

Testimony revealed a belief amongst some that the ship actually had touched bottom at least once (possibly on Chrysler Shoal) before stranding on Goose-neck Island. The Seaway pilot who had been aboard the downbound salty TAINARON testified that when he met EASTCLIFFE HALL near Bradford Point, she was several hundred yards south of the channel, an observation supporting the "wrong range" theory. The salty's VHF radio warnings to the doomed ship first were ignored and then rebuffed.

Why would an experienced shipmaster such as Capt. Groulx attempt to re-enter the channel by describing a large circle outside the designated navigation channel? And then, after seriously damaging his ship, how could he let her sink in deep water without alerting those on board or issuing a radiotelephone call for immediate assistance?

The answer to these questions came as a thunderbolt. A forensic examination report revealed that the blood alcohol concentration in the master's body "... was of the order of 360 milligrams per 100 millilitres, which is equivalent to 0.36 percent weight for volume". Pathologists were amazed by the finding. For reference, Ontario law presumes a motorist to be significantly impaired when his blood alcohol content is 0.08 percent!

The inevitable conclusion to which the enquiry was drawn was that Capt. Groulx had been incapable of safely navigating his ship. In the words of Mr. Justice Chevalier: "... because of his state of plain drunkenness, the Master of the EASTCLIFFE HALL was in no condition to steer his vessel... that ship and all its contents, cargo and human beings were in the hands of a blind man who did not know where he was nor what he was doing."

Chief Mate Marchand and Third Mate Dupuis (the second mate was not on board at the time of the sinking) were also reproached, Marchand receiving a six-month license suspension for failing to assume command in the incapacity of the master. Marchand argued that the captain had not seemed incapacitated, and that he simply had followed orders. He also claimed that, after the ship struck the light base, he was unaware that she was sinking until he looked down from the wheelhouse to the foredeck and saw water pouring out of a ventilation cowl, obviously rising under pressure from the forepeak. His claim seems incredible, given the tremendous shock he must have felt (and which was reported by others) when the ship struck the concrete light base at full speed and knocked it 24 feet off its original location!

At face value, Marchand's testimony portrays him as grossly stupid. But consider the situation further. Imagine him awakened and called to the bridge in the early morning hours, a time when the human spirit falters. He may not grasp the extent of Capt. Groulx's impairment; even if he does, this mate (described by a knowledgeable observer as an officer who was intimidated by the captain) knows that Groulx will vigorously resist - likely by physical means - any effort to relieve him of command. And if he does seize command? He will have to justify his action later. The wheelsman is not present, so it would be his word against that of his superior. One of the most interesting aspects of the court testimony is what Marchand (and other witnesses) left unsaid.

Third Mate Dupuis was criticized for failing to remain available to the captain, and for not alerting passengers and crew after the impact. His certificate was not dealt with, however. The Hall Corporation itself escaped formal censure; although EASTCLIFFE HALL's operation without a second mate aboard compromised her certificate of seaworthiness, company officials never had been informed of the man's absence. Nevertheless, the firm was devastated, not only by the loss of the ship and the terrible and unnecessary death toll, but also by the media's alacritous proclamations that this was just the latest in a star-crossed company's skein of disasters.

And EASTCLIFFE HALL herself? Her bones lie entombed for eternity in that