Zoeken naar de MUNCHEN met de SMIT ROTTERDAM

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Remember Winter in the North Atlantic 40 years ago: Hurricane ravaging Western Europe.

m..s. "MUNCHEN"

Eternal Father, Strong to Save

"Eternal Father, Strong to Save" is a British hymn traditionally associated with seafarers, particularly in the maritime armed services. Written in 1860, its author William Whiting was inspired by the dangers of the sea described in Psalm 107. It was popularised by the Royal Navy and the United States Navy in the late 19th century, and variations of it were soon adopted by many branches of the armed services in the United Kingdom and the United States. Services who have adapted the hymn include the Royal Marines, Royal Air Force, the British Army, the United States Coast Guard and the US Marine Corps, as well as many navies of the British Commonwealth. Accordingly, it is known by many names, variously referred to as the Hymn of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, the Royal Navy Hymn, the United States Navy Hymn (or just The Navy Hymn), and sometimes by the last line of its first verse, "For Those in Peril on the Sea". The hymn has a long tradition in civilian maritime contexts as well, being regularly invoked by ship's chaplains and sung during services on ocean crossings.

The Storm on the Sea of Galilee is a painting from 1633 by the Dutch Golden Age painter Rembrandt van Rijn.

Some went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. They saw the works of the Lord, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

Rig towage to Marseille

The ocean-going tug Smit Rotterdam with her 22.000 horsepower departed from Rotterdam in October 1978 and connected up a Jack-up rig in the North Sea bound for Marseille. With on board the famous maritime cineaste Pim Korver to make a movie of the Smit Rotterdam and her crew just to show the difference after the movie of Hollands Glorie.

The replica of the Santa Maria at Barcelona

The weather was fair and the tug made a good speed and within three weeks' time she delivered the Jack-up rig to the client in Marseille. The Smit Rotterdam continued her voyage to Barcelona to change her captain and dropping off Mr. Pim Korver. In the port of Barcelona was seen the replica of the Santa Maria. The Santa María was the flagship and

supply ship of Christopher Columbus, who in 1492 'discovered' America. However, he was not the first European to set foot there, that was a Viking from the ship of Leif Eriksson, who came from Greenland, probably in 1001 or 1002. The ship of Columbus was originally called María Galante, but since this was also synonymous with a prostitute, it was decided to change the name. On the Christmas night of 1492 the Santa Maria suffered shipwreck off the coast of Quisqueya, later called Hispaniola. It was very shocking to see such a small ship compare with the big and strong Smit Rotterdam and difficult to understand that they have some 100 sailors on board while the Smit Rotterdam, sailed with 18 persons only. After the Smit Rotterdam was cleared from Barcelona she set sail to Horta on the Azores island Faial to take up her station duties during the winter months.

Station duties Azores

Horta is a single municipality and city in the western part of the Archipelago of the Azores, encompassing the island of Faial. In 1921, Dutch seagoing tugboats began to use Horta as salvage station of the North Atlantic shipping crossings. After World War II, they returned during the period of European reconstruction.

The Smit Rotterdam anchored in the marina bay with for the Smit crew a daily view on the well-known, Café Sport. A period of waiting for the crew of the Smit Rotterdam starts. The

normal works of maintenance with special radio listening of the North Atlantic traffic and Salvage equipment testing. And so the worst winter station December 1978 starts and good to remember

The Port of Horta on the island Faial one of the Portuguese Azores in the North Atlantic

