

(No. 7197.)

“SIERRA BLANCA” (S.S.).

FINDING and order of a Naval Court, held at the British Consulate-General, Manila, on the Twenty-seventh day of August, 1908, to investigate the circumstances attending the stranding of the British steam-ship “SIERRA BLANCA,” of the port of Liverpool, Official Number 120821, when on a voyage from Sabang to Cebu, Philippine Islands, on the 26th day of July, 1908.

The “Sierra Blanca” was a steam vessel, schooner-rigged, of 2337 tons registered tonnage, Official Number 120,821, built at Glasgow in 1904, and belonging to the port of Liverpool.

It appears from the evidence given before this Court that she sailed from Sabang on or about the Twenty-first day of July, 1908, bound for Cebu with a cargo of kerosene and a crew of 33 hands all told. That it was at first intended to make Cebu by passing between the North and South Luconia Shoals, but, after taking a departure at Subi Island at noon, on the 25th of July, in view of the sailing directions [China Sea Directory, Vol. II, fourth edition, 1899], and the want of proper soundings in that channel, it was later determined to pass to the south of the South Luconia shoals; accordingly a course was taken, which would clear the easternmost reef of the south shoals by about 7 miles. The idea was that the breaking water, noted in the directions, might be taken as a guide. In proceeding on this course the ship struck an unknown reef, at 4.50 p.m. on July 26th, which occasioned jettison of about 300 tons of cargo from the No. 1 Bridge space, and subsequent deviation for Manila in the interests of the ship and cargo, owing to the danger which threatened the damaged ship from the boisterous weather encountered. The actual position of the reef is 4° 49' N. and 112° 30' E. The Court is satisfied, and finds that good and proper courses were steered during the voyage, that errors on the compass were obtained at every opportunity, that the chronometers were rated at Sabang, and that during the voyage the ratings were verified by cross bearings of land and sextant angles. That the position of ship, as marked on the chart, at noon on the day of the stranding, the 26th of July, was correct and obtained by good observations of the sun, and verified by the different sights of the master, chief and second officers. That the position of the ship at 3.30 p.m. on the same day, as marked on the chart, is correct of longitude by observation, and that there is no evidence or reason to doubt the assumed latitude projected from noon. That there is no evidence of any current setting to the northward either before or after the stranding, and that the courses laid down seem to have been made. That at 4.50 p.m. on the 26th of July the ship “Sierra Blanca” struck a reef and remained fast. The master and chief officer were on the bridge and were on the look-out for picking up the broken water, noted in the Directory referred to above, known as the Luconia breakers. The weather at the time was clear and the sea smooth, and from the evidence given it appears that the master and chief officer were doubtful whether, under such conditions, the broken water would be visible; accordingly it was decided to alter the course more to the east and give the danger a wide berth. It was at the moment of making such alteration that the vessel struck.

The Court is of opinion, from the correctness of the positions of the ship at noon and at 3.30 p.m. on the 26th, and from the nature of the soundings obtained after the stranding, that the “Sierra Blanca” struck a pinnacle rock of no great extent some 12 miles to the south-west of the reef marked on the chart to the westward of the South Luconia Shoals. That this rock, upon which the vessel struck, is uncharted and may possibly be one of those referred to in the China Sea Directory, Vol. II, 1879, page 179, in a note in connection with dangers existing between South Luconia Shoals and the coast of Borneo. That after the vessel struck everything possible was done to float her without avail. That in the urgent circumstances which demanded immediate action to avoid disaster the master was completely justified in jettisoning 300 tons of cargo from No. 1 Bridge space, which was the only means of saving the vessel and cargo. By this means the ship was floated, leaking badly. That proceeding towards Cebu boisterous weather was encountered, and beam seas, which caused the ship to roll and strain, and rendered her condition dangerous. That under such circumstances the master was justified in that, after consulting his chief officer and chief engineer, he decided to deviate from his course and make for Manila instead of Cebu, since by so doing he minimised danger by keeping wind and sea astern; also by proceeding to Manila, instead of to Cebu, repairs to the ship were greatly facilitated. The Court is of opinion that the said deviation was the best course in the interests and safety of the ship and all concerned.

That the master, Henry de Gruchy, appears to have navigated his vessel in a seamanlike and proper manner, and to have done everything in his power both before and after the casualty.

That Richard Compton, who holds a certificate of competency as a sea-going master, and who was on watch at the time of the casualty, appears to the Court to have fulfilled his duties in an able and seamanlike manner.

That the crew appear to have conducted themselves properly and used their utmost powers in rendering assistance.

That proper discipline appears to have been maintained on board the vessel. That upon the evidence given the vessel appears to have been well found, sufficiently manned, and seaworthy at the time of her departure from Sabang.

That the log book has been well kept.

That the “Sierra Blanca” appears to have been properly supplied with charts.

The expenses of this Court, fixed at £6 9s., are approved, and will be defrayed by the master.

Dated at the British Consulate-General at Manila, this Twenty-seventh day of August, 1908.

HUGH HORNE,
Acting British Consul General, Manila,
President of Court.

PERCY H. ROLFE,
Younger Brother of the Trinity House,
Commanding s.s. “Yuensang.”

ROBERT RODGER,
Master s.s. “Zafiro.”

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