

Letter Concerning the *ERIC*

Catalina

Apr 12/1878

To P. Carty, Esq, J.P., Inspector.

Sir:

I have respectfully to inform you that on Saturday evening, 6th inst, I received a telegram from D. Candow, Esq, Stip. Majistrate, Bonavista, directing me to proceed at once to Bird Island Cove, where a vessel and crew were in most imminent danger of being lost, accordingly I proceeded and arrived at the scene of the wreck, two miles from B.I. Cove at 9 o'clock P.M.

On the brow of a cliff a large fire was blazing, and hanging to a tree was a ship's red light, to show the poor fellows on board that they were not forgotten or uncared for.

In the dismal of darkness a light was once or twice observed on board, and voices were marginally heard over the roar of the storm.

At day-break, Sunday morning, the hull only of a vessel was to be seen swinging to her chains, with only about 12 feet of the main mast standing, and every wave, as it swept over her, threatened to swamp her. The storm, still raging, and which only the power of the Almighty could still or control. What a dismal sight!!

At about 9 A.M., a wave broke over and threw her on her beam ends, but she still righted almost immediately - a few more such mighty waves and the poor fellows would inevitably have perished.

I then got coils of rope, and had buoys and jiggers fastened on. With this completed and parties organized, we awaited the result. Momentarily expecting the vessel to founder. What anxious moments! Our attention was then attracted to a small string of ice looming in the distance.

As it came on, signals were made to the poor fellows that a kind Providence was sending them help. Immediately the ice struck the vessel, all hands were on deck with "pokers" warding it off, and about noon, when the ice reached the shore, signal was made of their leaving. We beckoned them back, as another string of ice was coming, which would, as it afterwards did, jam that already in, and ensure greater safety to land. But life is sweet, and the poor fellows

embraced the first opportunity of escape, and accordingly made for the shore. A small rock, or islet-like, was the nearest point of land, to get to which from the shore required a small amount of pluck.

I shouted for volunteers, and after some hesitation, Constable Baily asked, "Are you going sir?"

"Yes, I am." I replied.

Off went his clothes, stripped to his shirt sleeves, and rope in hand said, "Then I go too."

"And I." replied Arthur Tilly.

"And I." responded an old man named George Oldford; and five or six others.

We descended the almost perpendicular and rugged cliff, and gained the rock almost 6 or 8 yards across the gulch, with difficulty. The first poor fellow seized one of the ropes thrown to him, and was landed without accident which stimulated others to prepare. All went well until the 8th or 9th man was landed, when two mighty waves in succession, swept the rock we were on, and buried the poor mortal we were hauling in, under the ice. I was knocked down, Constable Baily and Oldford were washed off. Baily was rescued by Mr. Tilly and Oldford by myself and a man named Crew. But, Alas! poor fellow, he and the man we were rescuing had each a leg broken - What a heart rending sight! What agonizing cries! May I never have to witness the like again. With difficulty we carried these poor sufferers across the gulch. Ten yards from the shore stood a fine young fellow with "Sow westers" on his frost bitten feet, begging hard for a rope, but we could not throw it, as the sea was sweeping the rock, and we had to leave.

Subsequently at our solicitations, the remainder returned to the vessel, seeing we were unable to rescue them, to await the coming in of the other string of ice. Mr. Tilly, immediately sent his servant mounted with word from me with word for Mr. Candow and the doctor to come. Mr. Candow, who was on his way, arrived in a few moments. Oldford, Noble fellow, now lies in a precarious state, gangrene having set in. Truly he has risked his own life trying to save his fellow being.

I ask nothing for myself. I want no pecuniary reward; neither does Mr. Tilly. The consciousness of having done my duty, and of being sustained to do so again in the hour of peril, together with the grateful thanks of those we rescued is ample recompense for any risk I ran, or hurt received. But, I respectfully appeal to the Government and to a generous public, to show their appreciation of the heroic conduct, in a substantial shape, toward the family of this brave soul, who now, as I write, lies on the verge of death.

I now turn and leave the recapitulation of the subsequent scenes and incidents to be described by either Mr. Candow, Mr. Baily or the Rev. Mr. Reay, who were now on the spot doing their utmost to comfort and alleviate the sufferings of the unfortunates. Mr. Candow was untiring in seeing to everything connected with their being housed and cared for; and previous to his leaving that evening, gave me full instructions how to act. On Monday, the Capt. having given the vessel up, I had the men sent to Catalina, and employed two carts to convey the cripples etc. on so as to catch the S.S. Merlin. On Tuesday, per instructions, I had three of the men conveyed to Bonavista on stretchers - the other not being fit to remove is still at B.I. Cove, where, poor fellow, it is thought his body will finally remain.

I cannot close this statement without recording my sincere thanks to Capt. Talbott, the navigating Master. His conduct in advising and directing the crew, and getting them to their destination, was most creditable.

I am sir,

Yours respectfully,

John R. McGowan, Head Constable

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Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole