

Page 6, Daily Sitka Sentinel, Sitka, Alaska, Tuesday, September 11, 1984

Murders Suspect Was Known to Victims

BELLINGHAM, Wash. (AP) — John Kenneth Peel, 31, fell today on a 15 million bond and charged with murdering eight people on a fishing boat, was so friendly with some of the victims that they had his picture on their mantel and he attended their memorial service.

Peel, a 34-year-old laborer, was arrested in Bellingham on a Ketchikan warrant charging him with first degree murder in the 1982 deaths.

At least two of the victims were shot in the head before the 36-foot motorboat, which had been on a salmon fishing expedition, was torched while anchored near the village of Craig in Southeastern Alaska.

Waiting at sea and a bullet-proof vest, Peel appeared Monday afternoon in Whatcom County Superior Court to hear charges against him read. Bullet-proof vests are provided routinely in Whatcom County to defendants charged with serious crimes.

"Mentally is the only issue of the case as far as I'm concerned and I don't want my client's right to a fair trial tainted," said Michael Tarr, Peel's attorney, in explaining why Peel wore the mask.

Bail was set at \$1 million, and Peel was taken to the county jail.

Sgt. James Staggill, the Alaska State Trooper in charge of the investigation, declined to be specific Monday about evidence against Peel, but said it makes a "three-pronged case" including physical evidence, eyewitness accounts and circumstantial evidence. Officials do not have a clear motive in the case, he said.

"We think the motive was something spontaneous," Staggill said. "We've ruled out robbery or drugs."

Staggill said troopers had received phone tips "from more than one person" that they worked at Peel in their investigation.

Peel had worked as a boatbuilder on the assembly line at Murray-Craig Craft in Bellingham since July, and was

on his way to work Monday when he was arrested.

Peel will next appear in court Oct. 9 before Whatcom County Superior Court Judge Frank Morrow. At that time, a decision on extradition is expected to be made, said Mac Satter, Whatcom County chief deputy prosecutor.

If extradited, Peel would enter pleas in Alaska's First Judicial District Court, Satter said.

Staggill predicted a trial would take up to two months to complete. "It's a complicated case. It will take that long to lay out."

Peel is charged with killing Mark Coulthart, 36, of Bellingham, owner and skipper of the motorboat; Coulthart's wife, Irene, 39; their children, Kimberly, 5, and John, 4; Michael Steward, 34, of Bellingham; Jerome Keown, 33, and Dean Moon, 34, both of Sitka, Wash.; and Chris Heyman, 18, of Sitka-Halibut, Calif.

Peel "always seemed like a pleasant guy," said Carolann J. Hironaka, a friend of the Coultharts.

She said he had paid her respects to the family and attended a memorial service for the victims. The Coulthart family, she said, had a picture of the motorboat crew, including Peel, on its mantelpiece.

"He came to the house to say, 'I'm really sorry,'" she said. "I'd be do it (the killing), what kind of jerk is that? It makes me sick."

Dave McNeill, a Bellingham Police detective, said he had known Peel since he was a youngster, and that Peel had no record of felony crimes and had not been in personal trouble in Bellingham.

Police said Peel is married and has one child, and has lived in the department area during the investigation.

Investigators said the victims were slain the night of Sept. 5, 1982, while the motorboat was en route to a fishing community of 900 some 40 miles northwest of Ketchikan.

Peel Edmonds, an Alaska State

Troopers spokesman in Anchorage, said the boat was moved early Sept. 6 and an attempt was made to scuttle it and then, he said, an island out for from Craig, the motorboat and its grisly cargo were set adrift.

The bodies were burned beyond recognition in the blaze. Investigators at the time could only be certain they had recovered the remains of seven victims from the charred hull, which floated to the waterline.

However, in a presumptive death bearing last month, a Ketchikan coroner's jury ruled all eight aboard the fishing boat had been killed.

Ketchikan District Attorney Mary Anne Henry said Monday that four witnesses who identified Peel from a sketch from the vessel said he was the man who had fired the shots.

