

CORONER FINDS SYPHON DEATHS WERE ACCIDENTAL

LEADING HAND "DIRECTED OPERATIONS WITH CARE"

Barry William Jones and Cornelius William McAuliffe died at the Lawson Syphon on December 4 as a result of injuries accidentally received when the pile-driving frame on which they were working fell to the ground, taking them with it.

This, condensed, was the finding yesterday of the coroner, Mr. L. R. Mathieson, J.P., after an exhaustive inquiry into the cause of the deaths.

He added that evidence disclosed quite definitely that James Buchanan, a leading hand, had directed operations with care and had taken all necessary precautions in the turning of the frame.

A macabre feature of the inquest was the scale model pile-driving frame erected in the Court House grounds. Guy ropes were attached and secured to the ground in the same positions as when the accident occurred. Actual winches used were also in the grounds.

Mr. Harrington (Sydney), appeared for the Water Commission, Mr. F. L. Kelly for relatives of C. W. McAuliffe, and Mr. P. F. Phillips for A.W.U. members who were engaged on the shift when the accident happened.

Detective-Sergt. W. C. Morley assisted the coroner.

THE EVIDENCE

Mrs. Frederica Bapaume Jean McAuliffe, widow of Cornelius William McAuliffe, said she last saw her husband alive at about 11.50 p.m. on December 3 last when he left for his work at the Lawson Syphon. He was in good health and spirits. They had three children. Her husband had been employed by the Water Commission for about 15 months and was a winch-driver on shift work.

Water Commission engineer, Eric Sutton Nicholas told the coroner he controls and supervises all construction work at the Syphon, including pile-driving operations.

He described the construction of the pile-driving frame and produced a plan of it. Weight was approximately 2 tons 7 cwt., he said.

Witness was in charge of the work of driving and extracting piles and of the machinery and the men operating it. There were eight men on the shift in question, which he considered, was one man too many.

Mr. Nicholas described the working of the pile frame and the object of the steel piling at the Syphon. One section of piling had been completed and it was necessary to remove the pile frame to another location, a distance of about 50 feet. To shift the frame it was necessary to take it between wooden piles.

Work was commenced by Buchanan's gang, followed by Major's, Ross Thompson's, and at 11.50 p.m. on December 3, a shift was started again by Buchanan's gang.

Witness visited the job at 8.45 p.m. on December 3, when everything appeared to be in order. The frame had just started to lead through the line of timber piles. Buchanan's gang comprised Thomas Hall, Cliff Parker, Cornelius McAuliffe, Barry Jones, Ray Jones, Frank Culbert and one Bonaddio. He did not see that particular shift.

At 5.20 a.m. next day he was notified of the accident, and when he arrived at the scene he saw the frame had fallen in a north-westerly direction and the two deceased were lying at the head of the frame and the injured man, T. Hall, was near them. He made an inspection of the frame and everything attached to it. All the gear and the frame had been in good order prior to the falling. None of the guy ropes were broken. Of the four winches, three were in good order, but the one on the south-east corner had no sprag in it.

Witness was of the opinion that the turning of the frame had reached a stage where it was necessary to change the guy ropes round. Before doing this, Leading Hand Buchanan had evidently leaned the top of the frame backwards to the south and, as an extra precaution against falling, had attached a subsidiary rope through a block to about 15 feet below the top of the frame.

[The frame was over 60 feet in height.]

In his opinion the frame was momentarily unsupported when the south-east guy rope was released owing to the weight of the

other guy ropes and a north-west breeze at the time. The weight of the men on the frame should be an added advantage to the frame not falling. Should one of the men have caught one of the guy ropes it could have assisted the instability.

He personally knew the eight men and had every confidence in Leading Hand Buchanan, who had been promoted, due to his work and character. The other men were experienced in that type of work in various degrees, particularly Thomas Hall. He did not attach any blame to any member of the gang, or to any other person.

Mr. Nicholas was cross-examined at great length by Mr. Kelly and to a lesser extent by Mr. Harrington.

Detective-Sergt. W. C. Morley told of going to the Syphon at about 6 a.m. on December 4. He saw a pile-driving frame facing a northerly direction and the bodies of the two men. An examination of the frame and the equipment attached was carried out.

He saw four guy ropes leading from crab winches and fastened to the top of the pile frame. The winches were anchored to posts securely fastened to the ground. He also saw a fifth winch attached to a post with a rope leading from the south side to a pulley block on the north side and fastened to the frame 12-14 feet from the top. All the winches were spragged with the exception of one on the south side of the channel. The handle of this winch was bent and an iron sprag was lying close by. The steel wire rope round the drum was slack. Ropes were all in good order.

To Mr. Harrington: He was quite sure the men were sober. He received the fullest co-operation from the Water Commission in his enquiries.

To the coroner: He thought that when the rope started to slacken off the drum it would slacken rapidly and would probably get tangled round the handle and when the frame fell it fell so fast that the strain of the rope on the handle straightened it out.

John William Canobi, construction foreman at the Syphon, said his duties were to look after the pile driving machines, to see that all was in order and the job done properly.