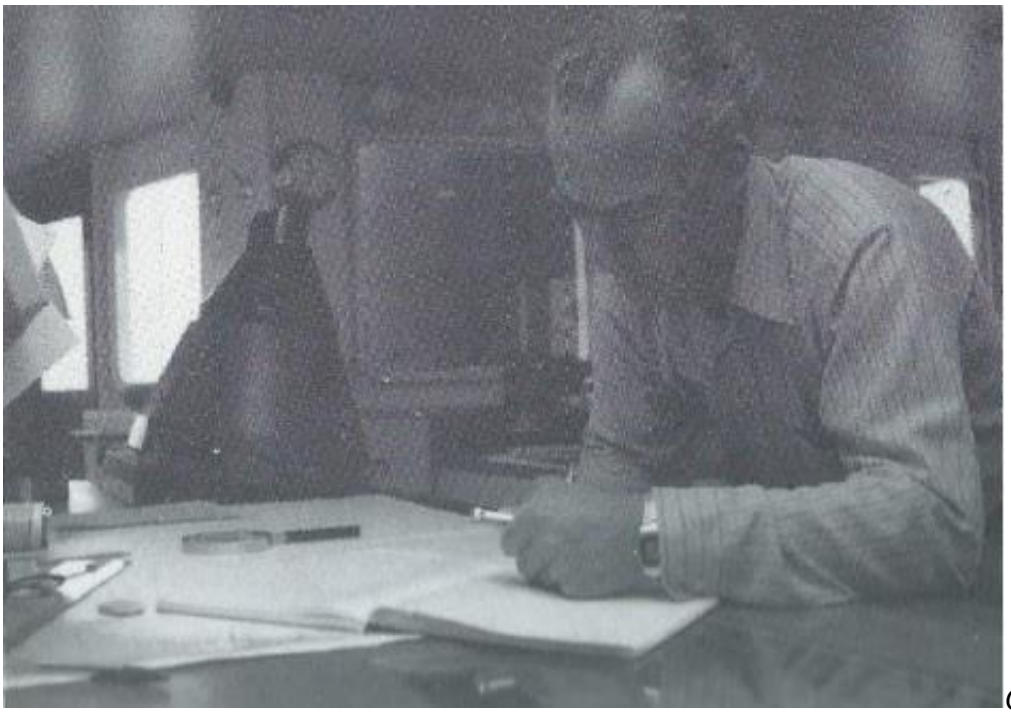
S.O.S Greek cargo vessel

On the 10th December the radio officer of the Smit Rotterdam received a mayday call from a Greek vessel in distress in the Gulf of Breton. She reported that the shaft sealing was leaking and she was flooded with water. The Smit Rotterdam anchored up and with full power she sailed to the given position. The weather was very bad, strong winds with 10 to 11 hurricane force. After more than 12 hours sailing the Greek reported that she had everything under control and continue her voyage. The Dutch ocean-going salvage tug Smit Rotterdam returned back to het salvage station. In the meantime she received a telex that the München has sent out a Mayday. The search for the München begins.

Smit Rotterdam directed search for the m.v. München

On December 12th, 1978, the Smit Rotterdam, which was off the Azores at the time, received a telex from the listening service with the information that the German containership “Munchen”, had sent out a mayday signal. In a severe storm gusting to force 10 the “Smit Rotterdam” with captain P. de Nijs in command, sped to the position given. The “Smit Rotterdam” shipped heavy seas, which battered her and even caused damage to one of the working boats, but the ocean going tug fought her way through the

raging water. From search- and rescue planes the “Smit Rotterdam” received only negative reports. Not a trace was to be found of the “Munchen” in the area in question and no further distress signals was received. The “Smit Rotterdam” crew realized that the situation was critical.



Captain P. de Nijs at the chart table

The radio-station served as a communications- and crisis centre. Radio-officer Ronnie Verschoor constantly sent out appeals to all vessels in the neighbourhood to report, while captain de Nijs plotted all their positions on the map. The mate had posted double look-outs on the wings with all crew members available, Whilst the remaining crew members got the remaining workboat, the inflatable Zodiac, the hospital, diving gear, tools and numerous lines and wires ready.

During the following ten days of radio silence, so as to be able to hear any distress signals, captain de Nijs and radio-officer Verschoor hardly ever left the radio station. All reports and further particulars from the searching ships and aircraft were channelled to this communications-centre. A search pattern had been set out on the sea chart, and all ships movements were continually updated on the plotting table. For days on end some 14 ships in line with the “Smit Rotterdam” at about 4 miles distance from one another searched the map sections. On reaching the end of each section the hole convoy pivoted round the “Smit Rotterdam” to begin searching the next section.

