

The Greenhill Park Disaster



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THE GREEN HILL PARK DISASTER

By John Stanton *

**John Stanton was the unions' lawyer in the
Commission of Inquiry into the explosion.*

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Early in 1945 explosions and fire ravaged the *S.S. Green Hill Park* in Vancouver harbour, killing two seamen and six longshoremen instantly. Ironically, this ship of death had been named after a peaceful picnic ground at Alma, a village in central Nova Scotia. Ottawa promptly appointed three former maritime men as a Commission of Inquiry. As a result of the disaster, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) Local 501 and the Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) catapulted into public prominence as they helped to expose lax ship-loading and port management practices.

A mile from the scene, the sturdy building in which I worked shook from a powerful initial rumbling, followed by two strong shocks and then a lesser one. Smoke rose over rooftops from the direction of Canadian Pacific's wharves. Emergency vehicles roared by, responding to a general alarm. The media quickly reported that a ship had blown up and was burning fiercely as tugboatmen struggled to tow her away from the docks. Unknown numbers were dead or injured. Thousands of downtown windows were shattered, and flying glass slashed many on the busy streets.

During World War II, Canada had built nearly four hundred merchant vessels at public expense, including the *Green Hill Park*. Completed in November 1943, the ship belonged to the Park Steamship Company Limited, a corporation wholly-owned by the federal government. Park's general manager was Vancouver shipping magnate Ernest Farquhar Riddle. He was also owner and director of Canada Shipping Company Limited, based in British Columbia. The other owners and directors were Sherwood Lett, a lawyer (later a chief justice), and D.E. Harris, a grain broker. Acting as Park's general manager,



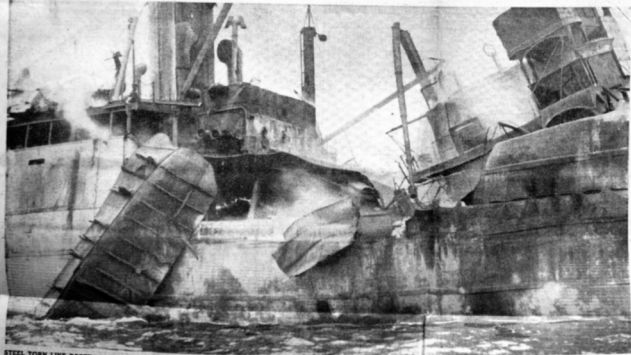
Image e-03973, courtesy Royal BC Museum and Archives

Riddle gave Canada Shipping (i.e., himself) a contract to operate, manage and control the *Green Hill Park*. The actual job was entrusted to businessman Kenneth Montgomery, who hired Empire Stevedoring Company to load the vessel. The longshoremen were its employees. The seamen worked for the Park Company.

The ship, which began loading cargo for Australia on February 27 at Canadian Pacific Pier B, a hundred metres from major downtown buildings, was divided into six compartments, five for cargo and one for the boilers and engines. Each had a lower compartment (hold) some thirty feet deep and an upper one only eight feet deep called the "tween decks." No. 3 hold was amidships, under the bridge and forward of the engines; it measured about fifty feet square. The

TWO BODIES RECOVERED; SIX SOUGHT IN SHIP ASHES

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STEEL TORN LIKE PAPER—55 Greenhill Park, 10,000-ton government freighter, which blew up at Pier B-C Tuesday, has yielded the charred bodies of two of her blast victims. City men at the bottom of the hull identified a chart of William Lewis of 2812 West Second. It was found at 10:15 a.m. Fire Chief W. L. Ernst immediately dispatched it by boat to the city morgue. Mayor Atkinson Dave Quigley found the body charred beyond recognition.

Firemen Hunt For Victims

VICTORIA, March 7.—Attorney General R. L. McLeod announced today he has asked the minister of transport at Ottawa for the fullest inquiry into the explosion on Vancouver's waterfront on Tuesday.

The ash-filled bulk of 55 Greenhill Park, 10,000-ton government freighter, which blew up at Pier B-C Tuesday, has yielded the charred bodies of two of her blast victims.

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Mayor Atkinson Dave Quigley found the body charred beyond recognition.

Trapped Below Decks

Police identified it as Lewis' body because shipmates had told them where they had last seen Lewis, during the explosion. It was there that searchers found the remains.

The second body was found at 1:45 p.m.

It too was rushed to the city morgue where an attempt to identify it will be made.

The men were trapped below when 225,000 pounds of molten chlorine in the holds blew skyward at high noon Tuesday.

Coroner Dr. J. D. Whitford, Fire Warden Archie King, Detective Walter Atkinson and Quigley were aboard the destroyer all day.

A big "clean-up" crew is being used to haul the ash and charred wreckage from the hull.

Body on Pile of Chairs

It is being dropped outside to a big heap.

These the wreckage are adding the ash. A cold wind will not be blowing there in time. The men's search will continue until the fate of those missing at Blaine Street.

At 11 o'clock this afternoon, Frank Ed Gills opened an escape hatch door in the stern of the ship and found the second charred body.

