

FIREMEN OVERCOME AT FIRE ON SHIP

The Glasgow Herald, Saturday 3 December, 1960

FIREMAN'S DEATH IN SHIP'S HOLD

In Glasgow a fireman lost his life and 11 firemen and a docker were overcome and taken to hospital during attempts to put out a fire in the hold of a cargo ship at Prince's Dock, Govan. The fireman who died was in charge of a fireboat which stood by the ship after she arrived late on Thursday night with her cargo of matches, wood pulp and paper smouldering.

GLASGOW FIRE OFFICER DIES IN SHIP HOLD

Station Officer Douglas Mearns of the Glasgow Fire Service was overcome and died yesterday while fighting in the hold of the German cargo ship Pagensand (1282 tons) at Prince's Dock, Govan.

With a detachment of firemen wearing breathing equipment he had gone into the hold of the ship to deal with a smouldering fire there. They had hardly gone down when there were cries for help. Dockers boarded the ship to help firemen rescue their comrades. Eleven firemen and a docker were brought up unconscious and treated at the Southern General Hospital.

THREE CHILDREN

Station Officer Mearns's home was at 29 Brandon Crescent, Coatbridge. He leaves a widow and three children.

He had been in charge of a fireboat which had stood by the ship on her arrival in Glasgow late on Thursday night with a smouldering cargo of matches, wood pulp, and paper.

Captain Berhold Schlinder of the Pagensand said that the fire was discovered on Tuesday when they were two days out from Gothenburg, Sweden. He radioed a warning and changed course for the Forth.

HOLD SEALED

The hatches and all air vents were closed to seal the fire, but smoke continued to come from the hold and the captain considered putting in at Leith or Grangemouth. He decided, however, that he could safely make port in Glasgow.

When the ship docked on Thursday it was decided by the firemen and captain that they would leave the hatches in place until daylight.

A squad of 21 dockers worked last night to clear the ship of her cargo while a pump unit of Glasgow Fire Brigade and a fire boat stood by. A fire officer said:- "The ship should be cleared by morning. The fire is completely extinguished but we are here to make sure nothing goes wrong."

Evening Times, Friday 2 December, 1960

FUMES HORROR - City fireman dies in ship blaze

A Glasgow fireman died today after being carried from the hold of a burning ship in Princes Dock. The deck of the German ship Pagensand became a casualty clearing station after eight firemen collapsed below.

Rescuers got seven of the men up on deck, but one was still missing – lost in the smouldering smoke filled hold. Down again went the rescue party – and found him. As ambulances raced to the dockside, firemen and dockers tried to revive the unconscious men stretched out on the deck of the Pagensand.

Most of them had recovered to some extent by the time the ambulances arrived. But one was still in bad shape. And was dead when the ambulances got to the Southern General Hospital.

HIS FAMILY

He was Station Officer Douglas Mearns, of 29 Brandon Crescent, Coatbridge – the last man out. Station Officer Mearns was in charge of a lifeboat which had stood by the Pagensand since early today.

Fire Brigade officers went to tell Mrs Mearns, who is a receptionist with a Glasgow dentist. An "Evening Times" reporter who called at the house in Coatbridge found the three Mearns children playing happily. News of their father's death was delayed till their mother arrived.

The Pagensand was loaded with matches and newsprint. Sulphur fumes were the killer. Altogether 15 firemen were affected. By 2-30 this afternoon, Deputy Firemaster Swanson said the fire was under control. The captain of the ship estimated the damage at £100,000. ►



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TREATED IN HOSPITAL

The firemen taken to hospital – the eight rescued from the ship's hold and two others – were all able to leave after treatment.

They were – David McFarlane (34), 8 Dunotter Street, Ruchazie; William Fenton (29), of 31 Glebe Street, Renfrew; William Gray (43), Kelbourne Street, Glasgow; Walter Hutchison (26), 478 Maryhill Road, Glasgow; James McIntyre, Central Fire Station; Alan Mackay (29), 59 Calvay Road, Barlanark; John McKinlay (41), 28 Bowfield Terrace; Charles Murray (30), 1 ? Road, Glasgow; Andrew ?, address?, Glasgow; John White, ? Torogay Street, Glasgow.

DEATH STRIKES IN BLAZE SHIP

There was no hint of death as Glasgow firemen stood on the decks of the German ship Pagensand at Princes Dock today.

But death was waiting in the smouldering hold. And when the firemen went down to tackle the fire, eight of them collapsed – overcome by sulphur fumes from the burning cargo of matches and newsprint. One of the firemen, Station Officer Douglas Mearns, aged 45, of Coatbridge, was killed.

BLAST DANGER

As Station Officer Mearns and his colleagues watched the ship's crew clear the deck cargo to get at the hatch covers, they were ready for danger. The danger of explosion. It was feared that when the hatches were lifted there might be an explosion as air rushed into the hold which had been sealed since Monday when the fire was discovered at sea.