Radio-officer R. Verschoor at the radio station

In view of the fact that the search area was in the centre of the transatlantic shipping route, a total number of 110 vessels participated in the search. The sixteen searchand rescue planes were also controlled from the “Smit Rotterdam” and on the basis of the findings they reported, ships were directed to the supposed floating objects. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a false alarm in most cases. Only fishing gear, oil slicks, or garbage were found. Ultimately only three lash-barges were found after one sank later on. The other two of which afterwards one was towed to Lisbon by the “Smit Rotterdam” and the other by the German tug “Titan”. It is the first time in history that an ocean-going tug has directed such a unique search of that size. Notwithstanding all the efforts and the vast amount of work carried out by the crew of the “Smit Rotterdam”, the outcome was regrettably negative. The loss of the “Munchen” is likely to remain a mystery for ever. Captain, officers and the other members of the crew of the “Smit Rotterdam” received messages of thanks and appreciations for the professional way in which they handled the search from the Hapag-Lloyd shipping company and from Land's End coastguard.

m.s. München

m.s. München was a German LASH carrier of the Hapag-Lloyd line that sank with all hands for unknown reasons in a severe storm in December 1978. The most accepted theory is that one or more rogue waves hit the München and damaged her, so that she drifted for 33 hours with a list of 50 degrees without electricity or propulsion.

Early career

m.s. München was launched on May 12, 1972 at the shipyards of Cockerill, Hoboken, Flanders, Belgium and delivered on September 22, 1972. The München was a LASH ship and was the only ship of her kind under the German flag. She departed on her maiden voyage to the United States on October 19, 1972.

Lash carrier "Rhine Forest" in 2006 in the Waalhaven of Rotterdam; Netherlands

Her sister ship m.s. Bilderdijk was built for the Holland America Line at the Boelwerf Temse Shipyard, also in Flanders, Belgium (Yard number 859). She sailed under the Dutch flag until 1986 when she was renamed Rhine Forest. This ship was retired from commercial operation on December 15, 2007. She has been scrapped in Bangladesh.

Last voyage and search operations

The München departed the port of Bremerhaven on December 7, 1978, bound for Savannah, Georgia. This was her usual route, and she carried a cargo of steel products stored in 83 lighters and a crew of 28. She also carried a replacement nuclear reactor-vessel head for Combustion Engineering, Inc. This was her 62nd voyage, and took her across the North Atlantic, where a fierce storm had been raging since November. The München had been designed to cope with such conditions, and carried on with her voyage. The exceptional flotation capabilities of the LASH carriers meant that she was widely regarded as being practically unsinkable.

Radio station of the München with call sign “DEAT”

The München was presumed to be proceeding smoothly, until the night of December 12/13. Between 00:05 and 00:07 (all times GMT) München's radio officer Jörg Ernst was overheard during a short radio communication on a "chat" frequency. He reported bad weather and some damage to the München to his colleague Heinz Löhmann aboard m.s. Caribe, a German cruise ship 2,400 nautical miles (4,440 km) away. Ernst also transmitted München's last known position as 44°N 24°W. The quality of the transmission was bad, so that not everything was understood by Löhmann. Since it was a standard communication, the information was not relayed back to the ship's owner until December 17.

Distress call

The Greek Panamax freighter Marion received the SOS calls from the München

Around three hours later (03:10- 03:20), SOS calls were received by the Greek Panamax freighter Marion, which relayed it to the Soviet freighter Marya Yermolova and the German tug boat Titan. M.s. München gave her position as 46°15'N 27°30'W, which was probably around 100 nautical miles (200 km) off her real position. The messages were transmitted via morse code and only parts of them were received. One fragment received was 50 degrees starboard, which could be interpreted as a 50-degree list to starboard. Automatic emergency signals were also received by multiple radio stations starting at 04:43. No further calls were recorded after 07:34, probably because US stations stopped listening on the frequency 2182 kHz. At 17:30 international search and rescue operations were initiated and co-ordinated throughout by HM Coastguard at Land's End, Cornwall. Wind speeds of 11-12 Beaufort were reported in the area of the search, hampering efforts. The initial search requested by HMCG was by RAF Nimrod maritime recognisance aircraft this air asset co-ordinated by SRCC RAF Mountbatten.

Initial search efforts and further communications

The next day, December 13, an additional C130 Hercules aircraft from Germany and six ships searched for the München. At 09:06 Michael F. Sinnot, a Belgian radio amateur in Brussels, received a voice transmission on the unusual frequency 8238.4 kHz, which is usually used by the German ground station Norddeich Radio. The transmission was clear but interrupted by some noise, and contained fragments of München's name and callsign. Later in court, Sinnot reported that the voice was calm and spoke in English but with a distinct German accent. Since Sinnot only had a receiver for this frequency, he relayed the message via telex to a radio station in Ostend. Between 17:00 and 19:14, ten weak Mayday calls were received by the US Naval Station Rota, Spain at regular intervals, mentioning "28 persons on board". The messages may have been recorded and sent automatically. München's call sign, 'DEAT' which was sent in Morse code, was

received three times on the same frequency. The Dutch ocean-going salvage tug Smit Rotterdam, which was returning from other Mayday calls in the Gulf of Breton and the English Channel, received the calls as well and went to the designated position under the command of Captain P.F. de Nijs. Seas were heavy, with a swell averaging 22 metres. Lands' End CG provided the search planning and areas to be covered and appointed the salvage tug Smit Rotterdam as On scene Commander co-ordinating the activities of eventually more than 100 ships and also the 16 aircraft taking based all now temporarily based in the Azores.

The search intensifies

On December 14 wind speeds dropped to Force 9. By now four aircraft and 17 ships were participating in the search operation. Signals of München's emergency buoy were received. At 19:00 the British freighter King George picked up an empty life raft at 44°22'N 24°00'W. The same day, Hapag-Lloyd's freighter Erlangen found and identified three of München's lighters. The following day, December 15, a British Hawker Siddeley Nimrod patrol aircraft discovered two orange objects shaped like buoys at 44°48'N 24°12'W and the salvage tug Titan recovered a second life raft. A third one was located at 44°48'N 22°49'W the next day by m.s. Badenstein; all were empty. A yellow barrel was also sighted that day.

On December 17, at 13:00 Düsseldorf Express salvaged München's emergency buoy. By now wind speeds dropped to Force 3. The freighter Starlight found two life belts, at 43°25'N 22°34'W the Sealand Consumer picked up a fourth empty life raft. Also three life vests were sighted, two of them by Starlight and another one by Evelyn.

The search is called off

The international search operation officially ended in the evening of December 20, a week after it had begun. The West German government and Hapag-Lloyd decided to search for two more days, with British and American forces supporting them. The search effort had been the largest undertaken to that date. Altogether 13 aircraft from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Portugal and Germany, and nearly 80 merchant and naval ships had searched for the München or her crew. On February 16, the car transporter Don Carlos salvaged a lifeboat from the starboard side of München, the last object discovered from her.

Investigation

The subsequent investigation into the disappearance of the München centred on the starboard lifeboat and in particular the forward block from which it had hung. The pins, which should have hung vertically, had been bent back from forward to aft, indicating the lifeboat hanging below it had been struck by a huge force, that had run from fore to aft of the ship, and had torn the lifeboat from its pins. The lifeboat normally hung 20 metres above the waterline. With the existence of rogue waves then considered so

statistically unlikely as to be near impossible, the investigation finally concluded that the severe weather had somehow created an 'unusual event' that had led to the sinking of the München.

As the science behind rogue waves was explored and more fully understood, it was accepted that not only did they exist, but that it was possible that they could occur in the deep ocean, such as in the North Atlantic. Investigators later returned to the question of the München and considered the possibility that she had encountered a rogue wave in the storm that night. Whilst ploughing through the storm on the night of December 12, she was suddenly faced with a wall of water, between 80 and 100 feet (24 to 30 metres) high, looming out of the dark. The München would have plunged into the trough of the huge wave, and before she could rise out of it, it collapsed onto her, breaking across her bow and superstructure, tearing the starboard lifeboat out of its pins and likely smashing into the bridge, breaking the windows and flooding her. Having lost her bridge and steering, she would probably have lost her engines. Unable to maintain her heading into the storm, she would have been forced broadside into the waves. She seems to have floated for a number of hours, during which the storm and inaccurate positioning prevented her from being located. The force of the waves then hulled or even capsized her; another rogue wave may have contributed to her distress. She would then have succumbed to the flooding and sunk within a short period.

Report from one person onboard of a searching vessel

It's the night of the 11th to the 12th of December. Over the North Atlantic raging for days a heavy hurricane, the mean wave height, so the predictions and measurements, is more than 16 meters. Massive volumes of water have begun to move in the north-west storm, the sea is boiling, the wind is screaming.