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Image courtesy Chris Madsen.

explosions occurred in the 'tween decks of No. 3, near the starboard side of the ship and away from the pier. The bulkhead (a steel wall) separating No. 3 from No. 2 was tom out, killing five longshoremen who were still in No. 2 and one man trying to escape from No. 1. The two seamen perished in a cabin above the site of the explosions.

Months earlier, the Australian government had begun acquiring items of cargo for shipment on the *Green Hill Park* and sent a detailed list to Canada Shipping. Lumber, newsprint and tin plate comprised the great bulk, but there were also

many other goods, among which three should have attracted special attention: ninety-four tonnes of sodium chlorate, lesser amounts of overproof whisky, and distress flares.

The sodium chlorate and the whisky were particularly dangerous. Charles Hazen, a chemist, insisted the chlorate was not responsible for the explosions. G.S. Eldridge, a chemical engineer, declared that it seldom caught fire. These men were witnesses for Canada Shipping and the ship's officers. Minimizing the importance of the chemical was in their interest. The commission reported that it was "not impressed with ... Eldridge and still less with Hazen. These two gentlemen ... were wedded to their own views and were less than convincing."

The commission did accept evidence by three other scientists, including chemistry professor MJ. Marshall, who explained



M. P. McGRATH



DONALD G. BELL

MISSING—The above two men are on the missing lists and are feared dead in the Greenhill Park explosion.

that sodium chlorate is "similar to gunpowder in effect and does damage at a distance out of proportion to that at the scene." This is why downtown buildings shook and windows broke.

Theories about the cause of the fire were suggested by some witnesses: sabotage, an incendiary bomb, spontaneous ignition, and friction. These were rejected on the spot. As for a cigarette, there was much evidence. The employers spoke of the



The Province newspaper, Vancouver Public Library 45866

difficulty in getting men to stop smoking. Union witness George Sickavish, who barely escaped from the *Green Hill Park* with his life, told of a recent union meeting deciding that anyone who smoked in a ship's hold would be fined a hundred dollars and lose his job. Percy Cavanagh, working on deck, had

a good view into much of No. 3 'tween decks and was "completely satisfied in [his] own mind that no one smoked in the 'tween decks the day of the explosion or the day before... many of the men below came up on deck to smoke."

Hardly had echoes of the explosion died away when many tugboats were on their way to the *Green Hill Park*, as was the city's fire department. The professional efficiency of the firemen and tugboatmen was a refreshing change from the bungling of Montgomery, Galt, Wright and the others. Fire engines poured water onto the ship from every available vantage point and rescued the men who had jumped or been blown overboard, including Herbert Mayhew, who was found in a safety net. They also assisted an officer whose clothing was on fire. The work went on despite the bursting flares, which, as one newspaper wrote, "continued to pour into the sky at intervals."

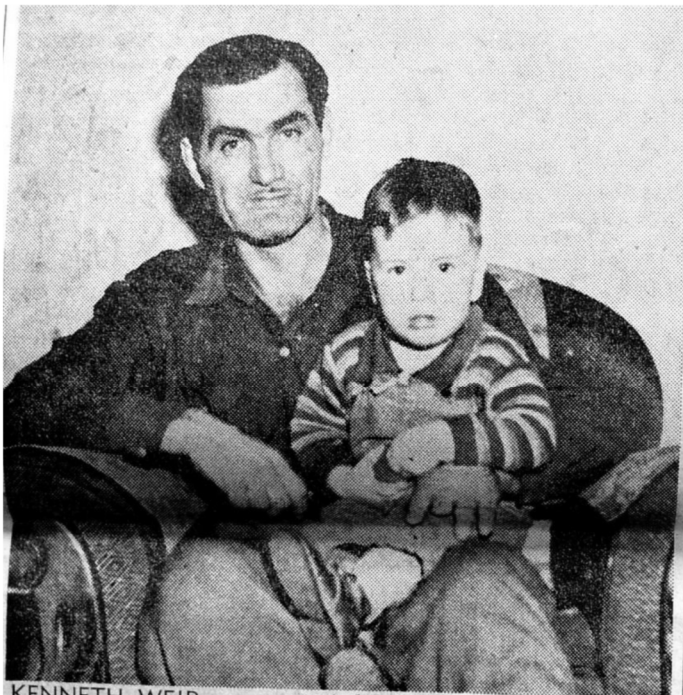
The small harbour tug *Charles H. Cates No. 5* was first at the scene; her captain, Douglas Dixon, recalls a blazing barge of lumber being towed away with difficulty, while other tugs set to work with hoses. Dixon, near the *Green Hill Park's* stern, saw other tugs hauling away a sister ship to facilitate removal of the burning vessel.

