

**Inquiry Into The Pontoon
Bridge Accident
14th June, 1962**

Militia Hall,
Belize,
13th October, 1962.

To: His Excellency Sir PETER HYLIA GAWNE
STALLARD, Knight Commander of the
Most Distinguished Order of Saint
Michael and Saint George, Commander
of the Royal Victorian Order, Member
of the Most Excellent Order of the
British Empire, Governor and
Commander-in-Chief in and over
British Honduras.

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY:

Your Excellency's Commission, bearing date 26th
June, 1962, appointed us Commissioners with the following
Terms of Reference:-

"To make a full faithful and impartial inquiry
into and report upon the circumstances of the accident
at the temporary pontoon bridge being erected over the
Belize River in which accident seven persons lost their
lives on the 14th day of June, 1962"

and to make report of the result of the inquiry furnishing a
statement of our proceedings and of the reason leading to our
conclusions.

We now submit to Your Excellency the following Report:

1. Your Excellency's Commission appointing us to be
Commissioners was issued by virtue of the power and authority
vested in Your Excellency by Section 2 of the Commissions of
Inquiry Ordinance, Chapter 14 of the Laws of British Honduras
Revised Edition 1958 and was signed on the 26th June 1962 and
was published in Gazette Extraordinary of the same date as
Statutory Instrument No. 55 of 1962.
2. On the 30th June and the 2nd July we subscribed
before you the oaths as required by the said Ordinance and they
were duly deposited with the Acting Chief Secretary.
3. We held our first meeting shortly after and authorized
the Secretary to publish in the press and on the radio Notices in

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the form as exhibited herein at Appendix I. The Notices were duly published.

4. The Commission accordingly held meetings at the Militia Hall at Fort George in Belize on the 11th, 13th, 18th and 20th July, 1962.

5. Twenty-one persons as set out in Appendix II then successively took the oath and gave evidence before us.

6. Mr. C.A.B. Ross, the Acting Crown Counsel of the Attorney General's Department, kindly conducted the examination in chief of the witnesses.

7. At the meeting on the 20th July the hearings were adjourned sine die and the Commissioners then visited the site of the temporary pontoon bridge where the accident had occurred.

8. Before examining the evidence of this matter in detail we will state some of the background to the accident.

9. By written contract dated 17th day of June, 1962, between the Milan Construction Company Limited (hereinafter called "Milan") and Albert Edward Cattouse, Minister of Public Works, Power and Communications acting for and on behalf of the Government of British Honduras Milan agreed to do some repairs and overhaul to the Belize Swing Bridge and to erect a temporary bridge across the river at a point three hundred yards upstream from the Swing Bridge. The temporary bridge was to be erected by using two barges each 20 feet by 70 feet with a ramp approach to the shore on each side. The contract does not mention it but the construction of this temporary bridge was to serve for the crossing of vehicular traffic from one side of the river to the other during the repair of the Swing Bridge; it was not intended to carry pedestrian traffic and indeed in a letter dated 31st May 1962 from the Principal Secretary, Ministry of Public Works, Power and Communications, to Mr. Milan it is stated inter alia:

"It is further understood that the existing Swing Bridge will be available for pedestrian and bicycle traffic throughout the period of repairs as the temporary bridge will not be suitable
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for such traffic."

10. The Contract says nothing of any precautions which were to be taken by Milan to exclude pedestrians from using the temporary bridge.

11. The temporary pontoon bridge was erected across the river between the end of Pickstock Street on the north side and Richard Sidewalk on the south side. Wooden ramp approaches were built on each bank of the river and one end of each barge was secured on the bank next to the ramp and the other ends of the barges placed together in mid-stream of the river. The barge at Richard Sidewalk end was fixed permanently into position and was not intended to swing away for river traffic to pass. The barge on the Pickstock Street side was arranged so that the end in mid-stream of the river could be swung back to the river side along Pickstock Street to allow boats to pass. There was a space between the end of the barges in mid-stream. This enabled this portion of the river to be used by small boats going up and down the river without having to disturb the barges. Over this space a movable apron 10 feet 2 inches wide by 12 feet long was constructed. One end was secured to the barge on the Richard Sidewalk side and the other end projected over the water and rested on the mid-stream end of the Pickstock Street barge. The idea was that when the Pickstock Street barge had to be swung out of the way, the end of the apron was lifted about six inches off the barge and left suspended in mid-air and supported by cables and eyebolts. This arrangement was never intended to support more than the weight of the apron projecting over the water when the Pickstock Street barge was swung away. Before the apron was constructed the workmen used to cross from one barge to another on two planks of 2 x 12 timbers resting on the ends of the barges. It was while the apron was being constructed and not yet bolted and set in position that the accident under investigation occurred.

