



Department of National Defence

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE

NO. ....

December 24 1940

From: The Commanding Officer,
H.M.C.S. Vison,
Bermuda.
To: Captain Watkins Grubb R.N.,
H.M.C.S. St. George's,
Bermuda.

The following is a report covering the loss at sea of
Able Seaman R.F. Shelley V13261, R.C.N.V.P., next of kin (wife)
Mrs. L. Shelley, 15 Sinclair St., Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.
At about 0848 hours December 21st., in Latitude 37-12'N.
and Longitude 63-55'W., Course 184, Wind E.W., Force 5, Weather
and Visibility 0/8, Sea and Swell 3 and 9.

The Jack staff had been broken off and washed clear of
its socket on the bow during the night, to the after position
of the forecastle deck. The position of the Jack staff was about
ten feet from the break of the forecastle, on the port side. I
gave orders to the Officer of the Watch, Sub-Lieutenant I, Angus
R.C.N.V.P., to select an experienced seaman to go forward and
remove the Jack staff and stow it under the forecastle deck. The
O.C.W. detailed Able Seaman Anderson, Able Seaman Shelley, who
was off duty accompanied Able Seaman Anderson without orders
from myself or the O.C.W. While the men were on the forecastle deck
the ship pitched and shipped a small amount of water. I ordered
the O.C.W. to see that the men had returned to the main deck.
The O.C.W. reported immediately that a man was overboard. A life
buoy was thrown by the Coxswain from the bridge deck. The Coxswain
estimated the buoy landed within fifty yards of the man. I ordered
a lookout aloft to keep sight of the man in the water and the
O.C.W. proceeded to get the sea boat away. The ship was brought
about in the direction where the man was last seen, and arrived
in that position in approximately three to five minutes, where
his cap was observed floating on the water. We searched in the vicinity
until 1020 hours, when I considered there was no hope of
recovering the man.

I consider the man was in a dazed condition when he
landed in the water due to striking the ship's super structure
because he disappeared in such a short time. The man was dressed
in a light jacket, dungarees tucked inside short rubber sea boots.
Resumed course and speed with Ocean Escort.

W. L. ... Lt. Cmdr. R.C.N.R.
Commanding Officer



H.M.S. "MALABAR".

26th December, 1940.

Sir,

In accordance with your Memorandum AWI. No. 251/2 of 23rd December, 1940, we have to-day held a full inquiry into the matter, and submit the following report.

2. We are of opinion that Able Seaman R.F. Shelley, V13261 was washed overboard while securing an aerial wire to the hand rails on the port side of Forecastle deck after a jack staff had been removed by Able Seaman Anderson, assisted by the deceased. There seems to have been only slight water coming onboard till the time, but one sea being heavier than the others, caused the deceased to slip and topple over or through the hand rails, which were properly set up. As the deceased was wearing sea boots, it is presumed he sank immediately.

3. There seems to have been no particular watch kept on the men working on the fore-castle by officers on the bridge, either Captain or Officer of the Watch, as by their evidence they did not consider there was any danger.

4. All due precautions appear to have been taken and steps to search for the deceased in the water carried out; the turn to starboard being used after the object had passed clear of the stern, as the Captain finds that the ship turns quicker in that direction.

We have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servants,

*Robert E. Nicholl*

Lieutenant, R.N.R.

*Robert James*

Lieutenant Commander, R.N.

*R. Waltham Gault*

Captain, R.N.  
(Retired).  
PRESIDENT.



(NAVAL SERVICE)

N.S. 113-S-410 F.D. 315


65

MEMORANDUM TO THE C.N.S.

Concur with the Findings of the Board.

As regards Paragraph 3, in this particular case, the fact that the ratings were not under constant observation had no effect on the attempt to rescue Able Seaman Shelley. He was seen to be washed overboard, and immediate action was taken.

*Concur.*  
*W. H.*  
CNS: 5.2-41

  
Captain, R.C.N.,  
DEPUTY CHIEF OF THE NAVAL STAFF.

O T T A W A, January 23, 1941.

COPY.

S.1361.  
BOARD OF INQUIRY -  
NOTIFICATION TO SHIP.

Admiralty House,  
Bermuda.

24th December, 1940.

AWI. No. 251/2.  
MEMORANDUM.

I have directed a board of inquiry to be assembled on board H.M.S. "MALABAR" at 0930 on Thursday, 26th December, 1940, of which Captain Reginald Watkins Grubb, Royal Navy, (Retired) of H.M.S. "MALABAR", will be president to investigate the circumstances attending the death of RALPH F. SHELLEY, Able Seaman, R.C.N.V.R., Official Number V.13261.

2. Every facility is to be afforded to the officers holding the inquiry, all persons whose evidence may be required are to be in readiness to attend, and any books or documents bearing on the subject which may be needed for examination or reference are to be ready for production.

(SGD.) C.E. KENNEDY-PURVIS.

Vice-Admiral,  
Commander-in-Chief.

The Commodore-in-Charge,  
H.M.S. "Malabar".  
The Commanding Officer,  
H.M.C.S. "Vison".

(Copy to each).