In the middle of it, a large LASH carrier heads for the American East Coast, powered by a state-of-theart 26,000-horsepower machine capable of driving 18 knots. The huge ship is five days behind Bremerhaven, far out in the Atlantic, a good 830 km north of the Azores and 1,700 km behind Lizzard, the exit from the English Channel. With a length of 240 meters and 37,000 GRT, it is significantly larger than the "Titanic" and, with state-of-the-art technology of its time, represents the pride of German maritime shipping. It has loaded "heavy stuff", machine and steel components into theirs self-floating barges, stacked in a double position, occupy the entire length of the ship behind the bodywork. Her name is " München " and we write the year 1978.

In the late evening, shortly after midnight, the radio operator of the large ship still has contact with the German passenger ship MV "Caribe" several thousand kilometers away on the "Sabbelwelle". He reports of very bad weather and - as a result - damage to the structure, but speaks neither of imminent danger or even distress. After contact, the ship will probably continue its course through night and storm.

Just a few hours later, at 03.10 h, two ships on the Atlantic take on an electrifying paging: "SOS SOS SOS DEAT DEAT DEAT" and a mutilated position message. This is the international call sign of the German cargo ship. The call will be routed as usual, with several ships in range immediately changing their course and heading for the distressed vessel's reported location, not a safe haven in prevailing weather conditions. The shipping company is notified, and in turn makes contact with the families of the sailors. Early in the morning, a first "Nimrod" long-range reconnaissance aircraft sets off from

England and flies out into the storm, finding weather conditions with west winds from 11 to 12 Beaufort arriving hours later in the target area. Calls to the " München" remain unanswered, the aircraft cannot find anything in the reported position. Slowly it gets scary. Such a powerful ship cannot just disappear.

In the afternoon, the Dutch salvage tug "Smit Rotterdam" takes over the coordination on-site at sea and probably the largest search operation of German maritime shipping begins. More and more ships hurry on the busy North Atlantic route, are divided and search in the next few days from an area that is five times the size of today's Federal Republic.

The German Navy relocates "Breguet" sea ice reconnaissance aircraft from Northern Wood to southern England, later to the Azores, flies non-stop search missions. British, Portuguese and American machines are also in use. In the end there are 75 ships and 13 planes on the way and find ... NOTHING.

On the evening of December 13th in the Azores it is said that two hours of slower calls for help from the " München" will be intercepted. On the morning of the 14th, the " München" EPIRB buoy begins automatically to send the vessel identification, a sure sign that it has floated out of its cradle at one of the highest points on the ship. Freezing cold is spreading in the radio network. Everyone who hears about it knows the meaning. Slowly you come in the course of the day behind it that you may have searched due to an incorrect position 350 km too far south. In the new search area are relatively fast driving barges, the radio buoy, life jackets and unopened life rafts in a thick layer of oil. No crew. Neither alive nor dead.

It will continue to search. With high expenditure on ships, airplanes and humans. On December 20, the international search will be stopped. The shipping company in Hamburg does not want to give up, continues to search with its own ships, it is supported by German, American and English aircraft. On December 22, they must also stop the search. The " München" and their 28-member team remain missing.

The world is puzzling. How could such a thing happen? What had gone so horribly wrong that such a "super ship" and with him 28 people just disappeared almost without a trace in the depths?

As one of the innumerable possibilities, experts assume "green water" on deck, ie the impact of an unbroken wave on the deck or on the bodywork. Trials in the towing tank later revealed clues to this thesis. For the damages also speak on the retaining bolts of the found lifeboat. In professional circles, this is called a sea beating and - depending on the amount of water - can have disastrous consequences for the integrity of the ship's hull. Years later, this is the only identical sister ship of München, the Dutch "Bilderdyk", also happened in a storm. She just got away from it.