12. We now turn to the actual evidence. Construction on the pontoon bridge according to the evidence started on or about the 16th or 17th of May, 1962, and as early as the 17th of May Mr. Milan saw some young boys swimming in the river and climbing on to the barges and this disturbed his workmen. A day or two after he saw two ladies using the pontoon bridge to cross the river and walking on the 2 x 12 planks between the two barges. He spoke to them and told them it was dangerous. Later that day he complained to Mr. Cattouse, the Minister of Public Works, Power and Communications and Mr. Gill, Principal Secretary to the Ministry. As a result Mr. Cattouse and Mr. Gill in the company of Inspector Brown and Commissioner of Police Taylor visited the site. They agreed that this practice was dangerous and the Police decided to put a constable on duty to stop the pedestrian crossing. After a constable was posted at the pontoon bridge the number of people using the bridge to cross diminished, but many still continued to use it and argued with the Police when he tried to stop them.

13. A barricade made out of 2 x 4 timbers fixed at a height of four feet from the ground was placed at the entrance of the ramp on the Pickstock Street side. People were still able to pass under this barricade or around the end of it, and in fact, did so. On the night of the 29th or 30th May, Milan's watchman reported that some men broke down the barricade and threw the lumber into the river. This was reported by Milan's workmen to Assistant Superintendent of Police Fuller who suggested that it be reported to the Police Department. The following day Mr. Milan reported it to Mr. Cattouse and Mr. Gill and it appears that Mr. Cattouse and Mr. Gill in company of the Police again visited the site. While there, they discussed the problem of people crossing and many other matters concerning the bridge such as, handrails, traffic movements and signal lights. Apparently, there were no written notices or signs advising people

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that the pontoon bridge was not to be used by pedestrians, put up in the vicinity of the pontoon bridge. However, the Police increased their patrols with the object of keeping the people from crossing the bridge and from annoying the workmen.

14. Police patrols were by no means continuous or regular. Police on other duties were instructed to give an eye at the temporary pontoon bridge, one set of policemen to deal with traffic and another set to deal with pedestrians crossing. It must, however, be borne in mind that the barges were not always connected across the river. At nights they were swung apart, so there was no possibility of pedestrians crossing; and they were also swung apart several times during the day. The Police were therefore instructed that when the barges were apart there was no need for them to be at the site. But the evidence disclosed that there were many times when the barges were connected and pedestrians crossing from one side to the other, no police patrols were at the bridge. The Commissioner of Police explained that the main object of establishing these patrols was to prevent interference with the workmen by pedestrians using the pontoon bridge. The Commissioner of Police also explained that owing to the acute shortage of men at Central Station it was impossible to post a constable continually on the bridge, but his orders were that the constable in that area should concentrate on his normal beat duties and keep an eye on the bridge.

15. With regard to the barricades, at the Pickstock Street side it seems that there was some kind of barricade; it was movable and many times was not in place at all. At the Richard Sidewalk side it is doubtful whether there was ever a barricade there at any time before the accident. Those witnesses who said there

was a barricade there differed as to its construction. Some said it consisted of pieces of lumber lying on a saw bench or carpenter's horse on the barge itself; others said the pieces of lumber were nailed to the handrails of the barge.

16. We formed the impression that whatever barricades were there, if any, were very ineffective for the purpose of preventing pedestrians from crossing the pontoon bridge. As a result, pedestrians continued to cross the pontoon bridge from time to time right down to the day of the tragedy, June 14th. As a matter of fact, one witness said that he was able to ride from his home in Richard Sidewalk right over the pontoon bridge, without stopping or getting off his bicycle, to his work on the north side of the town. Other witnesses mentioned that some workers from the Belize Sawmill made free use of the pontoon bridge to cross to and from the north side of the City.

17. We come now to the 14th June, the day of the tragedy. Mr. Milan, the building contractor, was not in town. Between 10:00 and 10:30 the morning, the swing bridge was opened to allow some barges to pass through up-stream. The evidence is that one of the barges stuck at the swing bridge, and the bridge was not able to swing back into position. The crowd on both sides of the swing bridge became impatient after waiting for about 25 or 30 minutes and were not able to cross because of the obstruction which kept the swing bridge opened. A number of people on the south side of the swing bridge decided to walk via Regent Street West to Richard Sidewalk and to cross the river by the pontoon bridge. Others at the swing bridge saw these people crossing on the pontoon bridge and they in turn decided to go to the pontoon bridge to cross. It appears that there were no barricades or policemen at the pontoon bridge on this occasion.