But all that happened was that smoke drifted lazily into the air. The firemen, wearing breathing masks, then went down into the hold. In a few minutes there were shouts for help. The deadly drama of the Pagensand had begun.

FRANTIC SEARCH

Choked by the fumes, 11 firemen collapsed. Dockers rushed to help the firemen on deck. A relay of stretcher bearers went down to the hold. Ambulances were called. And as the unconscious men were brought up, the deck looked more like a casualty clearing station than a ship. As efforts were made to revive the men on deck, a frantic hunt was going on below for a man still missing. He was found and brought up.

By the time the ambulances arrived the men stretched on the deck had started to recover. All but one – Station Officer Mearns. And when the ambulances arrived at the Southern General Hospital, Station Officer Mearns was dead. Five of his rescued colleagues who returned to the dockside after hospital treatment reported the Station Officer's death to Firemaster Martin Chadwick, who was in charge of the fire fighting and rescue operations.

"LIKE NINEPINS"

Firemaster Chadwick later told reporters – "They all went down like ninepins – without warning." And one of the rescued men added – "Everything appeared normal for about three minutes. Then, suddenly, we all started collapsing. It just hit us."

Another of the rescued firemen, Bill Gray, of Kelburne Street, Glasgow, sitting in a wheel chair at the hospital, said he remembered very little of what had happened in the smoke filled hold. Still dazed, blinking, and gulping air, he was unable to answer questions at first. After a few minutes, however, he accepted a cigarette from an ambulance driver and tried to explain.

THE FUMES

"I believe the hold had been battened down for two weeks. When we went in the sulphur fumes got us. It all happened very quickly. I don't know what happened to me." Twelve men were taken to hospital – 11 firemen and a docker. After two hours nine had been discharged. The docker, Robert Dayer, and Station Officer James McIntyre were still under treatment. Station Officer McIntyre later left the hospital by ambulance. He was taken out in a stretcher, and was too ill to be interviewed.

BY ROPE

Last of the casualties to be discharged was docker Dayer, aged 32, who said he had gone into the hold twice and had collapsed the second time. "I wakened up here in hospital." He added that before he was overcome he and his colleagues rescued several firemen who were in trouble.

Back at the dockside, two dockers who went into the hold with Dayer – William Brannigan, of 115 Stobcross Street, Glasgow; and Jimmy Robertson – spoke to reporters. ➤



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Mr Barnnigan said they uncovered part of the hatch and went into the hold to clear a space for the firemen to work. Moments after the firemen went into the hold there was a concentration of fumes. "I was staggering about myself," said Mr Braggigan. "We had to come out, of course, because we had no masks."

The dockers helped out the firemen overcome in the hold. They lifted them up some 12 feet by hand and rope. Water was later pumped into the ship which began to list to port. Dockers were told to go ashore and members of the crew were asked to keep back as firemen – wearing breathing apparatus and working in short spells – organised the unloading of the hold so that they could put out the fire.

STORMY VOYAGE

The Pagensand's stormy voyage across the North Sea was described by First Officer Karl Erler "We saw the smoke and smelled it two days out from Gothenburg in Sweden," he told a reporter. "We never saw any flames. We had reached a point in the North Sea when we were nearer Scotland than Sweden or Denmark, so it was decided to continue on to Scotland." "We sailed up by the Orkneys and through the Pentland Firth. The seas were very rough and we got a lot of – I'm sorry, my English is not so good – we got a lot of cracking."

Captain Schlinder, master of the Pagensand, who left his ship for a conference on shore with the owners' agent, said that during the voyage members of the crew, whose quarters were in the forecabin, were moved to other parts of the ship when the plates became warm. Sea spraying over the ship in the rough seas helped cool the plates. The smoke coming from the forward hold was at its worst on Wednesday. It was coming through little holes in the deck, and these were sealed with adhesive tape.

VICTIM'S WIFE RUSHES HOME TO CHILDREN

A Glasgow dentist's receptionist was told by fire brigade officers today that her fireman husband was dead. She was Mrs Mearns, wife of 45 year old Station Officer Douglas Mearns, the victim of today's ship fire. Mrs Mearns is a receptionist with dentist Mr H. McCall, Byres Road. A car rushed her to her home at 29 Brandon Crescent, Coatbridge.

An "Evening Times" reporter who had called at the house in Coatbridge found the three Mearns children playing happily.

The eldest son, Rodney (13), off school with a cold, was looking after three year old Fergus. And 12 year old Patricia had just come home from school for lunch. News of their father's death was delayed until the arrival of their mother.

Station Officer Mearns, one of the first men into the burning hold today had been in charge of the fireboat for about 18 months. He had many years experience in fire fighting, seven years of them in Glasgow. Before that he was a member of Middlesbrough fire brigade. In fighting one fire in Glasgow some time ago he received an injury to an eye.

