

## LOSS OF THE "TAHITI"

### Official Report of Inquiry Court's Finding

An official report of the Marine Court of Inquiry's finding in connection with the loss of the British steamship *Tahiti*, owned by the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand, has just been issued by the Board of Trade. Brief reference to the finding of the Court was made in our columns on Sept. 16.

The Court found that on Aug. 12 last, with Captain A. T. Tuten, master, the *Tahiti* left Wellington with a crew of 149; 103 passengers; and 500 tons of general cargo, in continuation of a voyage from Sydney to San Francisco. At 4.30 a.m. on Aug. 15 (western time), she being approximately 480 miles south-west from Karatonga (lat. 20 deg. 43 min. S., long. 166 deg. 16 min. W.), violent crashing noises were heard from the direction of the starboard main shaft tunnel, with very heavy vibration of the ship, followed by violent racing of the starboard engine.

"The second and fifth engineers," the report continues, "who were on duty in the engine-room, hastily shut off steam, the engine stopped abruptly, and the second engineer ran through the bulkhead door and along the starboard tunnel to locate the cause of the violence. The length of the tunnel is 100 ft., and the second engineer covered just over half the distance when he was met by a low wall of water that was rushing towards him. He could see to the far end of the tunnel, and in the one quick look that he was able to give he saw that a rush of water was pouring across and upwards from the starboard side of the ship to the port side, the flow covering in area the whole end of the tunnel from the floor to the ceiling.

"Though from long custom called a tunnel, the place in question has the appearance of a lower hold. It is 8 ft. in height and extends from side to side of the ship, so that both port and starboard tail shafts are, in this region, covered by the one tunnel. The second engineer raced back to the engine-room to get the door in the bulkhead closed, the onward rush of water keeping pace with him, so that before the door was closed water was pouring through it into the engine-room. Word was at once sent to the master, to the chief engineer, and to the officer on the bridge. Officers and all hands were called, all pumps were started, hand-pumps were rigged and manned, and wireless messages announcing the danger were sent out.

### "LONG AND DOGGED FIGHT"

"From then until the abandonment of the ship, two and a-half days later, a long and dogged fight was put up against the waters. In addition to the pumps, bailing by means of 44-gal. drums worked on the winch wires was maintained throughout. Boats were provided with increased provisions and, with blankets, passengers were allotted to the different boats, and everything was prepared for a hurried abandonment of the ship. From time to time, as the slowly rising waters created fresh danger points, a decision had to be made whether the limit of time had not been reached within which the abandonment of the sinking ship could with safety be effected.

"At 10.10 on the second night (Aug. 16) the Norwegian steamer *Penybryn*, which responded to the *Tahiti's* wireless SOS-calls, and had picked up her position from the distress rockets sent up, arrived and stood by throughout the night with her flood lights thrown over the *Tahiti*, and her crew ready to man their boats to go, if needed, to the assistance of those in the *Tahiti*. At 9.30 a.m. on Aug. 17 the chief engineer reported that conditions were critical but that he hoped to be able to control the water for about an hour longer, and orders were then given by the master for the passengers to abandon the ship. Within 15 minutes all the passengers were got into the boats and away from the ship, and they were shortly afterwards picked up by the American steamer *Ventura*, which had also responded to the SOS calls and had been rapidly approaching, and had sent word that she was ready to take care of all the passengers and crew. All the other *Tahiti's* boats were manned by the *Tahiti's* crew and brought alongside to save the first-class mails and the luggage. From then till the early afternoon the fatigued crew, assisted by one of the *Penybryn* boats, carried out this work.

"At 1.35 p.m. the vessel was settling rapidly, the engineers' position below became too dangerous to remain any longer, a final order was issued for remainder of crew to abandon the ship, and after master and chief engineer had personally searched the ship to see that no one was left behind, the last boat, containing the boatswain, carpenter, wireless operator, the engineers, the mate and the second mate and the master, abandoned the ship."

### A BROKEN TAIL SHAFT

At the close of the evidence, Counsel for the Marine Department stated that the only question he would put to the Court was, "What was the cause of the casualty?"

"We are of opinion," states the Court, "that the cause of the loss of the ship was the breaking of her tail shaft at a spot just forward of the stern tube, and that the breaking caused a puncture in the hull of the ship. The exact manner in which this puncture was brought about cannot be ascertained with certainty, but the indications are that the break was a diagonal, or scarf, break and that the driven end, overriding the other, and becoming twisted and distorted in alignment, as it revolved under pressure from the racing engine, flogged the bearing supports through the side of the ship."

"Notwithstanding the puncture in her side, the ship would have been saved but for another vital injury. The watertight bulkhead that divides the tunnel and No. 3 hold from the engine-room, and through which the shaft fits, was torn at its base by the violence of the racing engine coupled with the disturbed alignment of the broken shaft. The rent in the base of the bulkhead was a horizontal one and occurred just at the top edge of the bottom boundary angle, at which spot time and

the elements had no doubt reduced to some extent the original strength and thickness of the plate."

In conclusion, the Court were of the opinion that the ship was staunch and well found, and that her loss was due to a peril of the sea which no reasonable human care or foresight could have avoided. In the handling of the situation throughout the master displayed resource and cool, accurate judgment worthy of the highest praise, and all ranks under him responded to the example that he set.



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