Board of Inquiry held onboard H.M.S. "Malabar" at 0930, 26th December, 1940, to investigate the circumstances attending the death of RALPH F. SHELLEY, Able Seaman, R.C.N.V.R., Official Number V.13261, late of H.M.C.S. "Vison".

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BOARD.

Captain R. Watkins Grubb, R.N. (Retired). - President.  
Lieutenant Commander R. Birch, R.N. - Member.  
Lieutenant A.E. Nicholl, R.N.R. - Member.

- - - - -

List of Witnesses.

Questions put  
to each.

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|   |         |        |          |
|---|---------|--------|----------|
| Lieutenant Commander R.I. Swansburg,<br>R.C.N.R.        | 1<br>66 | -<br>- | 16<br>67 |
| Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant I. Angus,<br>R.C.N.V.R. | 17      | -      | 41       |
| Leading Seaman L.B. White, R.C.N.                       | 68      | -      | 82       |
| Able Seaman B. Anderson, R.C.N.                         | 42      | -      | 65       |

- - - - -

Lieutenant Commander Robert Irwin Swansburg, Royal Canadian Naval Reserve, of His Majesty's Canadian Ship "Vison", called and cautioned.

1. Are you Lieutenant Commander Robert Irwin Swansburg, R.C.N.R., of His Majesty's Canadian Ship "Vison" ?

Yes.

2. Have you anything further to add to your report dated 24th December, 1940 ?

I would like to qualify my statement.

- × 3. Your order to secure the jackstaff under the existing conditions was perfectly seaman-like in your opinion ?

Yes.

4. Were the hand rails well set up ?

Yes, they were well set up on the forecastle.

5. Did you actually see Able Seaman Shelley go to the forecastle ?

No.

6. When did you last see Able Seaman Shelley ?

While he was doing the job.

7. Did you see a sufficiently large sea come onboard to cause this accident ?

For an experienced seaman there was no danger.

8. Were you shipping water the whole time ?

The deck was almost dry when the small sea came aboard.

9. Were you on the bridge ?

Yes.

10. At what time did this man go over-board ?

About 0840.

11. After he had gone over the side did you see him in the water ?

I sighted his hat. I am not positive that I saw him.



Lieutenant Commander R.I. Swansburg, R.C.N.R., (continued).

12. Was he a non-swimmer ?

In the service, of course, men are supposed to be able to swim. I don't know if he had his certificate. I understand that he was a good swimmer.

13. Was he wearing sea boots ?

Yes, short ones up to the knees.

14. Did anybody actually see him go over-board ?

Yes.

15. Who ?

Able Seaman Anderson.

16. What was the state of the sea at the time ?

Confused, moderately rough.

Witness elected to remain present during  
the remainder of the proceedings.

Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant Ian Angus, Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, of His Majesty's Canadian Ship "Vison", called and cautioned.

17. Are you Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant Ian Angus, R.C.N.V.R., of His Majesty's Canadian Ship "Vison" ?

Yes.

18. Were you Officer of the Watch at 0830 and onwards on 21st December, 1940 ?

Yes.

19. Was the Captain on the bridge ?

Yes.

20. Did you order the jack staff to be dealt with by any particular Able Seaman ?

Yes, I did.

21. Who was that Able Seaman ?

Able Seaman Anderson.

22. What was the first you saw of Able Seaman Shelley ?

The first I saw of him was when he was on the forecastle of the forecastle deck.

23. Were the hand-rails on the forecastle deck well set up ?

Yes.

24. Was Able Seaman Shelley assisting Able Seaman Anderson when you saw him (Shelley) ?

Yes.

25. How far in the operation of moving the jack staff had they got when you last saw them together ?

About abreast of the foremost gun on the port side coming aft.

26. What was the first indication you had of anything being wrong ?

The first indication I had was when the Captain told me to make sure that the seamen had returned to the main deck. I was not paying very much attention to these men as we were keeping our position. I was paying more attention to the ship's head. When I looked over the side to look from the boat deck to the main deck, I saw a man in the water. I immediately reported it to the Captain.



Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant Ian Angus, R.C.N.V.R. (Continued).

27. At what time was this ?

Approximately 0840.

28. Was a Petty Officer available to take charge of this operation?

We have no Petty Officers.

29. What quantity of sea was coming onboard at the time - in your opinion ?

There was not very much sea coming onboard at the time.

30. As soon as you knew the man was over the side, what action was taken ?

There were a number of men on the quarter-deck aft, and one of them threw a lifebelt, that was hanging on the after part of the boat deck, to the man. I ran aft to prepare the sea boat for getting away.

31. What was happening to the ship at that time - did you stop the engines ?

We came about.

32. The man went over the port side and presumably you went hard to port ?

I think it was hard to starboard; I am not sure.

33. What order was given as regards engines or wheel ?

The Captain was on the bridge, and I do not know what orders were given.

34. Was the ship rolling much when this happened ?

The ship was not rolling at the time ~~time~~; it pitched heavily - more than we had experienced during the previous hour.

