

STORY OF THE TEXAS CITY EXPLOSION

WHEN the British freighter Meadowbank arrived at Auckland recently from Galveston, Texas, Station 12B sought an eye-witness account of the great explosion at Texas City on April 16, from the master, Captain John Stuart, whose ship was berthed six miles from the spot. Captain Stuart gave an interview which was included in the *I Was There at the Time* section of the 12B Radio Review the other evening, and this is what he said:

"It was a sunny day. On board ship we had just about completed loading 5,400 tons of bulk sulphur for Auckland, at the Galveston Sulphur wharf, and we were getting ready to sail for Port Arthur and New Orleans, where we had arranged to pick up more cargo for New Zealand.

"Early in the morning it was known that the French ship Grand Camp, loading nitrate of ammonia, was on fire. I believe hundreds of people went down to watch the fire-fighting, and this increased the death-roll. About 9.0 a.m. I was busy over some task in my cabin—I forget exactly what it was now—but anyway the explosion knocked it out of my mind. I have been bombed

in Liverpool for three consecutive nights during the height of the blitz on that city; I have also been bombed in Port Said, and in the Mediterranean, but I have never felt a concussion like the Texas one.

"I thought at first we had been rammed by another ship, and dashed outside to the deck railings, with my mind turning over various remedies for stopping an inrush of water. There was no ship near us, and no sign of damage to the sides of my ship. But I saw a great dome of smoke rising over Texas City. The top of the dome burst apart and a column of smoke, about a thousand feet in diameter, sped high up in the sky. It went up to a height of about five miles, pushing through a layer of alto-cumulus clouds.

"Then it mushroomed into a gigantic canopy that hid the sun and gave a peculiar yellow glow to everything. This occupied about an hour after the explosion. Then it started to rain a fine black dust, like burnt oil. The effect of the explosion on the ship—which, remember, was six miles away—was very similar to the feeling one has when standing on the deck of a battleship that is firing a broadside.

"Right after the main explosion, the huge bulk petrol storage tanks began to go up. Normally these in themselves

would be headline disasters, but by comparison, their explosions seemed like Chinese fire-crackers. As the tanks are near the waterfront, I did not like the idea of blazing gasoline spreading over the water and trapping us in the harbour.

"There was the chance that this might happen in our case. I called the chief engineer and asked him to get the engines running so we could put to sea at a moment's notice. But the danger receded, and I went to the town to complete the ship's papers. At the shipping company's office the young woman who attended to the papers was so shocked that she broke down and cried, 'I can't do it, Captain: I can't do it.'

"An illustration of the destructive power that the explosion had at a distance of six miles was drawn to my attention later. A pipe leading into a fresh water tank was cleanly sheared at its collar, as though hit by a mighty hammer. It was the jar with which the seven thousand ton Meadowbank hit the wharf that made me think we had been rammed.

"At four that afternoon we sailed, but we had not left Texas City and its explosions behind, because at ten past one the next morning, when we were 50 miles away, we felt the shock of another explosion. It was then the chief engineer's turn to think we had been in a



CAPTAIN JOHN STUART

collision: he hurried along to me, asking, 'Have we bumped something?'

"The picture of that great dome of smoke will long remain in my mind; its appearance was very like the photographs you have no doubt seen of the Bikini atomic bomb explosion. Most events can teach us lessons; and the one that comes to my mind in this instance is: Keep away from ships on fire. Don't join the idle watchers alongside. To my knowledge, very few of those sightseers alongside that ship in Texas City were seen again."



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