However, there cannot be such huge waves by definition of science and its "linear model" of wave development in 1978. Among seamen, however, has always rumors of "monster waves", "Kaventsmännern" or "Freakwaves" the round, those monstrous, all-destroying mountains of water, which seemed from the not to come and are so much bigger, higher and more powerful than anything around them. But no one spoke loudly, certainly not a helmsman or captain who kept his patent and did not want to be suspended for drunkenness in the service. Only 17 years after the " München" the Norwegian oil drilling platform Draupner-E was unequivocally documented during a storm in the North Sea a single wave with 26 m height. A rethinking began. Today, you do not just know that they exist, but also that such monsters are much more common than assumed. There even seems to be "hotspots" for them and they are obviously still much higher than the Draupner wave, 35 meters cannot be ruled out.

Ultimately, the reason for the downfall of the " München" cannot be clarified. Most likely is a chain of events that may have started with a sea beating. It is equally certain that the ship stayed afloat for many hours, possibly until the morning of December 14th, just as the buoy began to swell and send. After a careful examination of the few pieces of evidence, the Maritime Inspectorate later made little statement: "... an extraordinary event must have occurred due to bad weather, causing the sinking of the ship." It lies in the dark depths of the North Atlantic as the grave of its occupation North of the Azores, somewhere on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, close to their last reported position at 46.15 N 27.30 W. There, the sea is 1,000 to 4,000 meters deep and any search would probably be in vain. And for what?

What I have to do with it? I had been aboard my training ship since the summer of 1978, and we were at sea at the time of the search, albeit in a distant part of the world. Nevertheless, we followed everything, the listening radio operator gave out every few hours a Bullentin, as it stood with the search. After the first few hours of no success, the mood became ever more depressed - everyone on board knew how small the chance for the colleagues on board was. And I myself could not imagine it - after all, I had been standing in the Bremerhaven at the Kaiserschleuse in the spring of that year and admired the huge ship that was on its way to the North Sea. Unimaginable that something so enormous could be brought to an end by ANYWHERE! When the search was stopped then There was silence on board. Everyone knew he could have been in the place of the concerned sailors. Christmas Eve we were in Santos on the South American coast and I celebrated Christmas in the local sailor club. In the devotion, as in the preselected speech of the Federal President, the team of the "München" was thought. It was depressing.

On January 3, 1979, there was a memorial service for the crew in the Bremen Cathedral. Two thousand people came, in Hamburg and Bremen was half flagged. The ceremony was broadcast, the Bremen taxis were wearing mourning fleur, the people took part. At

the end of the moving celebration, the names of the 27 crew members and the traveling woman of one of the helmsmen were read out. Stayed at sea. At the end of the service, 8 glasses sounded through the cathedral: Watching

Towing lash barges to Lisbon

On December 22 the search to the München was stopped. Everybody on board the Smit Rotterdam was impressed and feel that this tragedy has a very heavy impact on their lives. But there was no time to think about it. Works continue and the search for the floating Lash container ask their attention. Just after a half day the Lash container was found. The problem for the crew of the Smit Rotterdam was how to connect this Lash container for towage. Her very heavy 9 inch towing wire was useless for this job. The weight of the towing wire is so big that when connected the towing wire should pull the Lash-barge down and sink her. However a connection was made with a smaller towing wire connected on the Lash-barge and connected on the Smit Rotterdam's wire storage reel. After the connection the Smit Rotterdam slowly towed the Lash-barge to Lisbon. The weather was much better but the sea was still worse with high waves. On the 26th second Christmas day the tug arrived on the Lisbon roads. But if you think that all was clear and fine for the crew it was a mistake. During the handover of the Lash-barge to the local tugs. Strong wind gusting with heavy rain overtook the transport. But the experienced crew succeeded to transfer the Lash-Barge to the harbour tugs and moored the barge safely to a berthing place. Also the Smit Rotterdam moored safely to a berthing place. The engine were stopped and the full crew were relaxed after a three weeks intensive duties.