35. Where was the wind when this happened ?

As far as I remember the wind was coming from a south-westerly direction. It was not a heavy one. We experienced a sea at all times.

36. Was she rolling ?

No.

37. For the job they had to do would it be difficult for them to hang on ?

There was no necessity for them to hang on.

THOMAS

Temporary Acting Sub Lieutenant Ian Angus, R.C.N.V.R. (Continued).

38. In your opinion what was it that caused the accident to happen ?

In my opinion the lift of the ship pitched the man.

39. Did you actually see the man go overboard ?

No.

40. Were immediate steps taken to save him ?

Yes.

41. How long did it take to get the lifeboat away ?

We did not get one away.

Witness withdrew.



Able Seaman Borden Anderson, Royal Canadian Navy, Official number 8458, of His Majesty's Canadian Ship "Vison", called and cautioned.

42. Are you Able Seaman Borden Anderson, R.C.N., Official number 8458, of H.M.C.S. "Vison" ?

Yes.

43. Were you ordered at about 0830 on 21st December, 1940, to secure or remove jack staff ?

Yes.

44. Did Able Seaman Shelley accompany you at once ?

Yes.

45. Had he any orders from anyone, including yourself, to go with you ?

No.

46. What sea was coming onboard the ship ?

She was not taking much water, most of what was coming was spray. During the time I was on watch that was the heaviest sea I saw come onboard.

47. Was that one spray or green ?

Green.

48. At what time ?

About 0830, immediately I went onto the forecastle.

49. Had you by then removed jack staff ?

Yes.

50. How far aft had you got ?

Right to the port alley-way clear of the forecastle deck. Shelley stayed there to secure.

51. What was he securing when you left him ?

An aerial.

52. To what part of the forecastle deck was he securing this aerial ?

The after part.

Able Seaman B. Anderson, R.C.N.. (Continued).

53. Did you see him fall overboard ?

Yes.

54. Were hand-rails thoroughly set up ?

Yes.

55. Was he securing the aerial to the hand-rails ?

Yes.

56. You say you saw Shelley fall overboard. How did the accident happen.

I think that if he had stayed and held fast to the rail instead of running he would not have gone overboard.

57. Do you know if Able Seaman Shelley could swim ?

No, apart from what they said onboard that he was a good swimmer.

58. When you saw him fall overboard what did you do ?

I immediately hollered "Man Overboard", all along the port alley-way. I ran aft.

59. What happened then ?

They stopped the engines. The lifeboat's crew got into the boat and stood by to lower away. The ship circled round.

60. The lifeboat's crew got into the boat ?

Yes - three men.

61. How long afterwards would that be ?

Almost immediately. All hands were aft on the after deck, the majority of the crew.

62. How long was it before the boat was lowered in the water ?

It was not in the water - it stood by.

63. In your opinion, was everything done to try and save the man ?

Yes.



Lieutenant Commander R.I. Swansburg, R.C.N.R., of H.M.C.S.  
"Vison", recalled.

66. After the man was reported as overboard the Officer of the Watch went down to lower the boat. Can you tell me what orders were given for the engines and wheel ?

The ship was keeping station with telegraphs at half-speed ahead. On hearing of the accident, I slewed the ship to starboard as soon as possible by means of rudder and screw when a floating object was clear of the stern.

67. How were you keeping station ?

Line abreast.

Witness remained present.

V13261  
SHELLEY  
RALPH

THOMA

Able Seaman B. Anderson, R.C.N., (Continued).

64. Was the ship rolling heavily ?

Yes, it was rolling and pitching heavily.

65. Was it difficult to stand on deck ?

Yes, I had to hold fast at times.

Witness withdrew.



Leading Seaman Lester Brehaut White, Royal Canadian Navy, of His Majesty's Canadian Ship "Vison", called and cautioned.

68. Are you Leading Seaman Lester Brehaut White, R.C.N., of H.M.C.S. "Vison" ?

Yes.

69. Were you at the wheel at 0830 on 21st December, 1940 ?

Yes.

70. Was the ship rolling or pitching heavily ?

Yes.

71. Both ?

Yes.

72. Was any spray coming onto the bridge ?

No.

73. Did you see any seas come on the forecastle ?

Yes.

74. Spray or sea ?

Mostly spray.

75. When were you first aware that Able Seaman Shelley had gone over the side ?

When Mr. Angus hollered "Man Overboard".

76. What orders did you receive from the bridge ?

Hard to starboard.

77. And the engines ?

I don't know what happened to the engines.

78. You say that an order you received was 'hard to starboard' ?

Yes.

79. Which way did the ship's head go ?

To starboard.

Leading Seaman L.B. White, R.C.N., (Continued).

80. Did you see these two men working forward when they were on the forecastle ?

I saw Able Seaman Shelley a few minutes before the sea broke over the ship, but not at the time. I did not see them working.

81. Not from the wheel-house ?

No.

82. Did you see the accident ?

No.

Witness withdrew.

*Albert C. Fiske*

Lieutenant, R.N.R.

*Ames*

Lieutenant Commander, R.N.

*R. Waltham Gubb.*

Captain, R.N.  
(Retired).  
PRESIDENT.