

(No. 7359.)

“KIRKFIELD” (S.S.).

Report of Court.

In the matter of an Inquiry held at the Marine Court, Singapore, on the 29th and 30th April, 1910, before LITTLETON EDWARD PIPE WOLFERSTAN, assisted by BERTIE ANGELO CATOR, HENRY SUTHERLAND HAUXWELL, and EDWIN FREDERICK STOVELL, into the circumstances attending the wreck of the s.s. “KIRKFIELD,” on the 7th April, 1910, on the Royal Captain Shoal, in the Palawan Passage of the China Sea.

Narrative.

The British s.s. “Kirkfield,” Official Number 106034, of Glasgow, tonnage 3,602 gross, 2,289 net, classed 100 A1 in the Lloyd’s Register 1909–10, left the Port of Labuan, after taking bunker coal, on the 6th April, at 9.30 a.m., bound for Kobe, Japan, with a crew of 29 all told.

The vessel had on board a cargo of phosphate of the weight of 5,200 tons, shipped by the Christmas Island Phosphate Company, Limited, at Christmas Island, and consigned to Messrs. Illes & Company, of Kobe, Japan.

All went well until 10.25 p.m. on the 7th April, when the vessel in navigating the Palawan Passage struck the Royal Captain Shoal and remained fast. The weather at the time being cloudy, the wind in the north-eastward blowing a gentle breeze with a smooth sea. Water immediately gained into No. 1 hold and fore peaks, also into bilges and tanks. Pumps were started which barely kept the water from rising.

The boats were immediately got out and all men not required were ordered to the boats. The next morning the crew returned to the ship and were employed jettisoning cargo day and night until 13th April, when attempts were made with the engines to back her off. The donkey pump broke down on this date and water then gained rapidly.

On the 14th the ship appeared likely to founder, and all hands were ordered to the boats, and the vessel was abandoned about noon.

From observation made by members of the crew in the boats proceeding towards Balabac, the “Kirkfield” appeared to founder at 5 p.m. on the 14th April.

The master and crew proceeded in ship’s boats to Balabac, arriving there on the 15th instant, from thence they were taken to Kudat in the Governor’s motor launch, where they took passage in the German s.s. “Darvel,” arriving at Singapore on the 25th instant.

Questions.

(1) Was the steamship “Kirkfield” properly found and in a thoroughly seaworthy condition on leaving Labuan on 6th April?

(2) Was the usual and proper complement of officers available for duty on the “Kirkfield”?

(3) Where and on what date did the “Kirkfield” strand?

(4) Was there a properly qualified look-out man on duty on board the “Kirkfield” immediately prior to the stranding?

(5) Were proper steps taken by those in charge of the “Kirkfield” to ensure the safe navigation of the ship through the Palawan Straits?

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(6) Was everything done after the stranding to refloat the vessel and save the ship?

(7) By whose wrongful act or default was the stranding caused?

(8) Has the “Kirkfield” been abandoned, and if so, where?

(9) What is the finding of the Court in respect of all the circumstances in connection with the stranding?

The Court finds that—

(1) The s.s. “Kirkfield” was properly found and in a thoroughly seaworthy condition on leaving Labuan on the 6th April, 1910.

(2) The usual and proper complement of officers were available for duty on the “Kirkfield.”

(3) The s.s. “Kirkfield” stranded on the 7th April, at 10.20 p.m., on the Royal Captain Shoal, in the Palawan Passage of the China Sea.

(4) In placing a youth, with only two months’ sea experience, as look-out man on approaching narrow waters at night, the master showed want of caution.

(5) Proper steps were not taken by those in charge of the s.s. “Kirkfield” to ensure the safe navigation of the ship through the Palawan Passage.

(6) Everything was done after the stranding to refloat the vessel and save the ship.

(7) The stranding was caused by the default of the master, George Lawrie.

(8) The s.s. “Kirkfield” has been abandoned on the Royal Captain Shoal, of the Palawan Passage of the China Sea, on the 14th April, 1910.

(9) The disappearance of or failure to produce important documentary evidence, which would have been of great assistance in arriving at a right conclusion, is a matter for comment. The only ship’s books produced were the chief officer’s log book, and the deviation book, and this log book commences from Christmas Island to Labuan, on 5th April. The official log book and the chief officer’s log book prior to the 5th April, the captain and officer’s sight books and chronometer rate journal were not produced, which would have enabled the Court to judge of the navigation of the vessel prior to the accident, and particularly as to the way in which the position was found and checked at 12 noon and 4 p.m. on the day of the disaster. The Court is not satisfied with the evidence given as to checking the ship’s position by an observation, said to have been taken by the third officer, on the 7th April, at 4 p.m.

It was the duty of the master to personally take observations, especially approaching narrow waters. The opportunity of ascertaining the ship’s position without fear of error at noon by bearings on Balabac Island was not taken which, in view of the way the ship was navigated, would have been a proper and prudent course to follow.

In all the circumstances of the case the Court finds that the master, George Lawrie, was in default, and directs that his certificate be suspended for the space of six months. The Court recommends that the master be given a first mate’s certificate for the period of suspension.

Dated this 30th day of April, 1910.

(Signed) L. E. P. WOLFERSTAN,  
President.

We concur in the above Report.

(Signed) B. A. CATOR,  
Lieut., R.N., }  
“ H. S. HAUXWELL, } Assessors.  
“ E. F. STOVELL, }

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the 17th day of June, 1910.)