

(No. 6731.)

“W. J. PIRRIE.”

FINDING and Order of a Naval Court held at Tocopilla on the 23rd, 24th, and 25th days of August, 1904, to investigate the circumstances attending the loss by fire of the British sailing ship “W. J. PIRRIE,” of the port of Glasgow, official number 86359, in the bay of Tocopilla on the night of the 17th of August, 1904, and to enquire into the conduct of the master, officers, and crew of said vessel.

The “W. J. Pirrie” was an iron four-masted sailing vessel, barque rigged, of 2,398 tons register, built at the port of Belfast in 1883, and belonging to the port of Glasgow.

It appears by the evidence given before the Court, that between half-past ten and a quarter to eleven on Wednesday night, August the 17th, E. D. Thomas, night watchman, saw smoke coming out of No. 2 hatch, and at once roused the first officer, who aroused the master and all hands aft, then going forward, found the remainder of the crew had already been aroused, and were either on deck or coming out of their forecastles.

The ship burned fiercely until half-past eight the following morning, when the 850 tons of nitrate on board appears to have burnt out, the coal, however, at both ends of the ship, amounting in all to 220 tons, continuing to burn, and is, at this finding, still burning.

Apart from the evidence as given before the Court, all the Members of the Court being present when the “W. J. Pirrie” was burning, are of the opinion that nothing effectual could have been done to combat the fire with any hope of success, owing to the rapid spread of the flames, fore and aft of the ship, after the alarm was given, though the efforts made by the commander and crew of the Chilean war vessel “Chacabuco” with their fire pump, are deserving of mention and thanks, as the progress of the fire in the after end of the ship was checked for a time in consequence thereof.

The Court entirely exonerates the captain and officers of the burnt vessel from all blame with respect to the loss of the ship.

The Court finds that there is ample evidence to prove that the vessel was set on fire maliciously, and is of the opinion that the hour at which the fire broke out, in itself, apart from the evidence given before the Court, points to this conclusion; also, that Martin P. Hanegraaf, A.B., is the incendiary, with Roland Bridge, A.B., as an accomplice, for the following reasons:—

Firstly.—A. Bergmann’s statement, on being recalled, of the conversation between him and Bridge on Thursday evening the 18th inst., with reference to Hanegraaf, subsequently confirmed by Bridge.

Secondly.—A. Bergmann’s subsequent statement regarding a conversation between Hanegraaf and Bridge, overheard by him in the starboard fore-castle, partially confirmed by Hanegraaf.

Thirdly.—The statement of J. J. Davies, confirmed by J. J. O’Neill, as to Bridge’s movements after all hands had turned in on the night of the fire, confirmed by Bridge.

Fourthly.—The unsatisfactory evidence given by Hanegraaf on being recalled and interrogated, which evidence is completely at variance, on important points, with the subsequent re-examinations of Jean Lebert, V. E. Berg, D. J. Evans, F. La Fontaine, and others, his indifference to his arrest, and the charge brought against him, and his callous demeanour and reply when accused of setting fire to the ship.

Fifthly.—The fact that Hanegraaf gave the alarm forward almost so soon, if not at the same time, as Thomas did aft, on the night of the fire, also, the sound of his voice when shouting as noticed by some of the witnesses, and the fact that he was fully dressed when first seen, even to boots. The Court being of the opinion that the smoke on deck would not have affected him more than it did others, who, apparently, shouted in their natural tones. That the fact of his wearing a full suit when first seen, thus being in great contrast to the other members of the crew, who, when first aroused, were clad, for the most part, in shirts, with drawers in some cases, is most suspicious; and the Court does not believe that Hanegraaf was asleep at the time the fire broke out, as stated by him when before the Court.

Sixthly.—The confession of Bridge and his manner and deportment when making said confession, which the Court finds fully justifies their belief in his statement.

The Court think it desirable and expedient to state that on Wednesday night the 17th inst., the moon was at the first quarter, and, further, that the riding light was hanging from the forward rigging on the starboard side, thus giving a clear night additional light, and that the chain locker manhole is 18 ins. from the break of the fore-castle head.

And the Court recommends that both Hanegraaf and Bridge be sent to England for trial on the charge of wilfully setting the ship “W. J. Pirrie” on fire.

The expenses of the Court, fixed at £24 18s., are approved.

Dated, at Tocopilla, this 25th day of August, 1904.

C. W. NICHOLLS,  
Vice-Consul,  
President.

GEORGE W. DOTY,  
HY. C. HEMMING, } Members.  
JOHN BACKLUND. }

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