18. The workers on the pontoon bridge had instructions from the City Council that whenever the swing bridge was opened they should also open the pontoon bridge. As the swing bridge had opened this

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morning, they set about opening the pontoon bridge and in order to do this they had to stop the pedestrians who were crossing at the time. The apron was lifted and the Pickstock Street barge started to swing over to the Pickstock Street side. When the Pickstock Street barge swung away there were a few people standing on the apron which was now suspended over the centre of the river. The people from the swing bridge continued to come via Regent Street West to the Richard Sidewalk side of the bridge and as the crowd increased more people came on to the apron. These people became restless and kept shouting to the workers to bring the barge so that they might cross. Both the workers and the people in the crowd kept shouting at each other. The people wishing to cross were clearly annoyed because they were not able to cross. However, the workmen had their instructions and were merely carrying them out.

19. About this time, Mr. Smith, Milan Building Foreman, who was at the swing bridge, saw the crowd on the apron of the pontoon bridge and jumped on his bicycle and went via North Front Street to the pontoon bridge and gave instructions for the Pickstock Street barge to be swung back towards mid-stream. His reason for doing so was that he was alarmed because of the danger to the people who were standing on the apron which did not have the other barge to support its weight in mid-stream. He therefore told his workmen to hurry and swing the barge back to the apron which he said was holding too much weight. While the Pickstock Street barge was coming towards the apron to make connection with the other barge, the crowd on the Richard Sidewalk side surged on to the barge and the apron as they jostled for first place to get across. One witness said that he was pushed by the surge of the crowd from the barge on to the apron. Before the Pickstock Street barge reached the apron, the apron collapsed and the people who were on it, men, women, and children, fell into the river. When this happened some of the

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on-lookers apparently didn't take the matter seriously and started to laugh. However, when it was obvious that some of the people who fell into the water were in danger, a number of by-standers jumped into the river and rescued several of those who were not able to help themselves. There were many instances of heroism. From the evidence, special mention should be made of Mr. Rudolph Leslie, a musician living at the corner of George and Prince Streets, Mr. Rudolph Ochoa, Police Constable, and Mr. Lesmore Smith, Milan Building Foreman, who risked their lives to save others.

20. There was a conflict of evidence as to the number of people who were standing on the apron at the time of the accident. The number varies from 20 to 75.

21. From the evidence before us, the apron itself was made of wood. It was in the form of a platform about 10 feet 2 inches wide by 12 feet long. One end was attached by hinges to the Richard Sidewalk barge and the other end projected 10 feet over the end of the barge and was intended to rest on the Pickstock Street barge. In order to support the portion projecting over the end of the barge, there were two columns about 10 feet high on the Richard Sidewalk barge and these columns were attached to the barge by steel wires, eyebolts and turnbuckles on one side, and on the other side were attached to the apron by steel wires, eyebolts and turnbuckles. These wires were only intended to hold the weight of the apron when it was not resting on the mid-stream end of the Pickstock Street barge.

22. On the morning of the accident the construction of this apron was not completed. Mr. Smith gives this description of the apron: It is attached to the barge with a cable and an eyebolt. There is a column on the stationary (Richard Sidewalk) barge, that is, the barge that holds the apron. The apron overhangs the river when the other barge was swung away. It overhangs the river about 10 feet. There is a cable with an eye in this column and there is a cable with an eye on the apron. There is an eyebolt on the

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column and there is an eyebolt on the apron and a cable connects the two eyebolts. The two eyes on the bolts were supposed to be closed by welding, but the welding had not yet been done.

23. The result was that the two eyes on the apron were torn open or straightened out by the weight on the apron. This released the cable and caused the apron to fall into the water. The cable did not burst.

24. After the accident, Mr. Smith who had rescued several people as mentioned above, got on the apron and floated with it down the river. He tied it to the river bank down-stream. Later that same day Mr. Ysaguirre, Construction Superintendent for Milan, got permission from the Commissioner of Police to bring the apron back to the barges. Mr. Ysaguirre inspected the apron and confirmed that the eyebolts were straightened out, and so did Inspector of Police Brown. There were no photographs taken of the apron or of the eyebolts and the eyebolts were not available for inspection by the Commissioners.