The Glasgow Herald, Monday 5 December 5, 1960

DEATH NOTICE

MEARNS – On 2nd December, 1960, Douglas, beloved husband of Rose Lenson, father of Roderick, Patricia and Francois?, and son of Mrs. J. D. Mearns Shawlands, Glasgow – Funeral to Craigton Crematorium tomorrow (Tuesday) at 2 p.m. friends please meet cortege at crematorium; no flowers, no mourning, please.

Evening Times, Saturday 3 December, 1960

FIREMEN STILL AT DEATH SHIP

Firemen were standing by today while cargo was unloaded from the death ship Pagensand on which a fireman was killed by carbon monoxide fumes yesterday. The firefloat, whose officer in charge, Douglas Mearns, died yesterday, is still lying alongside the German vessel. It will remain there throughout the weekend while the cargo of matches, newsprint, and timber is unloaded. Dockers will work on the ship tomorrow, and it may be Monday before all cargo is taken off.

STILL ILL

Divisional Fire Officer James McIntyre, one of the 11 firemen overcome by fumes and discharged from hospital after treatment, is still suffering from the after effects of his experience. A doctor attended him at his home during the night and today callers were told that he was not to be disturbed. More than once before Mr McIntyre has been affected by smoke while fighting fires. In addition to the firemen, one docker was overcome by fumes. ➤



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NO DANGER

There is now no danger of fire on the ship as the sodden cargo of matches is taken out of No. 1 hold, where the smouldering fire was discovered on Monday when the Pagensand was two days out of Gothenburg. But the 20 firemen who are standing by are taking no chances. They are watching closely as the crates of matches and newsprint in No. 2 hold are removed. The only danger, said one officer, could arise from spilled matches being ignited by contact with men's boots.

First Officer Carl Erler said today that the cargo in both holds was so badly damaged by fire, smoke, or water that it was a write-off. But the cargo in the two aft holds was unaffected. A full report is being prepared by the police for submission to the Procurator Fiscal. A fatal accident inquiry will later be held in Glasgow Sheriff Court. How could experienced firefighters be overcome by deadly fumes while wearing breathing apparatus?

Mr Martin Chadwick, the city's Firemaster who retires at the end of the year, said that Station Officer Mearns crawled between piled up cargo after going down into the hold he slipped and dislodged his mouthpiece. He was immediately knocked out.

Report of the Firemaster of the City of Glasgow, 1960.

Despite the harsh experiences mentioned, 1960 was not to depart without tragedy once again hitting the Service severely. On Friday, December 2nd a further death in the course of duty had to be recorded.

The German Motor Vessel "Pagensand" came into the Clyde Estuary reporting a fire in her hold and while investigating the seat of the fire, Station Officer Douglas Mearns, the Officer in Charge, Marine Station, was overcome and died shortly afterwards. Several other Officers and Men were overcome by fumes and required hospital treatment.

Fire Magazine January, 1961.

APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

Take a good look at this picture. The officer in the centre about to enter the hold of a burning ship is only moments away from death. Take a look at the faces of his colleagues making the final adjustments to his equipment. They too know the dangers that lie ahead. They too are ready to face them. Take a good look, chairman of fire brigade committees, members of negotiating bodies, government officials, newspaper editors and members of the public.

The man you see there alive, and who is now dead, is the 22nd member of the British Fire Services to die in the past 12 months. He, like the others, died a violent death for you, for the protection of your homes, your lives and your property.

He died in the same quiet way as he carried out his duties. He died because he never questioned the possibility of remaining in a safe place while a job had to be done.

He died not in the emotional heat of a battle, not for a cause, but for humanity. His duty was to help others, his heroism was his selflessness. Such was the man who died – Station Officer Douglas Mearns, aged 45, married, father of three children and a member of Glasgow Fire Brigade.

Twenty two have died in 1960, an average of 350 firefighters are hurt each year. There are few who go through their Service career without being injured, and many are maimed permanently. Yet how few members of the public, the press and local authorities seem to realise the devoted and selfless service they are getting from their firefighters.

LITTLE CREDIT

How few seem to be willing to give them the conditions they deserve, the appliances and fire stations they need, the wages that are necessary to bring depleted fire brigades up to strength. How reluctant they seem to give credit for the thousands of jobs the Fire Service is carrying out apart from fighting fires, or to give them recognition in the Honours List or even to say just "Thank You."

We hope that 1961 will prove a year in which the Fire Service will at last achieve its proper place. Much work is being done in Parliament and in committees to improve fire prevention and to reduce the mounting annual losses in lives and property. ➤



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PRINCE'S DOCK FRIDAY 2ND DECEMBER 1960

We ask all those who meet round the conference table to remember that in the end it will be the professional firefighter who has to rescue people, put out the fire and risk his life or health. To help them remember let them keep this picture of the last minutes in the life of Station Officer Douglas Mearns, husband, father and selfless hero, and yet no different from any other member of the British Fire Services who will always put the common good before the interest of themselves and their families.

Harry Klopper