The subject frame was constructed on the job and had been in use for three weeks prior to the accident. He inspected the frame at 4.15 p.m. on December 3 and it was then in good order and condition. He approved the methods being applied to shift the frame. Winches and ropes were in good order. When he inspected the frame following the accident all the ropes were fastened correctly. Winches were all spragged with the exception of one, from which the sprag had been removed. The rope was lying slack and it had a bent handle. The rope was through a block and up on to a frame. When he inspected the frame the previous day there were four guy ropes and winches in use. After the accident there was an extra rope fastened to the front of the frame.

In reply to a question Mr Canobi said in his opinion the cause of the accident was that there was more lean on the machine than Leading Hand Buchanan thought and when the rope was released off the winch, the men at the top gave it a little extra pull to get the slack off the shackle, and the machine went off balance. The fifth rope did not contribute to the accident. It was a more ticklish job turning the frame than simply moving it and he was happy that Buchanan was coming on at the time he did. Hall was also a very good man. As foreman of the works he approved the methods used by Buchanan and added that the gear used was the best for that class of work in N.S.W.

To Mr. Kelly: Had the fifth rope been fastened on the other side it would have acted as a preventative. The machine was built back heavy in the first

place 990 times out of 1000 the machine must fall back instead of forward. The fifth rope was leading out from the front, with the machine lying back. Had that rope been on the back it would have held it.

To Mr. Phillips: He would say the men working on the 12 to 8 shift were the most experienced men working on the frame.

To the coroner: He had never known an accident of that kind happen in his experience.

Ross Thompson told the coroner that when he handed over to Jim Buchanan at about 12 mid-night on December 3 all equipment was in good order and condition.

Raymond Leonard Jones said he was working with Buchanan's gang and about 5 a.m. it was found necessary to move the guy ropes on top of the frame to allow the machine to turn further. The winch on which he was working was spragged with an iron bar. His brother Barry, McAuliffe and Hall were up on the pile frame. The two first-named were on top and Hall on a ladder near the top. He did not hear any instructions being given but he heard Jim Buchanan and someone on top of the frame call out and saw the frame start to fall towards the north bank. He saw one man either jump or fall off. When he ran over his brother and McAuliffe were lying apparently seriously injured, as neither moved or spoke. Tommy Hall was able to speak. During the shift operation he noticed the pile frame was allowed to lean forward in the opposite direction to which it fell. He did not know a guy rope had been slackened just before the frame fell.

Frank Stanley Culbert stated that about 2 a.m. Buchanan gave instructions to lean the pile driving frame in the opposite direction to which it fell. Later an additional winch was brought in to use to prevent the frame from falling the opposite way to which it did fall.

Clifford Parker heard the accident but did not see it. He was working under Buchanan's orders.

To Mr. Phillips: He heard Buchanan giving orders to others from time to time and they were promptly attended to.

James Buchanan, leading hand pile driver operator, stated that when he took over at mid-night on December 3 all the machinery was in good order and condition. The frame was to be moved to the opposite side of the channel, a distance of 60 feet. When he commenced his shift all the equipment was in the correct position. The two deceased and Tom Hall were on the frame. It was their job to change the guy ropes to various positions during the course of the shift. He was

looking after two winches and the other three were in charge of Culbert, Bonaddio and R. Jones. As an additional precaution he brought an additional guy rope into use at about a quarter to five.

Mr. Buchanan described in detail to the coroner the position of the frame and of the guys and winches. All the ropes were secured and the frame was not in any danger of falling. At 5 a.m. it was necessary to release one of the guys he was operating so it could be shifted to the other side at the top of the frame. He called to Hall of his intention to do this. He slackened off the rope, unwinding the winch after first pulling out the sprag. Whilst standing in front of the winch with his back to the frame, He heard someone call out and on turning he saw the frame falling towards the northern bank. The winch made a loud rattling noise. When the frame was just about down he saw Tommy Hall below the frame. The two deceased were clinging to the iron supports at the top of the frame. He heard the frame crash and on running over saw McAuliffe and Jones lying on the ground beside it. At the time the frame fell it was being supported by the winch operated by R. Jones.

The method and practice he adopted was the usual one. After the accident he made an inspection with Mr. Nicholas of the guy ropes and winches. During the moving operation he took every precaution to see that everything was safe and there was no risk of accident.

To Mr. Kelly: It was after he slackened his rope that the frame fell. He let the slack off his hands slowly and then turned to pull off some extra slack with his hands. While he was doing this the frame fell.

To Mr. Phillips: At all times during the shift the men carried out his instructions accurately. He felt there was sufficient margin of safety to enable him to release the third guy.

William Harvey Shattock Water Commission engineer, said that since the accident he had had made a scale model of the frame. It was not to scale so far as weight and balance were concerned in all tests the model fell as the frame fell at the time of the accident.

In reply to Mr. Harrington, Mr Shattock said he had gone into the matter with Foreman Canobi and Mr. Buchanan to ensure that in future there will always be sufficient winches available to see that the frame is effectively guyed at all stages of the operation.