Nine workers, aboard the *Green Hill Park* to check her engines, took refuge with crew members at the stern of the ship, the area least affected. There they assisted Dixon, now joined by the tugs *Kyuquot* and *RFM*, to fix towlines. At the same time the naval tug *Glendevon* arrived, despite warnings to stay away because more explosions were feared. The *Glendevon* came alongside several times to rescue men who escaped by sliding down ropes. Once in safety, they were asked to volunteer to return aboard the *Green Hill Park* to help the tugs get her out of the harbour. First Officer Horsfield, Third Officer Stuart S. McKenzie, and crewman Clarence Wallace went back, and from the stern of the ship did what they could. They reported the deck "unbearably hot" a scant twenty feet from their station.

With towlines in place, the dangerous and difficult process of towing the ship began. The tugboatmen did their job, never

knowing if more explosions would occur, for cargoes in Nos. 2 and 3 still blazed fiercely. At first it was thought that the ship could be beached on mud flats across the harbour. On the way, however, the vessel seemed to disdain the idea, turning a complete circle. The tugs were having a very awkward time hauling the ship from the stern. The bow was becoming ever lighter, and there was no way of steering from there because of the fire. So the ship kept yawing wildly. Naval officers decided that instead of beaching, she must be taken out into English Bay (the outer harbour) and scuttled. The *Green Hill Park* herself decided otherwise.

The tugs fought their way to Calamity Point in the First Narrows, where the ship again turned full circle and beached herself on the gravel. After much struggle, they succeeded in pulling the *Green Hill Park* into deep water. Passing under the Lion's Gate bridge, the ship was a spectacular sight for those



KENNETH WEIR . . . saved from death by "a miracle" when trapped in a hold of the *Greenhill Park*, is shown here with his infant son, Birt.

looking down. Fighting strong eddies and currents, the tugs pulled her along the south shore, where she finally beached herself on the rocks. The tugs could do no more for the *Green Hill Park*; but Vancouver's fireboat, *J.H. Carlisle*, had now arrived and began pumping sea water onto fires that still raged. Captain Dixon says that pressure from the nozzles kept pushing the fireboat away from the ship, so he used his tug to keep them together.

Horsfield, McKenzie and Wallace were taken off by a police boat a couple of hours later, but even after many more hours of intense firefighting no one could get below to begin the task of locating and removing the bodies. That was done the next day. Later the ship was towed to a pier in the harbour. Plans were made to salvage the boilers and engines and to put the hull up for sale as a breakwater.

Nothing like this had ever happened before on the British Columbia coast, and public reaction was swift. The mayor and the Attorney-General made immediate demands on the federal government for a full and open enquiry. They wanted no part of what one client of mine called "a heavy veil of secrecy" that he feared from shipping and harbour officials. The unions began collecting evidence from witnesses, and the media, normally indifferent or hostile to union activity, gave good coverage to a number of highly pertinent questions.

From a number of witnesses, I found out everything I could about the *Green Hill Park*: her cargo, the method of stowage, and about some men's attempts to fight the fire

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and then escape. Two longshoremen described how it felt to be trapped aboard, facing what they believed to be certain death. The slipshod way some companies and government agencies (to say nothing of the Port Warden of Vancouver) treated their responsibility for the safety of ships, cargoes and men, became increasingly apparent to me.

I was disappointed that fault was attached to longshoremen for broaching liquor, with no attempt to put the finding within its real context. This fed the prejudice against waterfront workers in those circles where longshoremen are seen as thieves, thugs, or worse. It is a cultivated prejudice that lingers on and enables employers to drag out union negotiations and Parliament to enact laws taking away normal collective bargaining rights, as was done in 1972, 1975, and 1982. Nonetheless, participation in the inquiry by Local 501 united the membership around serious issues of safety and strengthened the union through an increased public awareness of the realities of waterfront work.

SOURCES

Dixon, Captain Doug. "Interview," June 23, 1981.

Lloyd's Register of Shipping (1944-1970).

Province of British Columbia. Registrar of Companies.

"Canada Shipping Company Limited, 1928 to 1974."

"Report of the Inquiry Commission," May, 1945.

Stanton, John. "Personal files."

Statements to union counsel by seventeen longshoremen who witnessed most of the events.

Personal Data, Places and Causes of Death
of Eight Men Killed Aboard S.S. Green Hill Park,
Vancouver Harbour, March 6, 1945

Note: All causes of death also include asphyxiation.

Longshoremen						
Name	Age	Place of Birth	Status	Children	Place of Death	Cause of Death
Donald G. Bell	34	B.C.	married	3	No. 2 lower hold	4th degree burns of entire body
Joseph A. Brooks	51	N.B.	married	3	-do-	complete burning (4th degree)
William T. Lewis	46	Wales	married	0	top of ladder No. 1 hold	4th degree burns (entire body)
Merton McGrath	46	N.S.	widower		No. 2 lower hold	charring of body by burns
Montague E. Munn	57	P.E.I.	married	2	-do-	burning (4th degree)
Walter Peterson	56	N.B.	married	0	-do-	charring of body by burns
Seamen						
Julius Kern	about 41	unknown	single	0	chief steward's cabin	4th degree burns of body
Donald Munn	54	Scotland	single	0	-do-	burning (4th degree)

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

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