Mr. Vere Hunt.—So if the ship was carrying enough staff in the engine-room there would be no need for borrowing deck hands?—No need.

This shows that there were not enough men in the engine-room?—That is the case.

Did you have enough spare parts?—Yes, for the main engines, but not for the auxiliaries.

Is the Weir pump important?—Yes. If that pump goes out of order the engines stop?—No, not necessarily.

"It seemed to be certain that the root of the trouble was the unsatisfactory condition of the pumps, and they got worse and worse," was the remark in another letter by the captain.

To Mr. Vere Hunt, witness said he had no moment of anxiety on the ship. All repairs were easily dealt with.

Mr. Naisby.—Can you give us an idea about how much you used the evaporator in this vessel every day?—It was used about 10 hours a day.

Answering further questions by Mr. Naisby, the witness said that the gangway from the bridge to the flying bridge was in good condition.

The President.—Supposing there was a fire in the stokehold, was there any means on the upper deck for cutting off the oil from the burners?—Oh, yes.

FIRE APPLIANCES.

The President.—In the engine-room and the stokehold what appliances had you for fighting fire if it happened?—In the stokehold there was a box of sand and two fire extinguishers, and in the engine-room were fire extinguishers and a hosepipe.

What was your hosepipe attached to?—The general service pump.

Something was said about gas. Had you any gas masks on board?—None that I knew of.

In 1932 what was the number of the engine-room staff?—Four engineers, three firemen and a dayman; a donkeyman and a pumpman, and two greasers.

In 1934 what would your engine-room staff consist of?—Four engineers, pumpman, donkeyman, two greasers and three firemen.

The dayman was dropped?—Yes.

Answering questions by the President with regard to the master working on leaky rivets, the witness replied that that would ordinarily be attended to by the chief officer, and generally it would be done by the seamen.

Mr. George Henry Gunning, examined by the Solicitor-General, said that he had been 15 years in tankers with the exception of one ship. He joined La Crescenta in July, 1930, as third officer, and left her because she was laid up at Fowey on June 19.

THE BUCKLING.

Did you ever notice any buckling of the deck plating?—Yes, on the starboard side abaft amidships the plates were buckled. This occurred when the ship was in ballast, but when in a loaded condition these plates always straightened out again.

Did you attach any importance to it?—I had no fears about it. I have never seen it occur in any other ship I have been in.

I suppose you encountered an amount of bad weather during the course of the voyages? When the seas broke over the vessel did they break against the fore-part of the after bridge with some force or not?—With quite a force, because it was a very short distance from the water. The actual freeboard of that part of the ship is very small.

Was that part of the ship dirty in bad weather?—Yes, in the region of the after bridge.

Replying to Mr. Hayward, the witness said that in a forward sea she was rather sluggish in moving.

Mr. Ronald Radford Fletcher, giving evidence, said that he served in La Crescenta from May, 1929, to September, 1931, as apprentice. He rejoined La Crescenta as an A.B. at Sunderland after she had been undergoing some repairs, and remained in her three months.

Replying to questions by Mr. Hunt, he said that he had noticed buckling amidships. He did not recollect on joining about the buckling at all.

Mr. Naisby.—Did you have on board several notices in red and black lettering warning the crew as to the danger of smoking?—Yes, sir. I think there were four altogether.

Did you have printed notices in mess-rooms and in your own cabin?—Oh, yes.

WIRELESS SATISFACTORY.

Mr. John Reynolds, a wireless surveyor in the employ of the General Post Office, in his evidence said he was appointed to survey wireless telegraph installation on behalf of the Board of Trade. He saw the vessel in Milford Haven on October 12, 1933, and again on November 20, 1933, at Swansea. The dynamo wasn't working at Milford Haven, but was working when he saw her at Swansea.

The Solicitor-General.—Did you come to the conclusion she had satisfactory wireless apparatus?—Satisfactory in every way.

The witness added in reply to further questions that the range of the transmitting apparatus was, he estimated, between 250 to 400 miles, depending on the conditions.

Mr. Hubert Malcolm Rogers, the marine superintendent for the owners, examined by the Solicitor-General, said that Messrs. Harris and Dixon at one time had 20 vessels running. He was entirely responsible for the upkeep of the vessels. He was satisfied that things he thought ought to be done were done. All steel deck vessels buckled in hot weather. There was no serious buckling to show any serious weakness in the structure of the ship.

The Solicitor-General.—It was not a serious matter?—No.

THE BROKEN VALVE.

As to the suction valves from settling tanks. That valve broke in July?—It was reported to me in July. I am to blame that it was not made good, but it was not mentioned on the chief engineer's repair list. I went on board at Manchester, and nothing was said to me about it. It went out of my memory.

The Solicitor-General.—Mr. Gooch took the view that it did not make much difference. Do you agree?—Yes, to a certain extent. I have ships to-day that

have no settling tanks. As a statutory requirement the tanks were not essential.

Were the settling tanks without this valve a source of danger in not taking water out of oil, and perhaps putting fires out?—No. The water would be drained out of the tanks. There would be no danger of the fires going out. The burners could be blown out and new burners would be fitted.

Was La Crescenta likely to get water in furnaces without settling tanks?—The La Crescenta was better without settling tanks, as she was used. Otherwise, settling tanks were useful. It was impossible for the ship to lose her head as by water getting into the furnaces.