Station duties

After the delivery of the Lash barge the Smit Rotterdam set sail to South West Portugal for station duties. She dropped anchor on the 29th December in the Bay of Lagos. It is good to give crew some rest after the efforts and experiences of the past two and a half weeks. However much rest to the crew was not given. The Smit Rotterdam received orders from the head office in Rotterdam to pick up her Azoren station sailing with economic speed. In the morning of the last day of the year the anchor was heaved up and the Smit Rotterdam sailed from the Lagos Bay bound for Horta. Around 21.00 hrs the same day. The crew, free from watch, notice that the engines of the Smit Rotterdam start running on full power. The Captain, a few minutes later enters the messroom with the notice that there is a tanker in distress and the Smit Rotterdam with full speed underway to the casualty

Getafix

The tanker, the 46,827-ton Dutch-owned, Liberia-registered Getafix, was in trouble with a flooded engine room 95 miles north-northwest of Lisbon. “She was stopped dead in the water,” the duty officer reported. It was not immediately known what, if any, cargo it had or how many crewmen were aboard. The weather was reported as poor. In the morning of New Year’s day 1979 the tanker was reached and with a black out and rolling heavily in the North Atlantic swell. The life/workboat was making ready with salvage equipment, pumps and generator sets. The engine room flooded but reported with the seawater inlet valves closed and flooding stopped. The workboat enters the Getafix and dropped the salvage equipment on board the tanker. The second engineer of the Smit Rotterdam jumped on board to start up the pumps to dry the engine room and the emergency towing connection.

The radio officer of the Getafix write below the voyage of the tanker after he signed on in Rotterdam till the Getafix was safely delivered in Rotterdam.

A trip to remember *(door Henk Ros)*

After 40 years it is time to put my memories on paper. Mid May 1978 I joined the Liberian flagged tanker Getafix as a 20 year old radio-officer in Europort - Rotterdam, not realizing how it would end. The Getafix was a tanker of 102.065 tons dwt, built in Norway as Credo. In 1976 it was transferred to Liberian flag. Technical and crewing management was put in the hands of Nievelt, Goudriaan & Co, at the time a well-known Dutch shipping company based in Rotterdam.

From Rotterdam we departed for Teesport / U.K. to load Northsea-crude for Freeport Bahamas. Upon completion of discharging we were ordered to proceed to the Mediterranean, with a prospective trip to the Gulf of Mexico. Eventually we loaded in Arzew / Algeria and Ras es Sider in Libya. While passing off Malta a technician came out by small tug with a Loran navigator. This was necessary to comply with US rules and regulations on navigation equipment. In the Gulf of Mexico the greater part of the cargo was ship-to-ship transferred to another tanker while the remainder was discharged in Houston.

From Houston there was an 8 week voyage to Singapore where a drydocking was planned. During this 8 week trip preparations were carried out like tank-cleaning. The drydock took place for about 6 weeks. At the Sembawang shipyard in the north part of Singapore. Two Norwegian class surveyors were in charge of the surveying of this

drydock period. The Getafix was originally Norwegian and classed by DNV. After the drydock a voyage from Indonesia to West Europe was planned. Unfortunately the drydock period did not deliver much benefits, we were regularly plagued by black-outs etc. Quite annoying when you are awaiting your turn with Scheveningen Radio to obtain or send your Radio traffic. At a certain moment a more serious problem developed in the engine-room. In consultation with Nievelt (Nigoco) it was decided to carry out emergency repairs in Capetown. However, a few days before arriving at Capetown we received a telegram from Nigoco that the emergency repairs were cancelled because of economic reason. The engineers were not very pleased by this decision, to put it mildly. So we kept soldiering on towards Rotterdam.

Unfortunately on 31st December 1978 we encountered a real problem. A main coolwater pipe burst and the engine-room flooded, resulting in a dead. (the lights o/b flickered a couple of times, but we were all already used to that. The chief officer appeared suddenly in the radio room, saying the legendary words : “sparks, I think It is now time to call your friends”. (I have always been and still am a tug-lover, which can be easily explained by the fact I grew up in Maassluis, homeport of the Smit tugs.

I did send a XXX message requiring tug assistance, we were dead ship. The call was acknowledged and relayed by Monsanto radio / CUL. Also a Russian vessel with callsign URIL responded. After a short while the tug Smit Rotterdam offered assistance and gave ETA early morning 1st January. Also the German tug Titan offered assistance, but because of our Dutch background Smit Rotterdam was accepted. Despite a heavy swell still running, the workboat of Smit Rotterdam succeeded in transferring to small generators and pumps o/b Getafix. Also 2nd engineer Hans van der Ster managed to get o/b Getafix. An emergency towing connection was made (easier said than done on a dead ship) and course was set for Vigo / Spain. After a 3 day towing trip we entered the

Bay of Vigo. Towing line was disconnected and Smit Rotterdam came alongside to provide electricity etc. As our galley was dead as well, we endured 3 days of compulsory cold buffet. The complete crew of Getafix was therefore invited for a good hot meal on board Smit Rotterdam. It was nice to see on the noteboard of Smit Rotterdam: “o/b the casualty NO SMOKING”.

