

COPY

REPORT OF FIRE ON m.s. "LEXA MAERSK" at EASTERN ANCHORAGE,
SINGAPORE ROADS, DEC. 25th 1954. DRAFT FWD. 13'0" AFT 22'6"
WITH APPROX. 3000 TONS GENERAL CARGO AND 982 TONS DIESEL
BUNKERS ON BOARD. VESSEL TERMINATING CARGO WORK FOR DEPARTURE
TO PENANG AT 6 P.M. DECEMBER 25th, 1954.

On 25/12/54 at 4.15 p.m. members of the deck crew, who were engaged battening down No.3 hatch, observed that smoke was seeping out of the forward part of hatch No.2 and immediately the tarpaulins in No.2 hatch burned through.

The general fire alarm was sounded at once throughout the vessel and assistance from shore requested by morse signals and radio. In less than three minutes the crew had commenced to fight the fire. Hand fire extinguishers were used and four fire hoses connected to the fire line as well as a hose for foam rigged from the after deck.

Hatches Nos.1 and 4 where cargo work was being conducted were covered over as well as ventilator cowls.

The origination of the fire was discovered to be at the afterpart of No.2 shelter deck, where efforts were concentrated to extinguish the fire. At 3 a.m. 25/12/54 crepe rubber had been loaded on the after section of hatch No.2 shelter deck, and two hours before the fire was discovered loading of rubber in hatch No.2 lower hold had concluded.

No.2 shelter deck runs in continuation of No.3 shelter deck. The space in the shelter deck between hatches Nos.2 & 3 was stowed in the starboard side with 25 tons Tapioca Flour and the port side with cotton piece goods and machinery. Aft of this cargo 97 tons of Seedlac was distributed on the shelter deck and silkrooms in hatch No.3. The after silkrooms in hatch No.2 were empty. Aft on shelter deck No.3 wings there was 56 tons of Seedlac.

At approximately 4.30 p.m. it was observed that the fire was aft on the port side and spreading. In an endeavour to stop this men were sent down into No.3 hatch with a hose. In a few minutes smoke and heat made it impossible for anyone to be in the hatch, though dressed in Asbestos suit and equipped with smoke helmets. The steam smothering was put into use but of little avail as the hatch covers were burnt through.

At 5 p.m. the first of Singapore Harbour Board's Fire Boats arrived on the scene and set in to extinguish the fire with hoses and water. After about ten minutes the fire seemed to be under control, but unfortunately a container with Amonia placed in the deckhouse between hatch 2 and 3 for the vessel's freezers exploded. The poisonous fumes made it necessary for everyone to retreat from the fire for a few minutes and unfortunately at the same time the pumps on the fireboat broke down. The explosion which came very surprisingly knocked many of the fire-fighters down including Boatswain Ernst Hanson who very bravely was standing on the fore part of hatch No.3. He was poisoned by Amonia gases and bruised and later taken ashore to hospital.

The fire was now spreading very rapidly throughout the ship. Several of the port authorities, who in the meantime had come on board deemed it advisable to ground the vessel and preparations made to do so. The Assistant Master Attendant explained that where the vessel was, it was a hazard to other ships in the port and if sunk a great obstruction to navigation. As all the firemen from shore had left the vessel, and as the vessel's firefighting equipment in connection with two waterboats from the firm W. Hammer was quite inadequate to fight the fire, which by now had become a roaring blaze, the Master in conference with the Chief Officer decided to move the vessel to shallow water, where the holds could eventually be flooded.

The ship's crew continued to fight the fire and also the two water boats. The passengers were ordered to leave the vessel. The bilge pumps were put into action, but the vessel continued to develop a heavier and heavier list to port. A part of the crew were organised to shift part of the cargo in hatch No.1, which consisted of 21 tons Carbide into a lighter which had been ordered from shore. At this time the electrical installation to the foredeck had been burned over.

At 5.40 two more containers with Amonia exploded and flames shot high into the air: hatches and holds Nos.2 & 3 were fully aflame as well as lower holds and out of control.

The Assistant Master Attendant, who was still on board had authority to instruct the Master where to shift the vessel to. At 6 p.m. the Master with the aid of the Assistant Master Attendant commenced shifting the vessel to shallower water. As it was not possible to lift the anchor or knock out the pin on the four shackle of the anchor chain, the vessel got under way dragging starboard anchor with sixty fathoms of chain in direction of the beach of the Singapore Swimming Club. While the vessel was under way, the 3rd Officer C.G.Jensen, who was in charge of the men on the forecastle notified the bridge that hatch No.1 was on fire.

As the flames by now were reaching up to the bridge and smoke had reduced visibility to nil, while at the same time the engine room was full of smoke, it was decided to stop the vessel and at the same time boats were called to rescue the men who were on the forecastle. Orders were telephoned from the bridge to the engine room to let the settling tanks run down and to get all engineers up from the engine room. Smoke and heat had by this time made it impossible to remain in the engine room. All machinery was stopped and orders given for everyone to gather what they could of belongings and get off the vessel. On the vessel remained four men, who saved most important of the vessel's papers and who left the vessel at 7.30 p.m. 25/12/54. At this time none of the water boats or fireboats were alongside. The master got therefore in contact with the port authorities, who were on board the salvage tug "Griper", and endeavour was made to get the "Griper" alongside so the fire could be fought from the after part of the ship if possible. On account of the vessel's list, approximately 20 degrees to port the authorities did not consider it safe to go to the windward side of the vessel but after an hours discussion efforts were made to get the "Griper" alongside the starboard after deck of the vessel on the condition that the Master and Chief Officer would go on board and make the tug fast.

Just as the "Griper" was moored a heavy explosion occurred in the engine room and in less than a minute the whole midships building was ablaze, so it was necessary to let go and get away from the vessel.

At this time two of the water boats were alongside number 2 hatch one on each side spraying the vessel. As the fire had hold of No.4 hatch and all the way forward of the ship, efforts were made to get the water boats to move aft and try and control the flames from spreading further aft. By now the heat was so intense that all efforts to be alongside the vessel had to be abandoned.

At 10.15 p.m. it was clear to everyone that the vessel could not be saved and the port authorities took over the watching of the vessel.

The crew, who had been checked by the harbour police, were lodged in hotels ashore.

The origin and cause of the fire are unknown.

K. Friis-Pederson
Chief Officer

O. Caroe, Master



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