25. We now summarize the events leading up to the accident. On the morning of June 14th, a barge stuck at the swing bridge while it was passing through the bridge up river. This prevented the bridge from closing and the bridge remained open for a much longer time than was usual. As a result people became impatient to cross the river and some thought of the pontoon bridge and used it. Others, seeing a few crossing by the pontoon bridge, decided to make use of it themselves. The workmen on the pontoon bridge had instructions to open the pontoon bridge whenever the swing bridge opened, and on this morning, they stopped the trickle of pedestrian traffic crossing the pontoon bridge and swung the pontoon bridge open. After the pontoon bridge was opened, the people coming from the swing bridge to Richard Sidewalk, in the hope of crossing the river increased. They crowded on to the barge and the apron. Mr. Smith, Milan's Building Foreman, saw this crowd on the apron and became alarmed. He rushed to the pontoon bridge and gave

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orders for the barge on the Pickstock Street side to be swung back so that the portion of the apron projecting over the water could rest on it to support the crowd. While the barge from Pickstock Street side was approaching the apron, the crowd on the Richard Sidewalk side in their anxiety to get across, rushed on to the apron, and the result was that there were more people on the apron than the apron could support and the apron collapsed.

26. It is likely that had Mr. Smith not ordered the barge on the Pickstock Street side to be swung back to the centre of the river, the accident might not have occurred, because the last minute rush on to the apron might not have taken place. However, we wish to make it very clear that we attach no blame to Mr. Smith; to the contrary, we commend him for his foresight and efforts to forestall the danger to the crowd on the apron.

27. It must be remembered too that the apron was still in the course of construction and not yet properly fixed into position. But even if the apron had been completed there was still the danger that it would have collapsed under this abnormal weight because it was not intended to support any weight other than that of the apron itself.

28. The route over which the temporary pontoon bridge was placed had never been used before as a right of way and it had not yet been declared open for any kind of traffic.

29. Many efforts had been made by the Police and the workmen of Milan to prevent people from using the bridge but despite these efforts many persisted in using it. There was no evidence of any arrest being made by the Police as a result of disobedience to their orders and it appears that the Police themselves were uncertain as to their rights of arrest in such cases. It is, however, clear from the evidence of the remarks made by people using the pontoon bridge that in several instances they were well aware that they were using the bridge at their own risk.

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE PONTOON BRIDGE ACCIDENT

WHEREAS His Excellency the Governor has appointed a Commission of Inquiry under the Commission of Inquiry Ordinance Chapter 14 of the Laws of British Honduras Revised Edition 1958 to enquire into the circumstances of the accident at the temporary pontoon bridge while it was being erected over the Belize River between Pickstock Street and Richard Sidewalk and in which accident seven persons lost their lives on the 14th June, 1962.

ALL persons able and willing to give material evidence touching the subject of the Inquiry are invited to communicate immediately with the Secretary to the Commissioners at Ministry of Public Works, Paslow Building.

It is hereby notified for public information that meetings of the Commission of Inquiry will be held at the Militia Hall, Fort George Wednesdays and Fridays of each week from 10 a.m. to 12 noon and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. The first meeting will be held on Wednesday 11th July, 1962.

(H.M. TILLET)
Secretary to the Commission
4th July, 1962.

APPENDIX IIWITNESSES WHO GAVE EVIDENCE BEFORE THE COMMISSION

<u>Name</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Address</u>
(1) Daniel Milan	President, Milan Construction Co.	Belize
(2) Franz Ysaguirre	Construction Superintendent Milan Construction Co.	Belize
(3) Rudolph Ochoa	Police Constable	Police Station
(4) Violet Humes	Domestic	Belize
(5) Lesmore Smith	Foreman, Milan Construction Co.	Belize
(6) Robert Oliver	Carpenter	11 Guadalupe St.
(7) Leonora Card	Domestic	122 West St.
(8) Beresford Hall	Mechanic	11 Card's Alley
(9) Harry Middleton	Carpenter	19 Castle St.
(10) Rudolph Leslie	Musician	Cor. George & Prince Streets
(11) Roy Grant	Storekeeper	121 Euphrates Avenue
(12) John Gibson	Messenger	Simmons Alley, Albert Street
(13) Denfield Miranda	Mercantile Clerk	76 West Street
(14) Card, P.C. 376	Police Constable	Police Station
(15) Grevel Bladen	Shipwright	Cor. Woods & Vernon Streets
(16) B.H. Taylor	Commissioner of Police	Belize
(17) E. Brown	Inspector of Police	Belize
(18) D.R.B. Gill	Principal Secretary, Ministry of Public Works, Power and Communications	Belize
(19) A.E. Cattouse	Minister of Public Works, Power and Communications	Belize
(20) Gilford Major	Labourer	Hattieville
(21) Charles Neal	Stevedore	25 George Street.