Inquest into the deaths of Gerard Thomas Spencer Johnson and Robert Hugh Finlayson.

Findings of H.M. Coroner.

On Saturday 20th May 1989 a call was received by Mr. Terry Hawksworth through Fish-ops regarding an incident involving two Spanish vessels.The El Greco had in tow another vessel, un-named at that time,which had had a fire on board, but there was believed to be no danger to life.

Mr. Hawksworth contacted the captain of the El Greco and learned that there were 10 people on board the vessel in tow which was the Friopesca Uno. It was thought that the fire was out, the ship was described as being shut down. The captain said he was contacting the owners of the vessel and would then decide whether to proceed to Punta Arenas or Berkeley Sound. He told Mr Hawksworth that the ship would need to be checked by fire services and asked if these could be made available should the ship be brought into Berkeley Sound. Within a short time the captain of the Friopesca Uno contacted Mr. Hawksworth again. He advised he was bringing the vessel into Port William and made a firm request for the Falkland Island Fire Service to attend the ship.

Mr. Hawksworth contacted Mr Ford at the fire station and gave him the facts as he understood them. Mr Ford and Mr Marvin Clarke the Chief Fire Officer then met together to discuss the situation. It was decided it was a suitable case for them to handle. In making this decision Mr Clarke considered the whole general position of the events so far, including the fact that although the fire appeared to be out the captain of the ship was not happy with the situation especially since the breathing apparatus on the ship had been exhausted and therefore other breathing equipment from elsewhere would have to be utilised. The captain also needed expert advice on how to make the ship safe. I am aware and it was brought to my attention by the CPO that various criticisms have been levelled at the CFO because of the decision made at the time. Mr Clarke could have said no, and refused to help the stricken vessel. One point which made him decide to go was the fact that the bridge of the Friopesca Uno was inaccessible to the crew and therefore the ship was out of control. She was being towed but was in danger of pulling the El Greco out of control too. The tow could have been dropped, it probably would have had to have been had the weather worsened, which of course it subsequently did; this would have left the Friopesca Uno drifting out of control, possibly with a fire still smouldering, no one knew at this stage. She would have constituted a dangerous hazard to other ships and I suppose it's conceivable the fire could have raged again and killed the ten men on board. These factors had to be considered. Also Mr Clarke is not a stranger to the problems of fires on ships. He and his men have fought many fires and three significant ship fires in recent years. In addition they are trained men and have experience with the breathing apparatus so vital in these circumstances. Being a firemen is risky. There is no doubt about that. Assessing potential hazards is a Chief Fire Officer's job, If he said always "there could be a risk I won't go" what would be the point of a fire service?

In this case Mr Clarke looked at the task in hand, to examine a vessel which had been on fire, to ensure that the fire was out and to make the bridge safe and thereby enable the crew to take charge of the ship again and eliminate further danger. He decided he and his force could and should handle this incident. Few would envy him in having to make such a decision. Having decided, Mr Clarke and Mr Ford then hand-picked a team, bearing in mind that an adequate force must also be left in Stanley in the event of there being a fire in the town. After briefing the team they were then asked whether they were willing to go. Each man unreservedly agreed and went home to tell their families and to get changes of clothes.

They all then assembled at the jetty to board the launch with their equipment around 5.30pm. In company with Mr Hawksworth they left on the Speedwell and met the two ships about 4 miles off Menguera Point. The sea was rough and Mr Hawksworth boarded the El Greco to discuss the situation. Mr Hawksworth would have preferred to see the vessels brought much closer into harbour and indeed so would Mr Clarke. However the captain of the El Greco was adamant that if he tried to take the ships in under tow he would lose control of the vessel. In the meantime Mr Clarke and his team boarded the Friopesca Uno. Mr Clarke went with Mr Ford and the captain of the vessel to inspect it. No fire or signs of fire was visible to any of the fire-crew as they approached the stricken vessel and there were no signs of active fire apparent to Mr Clarke on the ship. There were indications that there had been a fire though, as there was blistered paint and surfaces were hot to the touch. Mr Clarke had some trouble understanding the captain of the ship who spoke only Spanish, and there were no plans of the ship available. It later transpired that the plans were in the bridge area and therefore inaccessible at that time. In any event Mr Clarke and Mr Ford were pretty clear as to how things were and it was evident later that they had formed an accurate impression of the lay-out of the ship and even if the plans had been located the outcome would not have been different.

A team consisting of Peter Biggs and Michael Luxton and supervised by Dave Ford entered the bridge area wearing breathing apparatus. A second team consisting of Gerard Johnson and Robert Finlayson entered the accommodation area supervised by Marvin Clarke. They were also wearing breathing apparatus. Raymond Poole was in a position level with the foredeck and tasked to supervise the breathing apparatus. Mr. J. McDonald was on standby. Mr Poole checked the breathing apparatus and tallies before the teams went in. The procedure was standard and thorough. From then on the two teams proceeded to examine their allotted areas. The court heard the details from Mr Clarke but since no-one was actually with the two deceased men during this time we can only state what the facts tell us, that they secured their guideline at each end of the accommodation corridor. This was described by Mr Poole who saw them emerge from the corridor. They did say to Mr Poole at this stage that they felt there was fire still about but that there was nothing to see. They told Mr Poole they were going back down the corridor to investigate again. Mr Poole checked their breathing apparatus pressure and described them as being "quite relaxed, not in distress at all", he noted the time they went back into the corridor as 7.02pm. The trawl door was left open. Mr Poole could see reasonably down the corridor with a torch at this stage.

