

Unique inquest declares men dead...after 59 years

Twenty-four sailors finally laid to rest

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CORONER for South Wexford, Jimmy Murphy had an unusual task to perform last Friday afternoon - inquiring into the deaths of twenty-four sailors who lost their lives at sea during the Second World War.

The inquest which he described as 'unique' was held with the special permission of the Minister for Justice, John O'Donoghue under section 23 of the Coroners Act.

The significance of the case is that the deaths of the men, the majority of them Irish, can now be formally registered following the jury's verdict that they died as a result of an explosion on board the SS Ardmore off the Great Saltee Island on November 12, 1940.

Three of the bodies were subsequently washed ashore in Wales but the others were never recovered. Only two were ever registered and the others were consigned to the unresolved category of 'missing, presumed dead'.

There was no medical evidence at the inquest and only one witness - Clontarf man, Peter Mulvaney, a law graduate who became interested in the case in 1986.

He embarked on a private investigation into the fate of the Ardmore which left Cork for Fishguard at 10p.m. on the night of November 11 with a cargo of live animals.

By a stroke of luck, Eugene Kehoe, a diver in Kilmore Quay discovered the wreck of a ship on the sea bed off the Great Saltee Island in the summer of 1995.

Mr. Mulvaney became aware of the find in January 1998 and following a meeting with Mr. Kehoe in February of that year, was able to confirm from photographs and the original shipbuilding



■ Coroner Jimmy Murphy: 'A unique inquest'.

plans of the Ardmore that the wreck was indeed the Ardmore.

Mr. Mulvaney told the inquest that he had concluded from his extensive research that the vessel was the target of a large explosion to her mid-ship section where the boilers were located.

The explosion caused her to sink immediately, trapping her crew. Irish intelligence records dated August 8, 1940 indicated that a German aircraft was seen laying magnetic mines off the Keeragh Islands and the Saltee Islands.

The current position of the wreck means that at the time she went down, the Ardmore

was inside Irish territorial waters and according to Mr. Mulvaney, this new fact rebuts the previous presumption that she was outside Irish waters.

In official files, the loss of the Ardmore is attributed to 'belligerent'

action and Mr. Mulvaney told the inquest he believed the deaths of the crew members were due to warfare.

The seamen ranged in age from 18 to sixty-five. Most of them were from Cork and Dublin with two being from Liverpool and one from South Wales.

The inquest was attended by Mr. James Power from Cork who was born three

months after the Ardmore went down. His father and his uncle were on board.

When his mother wished to re-marry some time after the tragedy she was unable to do so because her husband's death had not been registered. His death was subsequently registered.

Since 1940, only two of the deaths have been registered under Section 4 of the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act of 1972 - that of twenty-eight years old James Power of 126 Blackwater Road, Cork and Edward Bruland, aged 57 of Convent Place, Passage West, Cork.

Mr. Mulvaney pointed out, however that the registrations were invalid since the Act only covered deaths within Irish waters and it was presumed at the time they had died in foreign waters.

A large number of seamen lost as a result of 'belligerent action' on other Irish vessels between 1939 to 1946 also never had their deaths registered at the time. To date only 9 out of a total of 150 have been registered.

The Irish Government made no claim against the German Government arising from the loss of the Ardmore. Claims were made in relation to other vessels and in a small few cases, liability was accepted and compensation recovered.

After the inquest, Mr. Mulvaney said he believed the verdict had significant implications for the Irish Government and for maritime law. 'The whole issue of the non-registration of maritime deaths will not go away' he said.

Irish Ferries, the owner of the vessel issued a statement in which it stated that the wreck should be preserved as is, in deference to those who were lost and also their surviving families.