With regard to fire extinguishers. How many were fitted?—Eleven, minima 2-gal. size, Board of Trade pattern.

Was that sufficient?—No, it was not. I have seen a tanker blown up. I saw the wreck in Cardiff. Five men were killed and the ship was torn to pieces. So I increased the fire appliances to 25.

Witness said that anyone striking a match in the pumproom with the gas that might have gathered there could produce a great explosion. He never heard there was a risk with a portable torch. Thousands of torches were used in tankers every day. But in the case of dangerous conditions a special torch was provided, and one of these was on La Crescenta.

REPAIRS ABROAD.

Were 200 rivets repaired at Kobe—was this usual?—Quite usual. These overhauls of tankers cost thousands of pounds. But leaky rivets on a tanker are not as dangerous as they are on a cargo vessel. Every tanker manager knows that. I sent some spares to the ship by aeroplane to Port Said. We never spared any expense on repairs and renewals. There was very little time to overhaul in port. But we had regular overhauls in great detail. Mr. Gooch had a free hand to put everything right, and he was a first-class engineer.

The Solicitor-General (referring to the repairs at Sunderland in 1932).—Can you give us a general statement as to the condition of the vessel at Sunderland?—As far as the boilers were concerned, they could not have been better, and they were complimented on their condition. The engines were excellent, as they had been repaired and reconditioned. There were also new foundations. In fact, the whole repairs cost about £10,000. All the tubes were taken out, the condensers and all the pumps opened out, and the rudder reconditioned. Every part of that vessel has had plenty of money and time, and was in absolutely perfectly good order right throughout.

In answer to further questions, the witness said the repairs were carried out between April and September, 1932, which was about two years before she was lost.

CAPTAIN AND LOADING.

The Solicitor-General then read extracts from letters sent by the captain to his wife with regard to Mr. Sydney Graham, saying that he must load the ship to take a full cargo and 1,000 tons of bunkers, and in another letter the master states: "I wished to goodness I had sent that letter as I first wrote it before showing it to Mr. Rogers."

Mr. Rogers, in explaining, said.—I would like you gentlemen to know that I have known this captain since he was a lad, and followed his career right through, and they were all very fond of him. He was a splendid mate, but he never got the mentality of a master—in fact he was still a mate. As a shipmaster he thought of the most silly things a shipmaster would never experience of thinking.

He used the day-room as an office, and in that room was a typewriting machine. I was up there with him, and he seemed vexed about something, and he was typing a letter. He said "That is what I am going to send to the owners." Later, he said: "I shall load my ship properly, but will not overload my ship for anybody. I want to make it quite clear."

Proceeding, he (Mr. Rogers) said he replied: "My dear Upstill, you don't know what cargo you are going to load. I did hear you might be able to load to Indian summer marks." As a matter of fact, the inspectors at Batoum are so exact that no ship can get away with overloading. You cannot write to an owner accusing him of asking you to overload your ship. It is a positive insult; you would probably get a telegram back and get the sack. You must remember you are a shipmaster, and that you cannot write to an owner like that."

VULNERABILITY OF FLYING BRIDGE.

Solicitor-General.—Is the flying bridge a vulnerable part of the ship?—There was never any serious damage to the flying bridge during the 10 years he knew of it.

Witness added that he had told Hearnden that the ship was drawing 2ft. more than she ought to do, and her bilge keels and rudder were damaged; and that he said he could not see the ship put down by another foot under the new load line rules.

Then witness said that he had been told he had to take the new freeboard whether he liked it or not. As he was a bit of a fighter he objected. It was impossible to alter the whole ship at that time to make her ready for the new tanker freeboard rules.

Witness said it was quite normal for owners to tell the captain to carry out no repairs in California, because he was expected to get all the repairs done in Japan.

You stated you had plenty of money to pay for these repairs?—

President.—The insurance company paid for these?—

What amount?—The underwriters paid £9,000 and the owners paid £1,000.

Mr. Hayward.—Does a ship deteriorate when laid up for 12 months?—Yes, unless she is looked after.

Do you know the cost of laying up?—About £800 a year for a ship like this.

SAILORS A CARELESS CLASS.

Discussing the chances of an explosion, witness said to Mr. Hayward that a match might have been lighted in the pumproom by a sailor. He had great respect for all sea-going classes, but when it came to a question of their own lives there were no more careless a class of men in the world. They would often rather have a cigarette.

Mr. Vere Hunt.—Do you decide how many men this ship is to carry in the engine-room?—Under consultation with the owners, yes.

Do you authorise the number of engine-room hands to be carried?—Quite right.

Do you think this ship carried sufficient engine-room hands on the last voyage?—I do.

Do you think there are enough hands in the engine-room when the chief engineer has to get two or three sailors from the deck to work in the engine-room?—The men are there to do as they are told, whether they are deck or engine-room hands.

Questioned further about the working of A.B.s on the ship, witness said that if the men were loyal to him they would work anywhere in the ship they were told to.

As marine superintendent do not the number of hands come through your authority—the hands on deck?—It is agreed upon by the captain and owners. I have no knowledge of the deck hands.

What is the name of the man in your firm who decides?—It would be Mr. Holland, head of that department, and Mr. Sydney Graham and the other directors.

The Court adjourned until this morning.

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W604-0077 3/3