After about five minutes Mr Poole noticed black smoke billowing out of the open door. This was seen by the other team also and firemen Biggs and Luxton attempted to enter the accommodation area by the ladder. They then heard an alarm signal going off which we now know to have been Mr Finlayson's. Despite several attempts to enter the area using hoses the heat proved too intense and in fact Mr Biggs suffered burns to his face and ears in the attempts. The fire then appears to have been fought according to the usual procedures until it was under control.

During the fire fighting operations Mr Hawksworth was in contact with Mr Clarke by radio. At one stage Mr Hawksworth called upon the tug Typhoon but it was unable, because of the rough weather to get near enough to be of assistance. Mr Hawksworth also called up fish-ops and was told that whereas there were fire-fighting facilities available on their vessel the vessel itself was unservicable.Assistance was asked of the launch Speedwell and that vessel despite the terrible weather conditions managed to get around the Friopesca Uno and give valuable information as to the location of the fire in various areas of the ship.

The bodies of Mr Johnson and Mr Finlayson were discovered by Mr Biggs in two store-rooms in the accommodation block as soon as he was able to get into the area. Mr Biggs had kept up a search whilst fighting the fire insofar as he could but had been unsuccessful up until now.

The two men had left their safety lines,and this remains a mystery as to why they did. They were both very experienced, that very experience being the reason they were chosen for this operation. They had, as Mr Poole stated, established a line right down the area they were working in and secured it at both ends. It seems most likely that there was a catastrophic incident of some kind which forced them to leave their lines, such as a fire-ball or flash. The other possibility is that the heat was so intense and they saw a clearer patch which they wanted to get to but had to leave their lines in order to do so. They may have thought it was a way out and taken it as a last resort.

Mr Finlayson was lying on his back and the Chief Police Officer formed the impression that he had not fallen. He must have lay down either by himself or with Mr Johnson's help. Either way it seems likely that he was incapacitated in some way. He or Mr Johnson had pressed the alarm on Mr Finlayson's equipment so there must have been some apprehension as to Mr Finlayson's safety. On examination of the bodies later no obvious physical cause could be found suggesting a fall or other damage to Mr Finlayson other than inhalation of noxious fumes. Soot was present in the nostrils indicating that Mr Finlayson was breathing after his mask was taken off.Everything leads us to suppose that Mr Finlayson was overtaken by some incapacity causing him to have to lie down . This could simply have been the beginnings of the carbon monoxide gases and other noxious fumes affecting him and it probably was. Of course although we have no evidence to suggest it we cannot altogether rule out sea-sickness as a factor since we do know that conditions at sea were atrocious that night.

Mr Johnson was found face down in the next storage area to Mr Finlayson. There is every indication that Mr Johnson had been attempting

to move around. I suspect that, by the bruising that the doctor found on his legs and the position of his body when he was found, that he was crawling and was eventually overcome and slumped onto his face. He too had soot in his nose and mouth indicating that he was breathing after his mask was taken off, however his alarm unit had not been activated. My supposition is that Mr Finlayson was affected by the fumes first and Mr Johnson helped him to lie down before crawling off himself to look for a way out or for the other team. He may have activated Mr Finlayson's alarm or Mr Finlayson may have done it himself, but the fact that Mr Johnson's alarm was not activated leads me to the conclusion that he was fairly optimistic about his chances of finding a way out.

One point which concerned the Court was how the fire, apparently out, had sprung up again. Mr Clarke explained that he had carefully checked the doors to ensure that a vacuum had not built up inside during his initial examination. Clearly it had not since the crew entered without the immediate flash which would have been the case had the fire simply been starved of air. Port holes were also seen open on the vessel. It can only be assumed that somewhere on the vessel the fire was still smouldering and it seems that the two deceased men were sure there was fire in the area they were searching.

Mr Reeves, Mr Johnson's father-in-law, made a salient point to the court when he inquired if the clothing of the firemen was adequate. There is no reason to suppose it was not adequate in this case since the clothing of the two dead men was not scorched or damaged in any way. However Mr Reeves question provoked discussion on the equipment of the fire service in general and it may be that some of the points may be brought up again. Anything which can prevent a further tragedy, allbeit not in similar circumstances, is relevant and I am grateful to Mr Reeves for making these points.

It is practically impossible at this stage to see a positive side to this sad event. I hope that any findings we have made will help in future should a similar situation arise, more than that I hope such a situation never does arise again. However I will end on as positive note as I can. Mr Clarke and his team were brave beyond belief. Mr Terry Hawksworth worked unstintingly throughout and has also accomplished tasks of administration with tact and efficiency. Mr Robin Goodwin probably risked his life in the Speedwell to observe the fire outside the ship. Later on in the afternoon of the 21st May when help was needed in Stanley generally fetching and carrying Mr Arthur O'Bey and Mr Lloyd Hirtle volunteered their services and worked hard and long to help. These people and many others have produced a much needed faith in our fellow man at this sad time.

My official finding is that Gerard Thomas Spencer Johnson and Robert Hugh Finlayson both died from asphyxiation whilst fighting a fire on board the Friopesca Uno. Their deaths were both accidental.

R. McIlroy

Rose Mary McIlroy
Deputy Coroner