She said a sixth witness told authorities that Peel bought two 2.5-gallon jugs of gasoline on the day of the fire. Investigators believe gasoline was used to burn the boat.

Peel was working on a fishing vessel in Craig at the time of the deaths, Edmonds said.

"He had served as a crew member for Coulthart in 1981 and he may have been in 1982, I don't know," Edmonds said. "In 1982, he was a crew member on another boat in Craig at the time of the homicide."

Edmonds offered no motive, but earlier investigators had ruled out drugs and robbery, and said the killings may have been sparked in the heat of a fight.

Ruth Moon, mother of victim Dean Moon, said Peel "had been fired off the Coulthart's boat (in 1981)."

She said she was "relieved" by the arrest. "It was a long while waiting for them to be OK," she said. "I know the Peel Smith, grandfather of victims Mark Coulthart and Stewart, said he had been acquainted with Peel and had hoped would not be a suspect."

"We were hoping with all our might it wouldn't be him," said Smith.



RETIREMENT CEREMONY — BMC Fred T. Coleman, right, was presented with a shadow box by his department head, CRAIG T. Atwood, during a retirement ceremony at the Coast Guard Cutter Woodruff's moorings Friday evening. Looking on is Coleman's wife, Lena. Coleman has served in the Coast Guard for 30 years, including stints at several Alaskan bases. He is Sitka until deciding where he wants to retire permanently. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Coast Guard)

FLOOD WATCH ISSUED: Lake Drains Under Ice

ANCHORAGE (AP) — Ice-dammed Strandline Lake apparently is draining through a tunnel beneath the Transumvirate Glacier at a rate fast enough to lower the 5-mile-long lake at a rate of more than 6 inches an hour, a geophysicist said.

"The water is draining under the ice in some form of an ice tunnel," said Matthew Sturm, a University of Alaska graduate student in glaciology who spent the weekend at the lake.

Late Sunday, the National Weather Service River Forecast Center issued a flood watch for the Upper and Lower Beluga lakes and the Beluga River. The agency said the lake's high level and its history of erupting rapidly pose a serious danger to anybody in those areas.

Nobody lives in the river basin about to be flooded, but officials have warned hunters and other visitors to evacuate the area.

The water level in Strandline Lake has dropped 20 feet since the draining process started a week ago. The lake's water level may drop an additional 30 feet, Sturm said.

The only structure in the flood zone are poles supporting power lines on the west rim of Cook Inlet, and Chugach Electric Co. officials are confident that flooding would not cause a power outage. The poles, reinforced with steel barricades after a 1982 flood, have withstood five floodlines being built in the late 1960s.

The floods are part of a regular cycle of water buildup and draining. Strandline Lake, located on the flank of 11,358-foot Mount Gerdine, is blocked by the Transumvirate Glacier.

Every two to five years for the last 25, water leaving the lake melts through under the glacier, cutting a progressively wider path until the glacier floats on top of the water. That's when the trickle of water flowing from the glacier end into Upper Beluga Lake turns into a torrent.

The water, flowing at a rate twice that of the Missouri River, dumps into the lake, which then overflows and floods the Beluga River basin.

Within two days, Strandline Lake becomes a mere puddle surrounded by icebergs, and the filling process begins again, fed by streams flowing from higher up in the mountains.

The last flood occurred in September 1982.

Emergency Calls

A Sitka Volunteer Fire Department ambulance transported a patient from Belknap to the Mt. Edgemoor hospital at 12:30 p.m. Monday.

The ambulance was called to 300 Princess Way at 9:30 p.m., but no assistance was required.

An ambulance took a girl who fell from a tree like at 901 Hauld Point Road to Sitka Community Hospital at 10:08 p.m.

Sitka Hospital

Thelma Herman was admitted to Sitka Community Hospital Monday. Betty Kuback was discharged.

Aerobics Offered

Vasectomy still exist in Denise Martin's limited aerobics class.

The Community Schools class is designed for those overweight, handicapped or older.

The beginner's class will begin Wednesday and run through October 8:30-9:30 p.m. in the Blatchley Junior High-Gym.

Cost for the class is \$10.

To register, call Community Schools at 747-8670.

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