

MEDICAL JOURNAL OF DR. DAVIES-WEBB WITH REFERENCE TO THE SINKING OF THE SUN CHAPMAN

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Confidential:
Mr. J.N. Fraser

Sinking of "Sun Chapman"

Medical Journal of events from 6.00 p.m. Monday, July 6th, 1964

1. Introduction

On Monday, July 6th, 1964, the launch "Sun Chapman" was proceeding up river from Georgetown carrying many passengers. Shortly after leaving Buradaia* there was a violent explosion aboard and she sank within minutes. It was estimated that at the time of the explosion there were 69 passengers including the crew. On receipt of the news at Mackenzie, racial violence broke out and reprisals were taken against East Indians in the area.

This report covers the events following the sinking of the "Sun Chapman" in so far as these concern the Medical Services of the Company.

2. Narrative

Monday, July 6th, 1964

A request for assistance was received from the Police at 6.00 p.m., and a First Aid & Casualty Clearing Centre was established at the Wismar Police Station by the Ambulance Division of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, and by 6.45 p.m. early casualties from the Sun Chapman had been given First Aid Treatment and dispatched to the Hospital.

At approximately 6.45 p.m. the first 2 victims of the acts of reprisals were received at the Hospital, and by 9.00 p.m. 16 casualties had been admitted, 5 of them seriously injured, one requiring immediate surgery. Eight of the casualties were East Indian (5 Males, 2 females and 1 child - all from Mackenzie) and 8 were Africans (5 Males and 3 females - from the "Sun Chapman"). In addition 7 were brought in dead, 4 East Indian Males, killed in Mackenzie, and 3 African Women drowned.

In the midst of these activities the Police brought a further 15 survivors from the "Sun Chapman". On superficial examination, other than being slightly damp and upset, there was little wrong with any of them, and none required immediate medical attention. The suggestion that they be admitted was firmly discouraged on the grounds that it would swamp the bed capacity and leave little room for manoeuvre (*sic*) in the event that further casualties were received.

Three Newspaper Reporters, whom someone had misguidedly brought to the Hospital, were present during these exchanges, and were clamouring for a statement. However, they were successfully "stalled" and were most reasonable and co-operative when the situation was explained to them. The survivors were advised to go home to their relatives, anxiously awaiting news of their safety, remove their wet clothes, have a hot meal and go to bed. The Police reluctantly agreed to this.

By Midnight all the injured had been treated, the other patients had been calmed and put back to bed, and the Hospital was quiet.

Tuesday, July 7th, 1964:

Four of the casualties were still critically ill and one of these died during the morning.

The East Indian patients were segregated from the rest and put in the Male and Female Isolation Wards respectively. This was done to remove any sources of provocation from the General Wards as the atmosphere was tense and emotional, and there had been minor acts of hostility against the East Indians. Further, it was deemed advisable to group them together for their better protection.

There were now 8 bodies in the Mortuary requiring Post Mortem Examination. This was beyond the Medical capacity under the prevailing circumstances and urgent representation was made to the Chief Medical Officer in Georgetown. The response was immediate and Dr. L. Mootoo, Govt. Pathologist, was flown to Mackenzie to assist. A further body was recovered from the river during the day and Post Mortem Examinations were done on all nine.

The Police were having difficulty with identification of the bodies. Although crowds of about 50 or more had collected at the Hospital all day, and passed in procession through the Mortuary; and although with loud manifestations of grief, professed that they had recognized relatives, none were prepared to come forward and identify these to the Police - presumably from fear of being implicated in the acts of reprisal. Eventually, as the crowds were getting out of hand, the Mortuary was closed and only those who were prepared to make positive identification to the Police were permitted to see the bodies. This caused marked discontent. It was evident that many came out of morbid curiosity, and when the Mortuary was closed to them, they paraded through the Wards to see the casualties. The battered East Indian patients caused particular mirth and several times they were threatened. It became necessary to clear the crowds from the hospital and to post sentries over the East Indian patients. On 2 or 3 occasions, when the Police seemed unwilling or unable to move the crowds from the vicinity of the Wards, British Troops had to be called on for assistance. The atmosphere remained tense throughout the day and the Nursing Staff and patients were nervous and worried. The greatest cause for concern was the possibility that numbers of bodies might be recovered from the wreck and brought to the Hospital, and if this happened when the crowd was present an explosive situation might develop in an atmosphere already heavily charged with emotion. It was much appreciated that the Commanding Officer of the British Troops was fully alive to these possibilities and gave immediate and adequate support whenever this was asked for. It is quite evident that the presence of British Troops did much to allay the apprehensions of the staff and patients, and keep the situation under control.

Meanwhile the East Indians in the Mackenzie Area had been rounded up and taken to the Police Station for protection. These were visited in the morning and altogether there were 100 persons, including 42 women and children. None required medical attention and arrangements were made with the Army and Police to feed them. They were all evacuated that evening by the R.H. Carr.

The most urgent problem was the supply of sufficient coffins. The Carpenter Shop was alerted to this end, and 2 were promised that afternoon. The total requirements were not known, but it was feared they might exceed 20. Due to the lack of coffins and the time taken to conduct the Post Mortem Examinations, it was not possible to dispatch the bodies of the 5 East Indian dead to Georgetown that evening by the R.H. Carr, as had been requested and arranged.

With the continuation of the curfew on Tuesday night the situation settled down.

Wednesday, July 8th:

The condition of the casualties gave no cause for alarm, but there were three still on the danger list. The situation throughout the day was quiet. People had recovered from the initial shock and excitement and only isolated groups of anxious relatives and friends gathered at the Hospital. Two further bodies were recovered during the day, and Post Mortem Examinations were done on these. All eleven bodies in the Mortuary had been identified and examined.

The Police Authorities in Georgetown decided that no further Post Mortem Examinations would be required on bodies recovered from the wreck, if drowning was the obvious cause of death; and further directed that when all the bodies were recovered these should be sent to Georgetown. This remained the major cause of concern, as the Refrigeration Plant of the Mortuary was not working efficiently and one of the motors had required attention. It was also agreed that the bodies of the 5 East Indians and 2 of the Africans could be sent to Georgetown that evening by the "Cay Sal", and if coffins were not available these bodies could be shrouded, and this was done. The Carpenter Shop had every available man now making coffins and it seemed that the requirements would be filled.

The situation seemed well under control when, at 7.00 p.m., the Police telephoned that 4½ bodies had been recovered and were being sent to the Hospital. There had been some delay in the sailing of the "Cay Sal" and the 7 bodies for dispatch therein had been returned to the Cold Chamber. This now contained 11 bodies and the Police were warned that, with the 4½ additional bodies on the way, this was the limit the Cold Chamber could hold, if a complete breakdown was to be avoided. Normally the Refrigeration capacity is 5 ton, provided it is left undisturbed, but during the past two days the compressor had been turned off frequently and the Cold Chamber opened for various reasons. This would now have to be done twice more: to admit the latest bodies, and to remove the 7 for the "Cay Sal" when it is ready to sail.

When the bodies arrived at the Hospital Stelling it was seen that there were 9½ and not 4½. It was therefore urgent that the 7 bodies for dispatch to Georgetown should be removed immediately from the Cold Chamber, and these were loaded on a lorry for transport to "Cay Sal". The recent bodies were taken from the river and placed in the Mortuary Cold Chamber. When the operation was nearly completed Major Goodbody, C.O., British Troops, Mackenzie, arrived with the news that Assistant Superintendent Austin had sent instructions from Georgetown cancelling the arrangements for the despatch of the original 7 bodies and directing that these be retained in the Mortuary. This meant that there would be 20½ bodies, most of them in an advanced state of putrefaction, in the Cold Chamber, which was presently at atmospheric temperature with the Refrigeration turned off, and there was the prospect of more bodies to come. It was therefore decided to make a personal approach to Commissioner (sic) Austin. Fortunately reason prevailed, the original plan was re-instated and the 7 bodies

despatched. Everything was once more under control, the hospital quiet, the crowd dispersed and the bodies secured.

Thursday, July 9th:

There was some improvement in the condition of the casualties on the danger list and the Hospital was functioning normally.

Although a crowd had collected at the news of the recovery of further bodies, this was orderly and the atmosphere calm. Identification was proceeding and arrangements were being made for burial; some had requested postponement until the weekend, to allow relatives to travel to Mackenzie. It was then discovered that the Refrigeration of the Cold Chamber had failed. Putrefaction of the bodies was rapidly progressing, and it became imperative to arrange for the burial of all as soon as possible. Somehow this was achieved; coffins arrived in time and in sufficient numbers, transport was arranged, relatives rounded up and by 3.30 p.m. that afternoon the first group had moved down the river to Christianburg for burial. The crowds were well behaved, the organisation efficient and the whole operation was completed by 6.30 p.m. There was one hitch in the middle of all this preparation and despatch of the dead, when the Police blithely announced that they were sending to the Hospital 7 more bodies they had recovered. These were already at Wismar on their way up, and prompt action was necessary to intercept them, and take them to the far bank of the river until the funeral proceedings were completed. The Police were then instructed to have the bodies towed back to Christianburg and secured in the water, near the Cemetery. This action may have seemed callous, and in fact it provoked some severe adverse comments. But the bodies could not be accommodated in the Mortuary, nor could they be left all night at the Hospital Stelling; and in any case they would have to be taken to Christianburg the next day for burial. As they had to wait overnight it was safer to leave them in the water rather than drag them up on to dry land, where they would have decomposed even more rapidly and constituted a health hazard, or at the least a very unpleasant nuisance. In the circumstances this was the only action that could be taken.

Friday, July 10th - Friday, July 17th:

The Hospital was now back to normal except it was necessary to maintain a guard on the East Indian Patients.

The three Female East Indians - 2 women and one child - had to be transferred back to a far corner of the general ward as people kept going into the Female Isolation Ward and threatening them, or shouting threats and abuse through the windows.

All of the casualties were off the danger list and well on their way to recovery.

Extra coffins were made and despatched direct to the Police at Christainburg. During the next few days further bodies were recovered and all were buried as soon as possible.

In all 32 bodies of Africans were recovered from the wreck, and 5 East Indians were killed in Mackenzie - a total of 37 deaths from this one incident.

As long as the East Indian patients remained in the Hospital they were a focus of tension, and were subjected to continuous threats. Arrangements were therefore made for their transfer to the Public and Mercy Hospitals in Georgetown, as soon as all were fit to travel.

On July 17th, under escort of British Troops, they were transported to the R.H. Carr, 3 as stretcher cases, and the British soldiers accompanied them to Georgetown.

This concluded the immediate sequence of events following the sinking of the launch "Sun Chapman".

(Signed)
C.O.C. Davies-Webb **

*[Editor's Notes: * Some newspaper and official reports spell the name as "Booradia".
** Dr. Davies-Webb was the doctor in charge at the Mackenzie Hospital.]*

(Source: Cheddi Jagan Research Centre)

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