Arrangements were made to get a more powerful generator from Holland o/b Getafix in order to provide energy to keep the cargo of 96.000 ton Indonesian crude at the correct temperature. Also a proper towing connecting was set up for the trip to Rotterdam. In the meantime also two (rather nervous) company Superintendents arrived o/b. There were a few spare seats in their charter plane, so some of the officers left the vessel, stating : “I do not sail another miles with this derelict floating oiltin, certainly not without a radio-officer”. In the end I was asked whether I was willing to stay o/b during the towing trip to Rotterdam. I agreed, being a tug-lover..... but this time on the other end of the tow-line. I did the 3rd officers navigational watch and radio communications in between. Navigation also had my interests and putting Decca positions in the chart does not require a genius.

Shortly after departure from Vigo the weather was very nice and speed about 8 knots, but as soon we entered the Bay of Biscay the weather deteriorated fast. Speed reduced to 2 knots, vessel heavily rolling and lots of water on deck. Upon approaching the entrance of the English Channel the French navy provided escort services with a standby tug. Despite regularly transmitted navigational warnings, because Getafix was sheering behind Smit Rotterdam, some ship pretty close by. I frequently used the Aldis-lamp sending the letter D. In the end in consultation with the watchkeeping officer on Smit Rotterdam it was decided the switch on part of our decklight. It is a fact that a lot of light on a pitch dark sea, scares most of the other ships away. On the early morning of 15th January we arrived at Rotterdam. Between the breakwaters Smit Rotterdam disconnected and with the assistance of 4 harbour tugs we were safely berthed.

My brother and father travelled to Hook of Holland, despite very wintry conditions and icy roads to see us enter port and take some photos. Another fact which still surprises me today, is that my brother had to read in a newspaper we encountered problems during new year's eve. My father phoned the ship office, and Radio Holland, content of his conversation Is not suitable to put in writing here. Fact remains both were not able (or willing) to supply information. These memories are strictly personal and any accusation towards Nigoco are on my account. The message with the cancellation of emergency repairs for economic reasons is very real. Nowadays a trade union or crew would most probably prosecute the shipping company, or Port State detention would have been very likely. I certainly do not regret that Nievelt in the end ceased to exist as a shipping company.

Henk Ros
Radio officer Getafix / 5LPC

Andros Patria

On the same day as the troubled Getafix another tanker faced problems in the North Atlantic at the Spanish coast near La Coruna. The Andros Patria was a Greek oil tanker , which burned on December 31, 1978 northwest of Spain on fire, with about 50,000 tons of oil leaked. Two Dutch ocean-going tug alerted and proceeded to the given location. The tugs Typhoon from Wijsmuller at Ijmuiden and the Poolzee from Smit International at Rotterdam. Advertisement Off the north west coast of Spain the Greek tanker Andros Patria caught fire. The explosion occurred midships and the captain, fearing that the entire ship would explode, ordered the lifeboats to be launched. Almost the entire crew along with the captain abandoned the burning tanker. Only the chief engineer and one crewman stayed aboard.

The fire did not spread and the chief managed to restart the engines, set the autohelm to avoid the coast thus saving the ship and a greater environmental disaster. The tanker was carrying over 200,000 tons of Iranian crude oil and ultimately released over 14,000,000 gallons into the Bay of Biscay.

The ship was later taken in tow and was salvaged. The lifeboat carrying the captain and the thirty three crewmen who abandoned the ship capsized in the heavy seas and all were drowned.

The accident

The tanker Andros Patria of the United Shipping & Trading Company of Greece from Piraeus was in December 1978 on a journey with 208,000 tons of crude Iraqi heavy crude from Kharg to Rotterdam. At 6:20 pm on December 31, the ship developed a crack in the outer skin through which oil spilled out in bad weather off Cape Finisterre. About two hours later,

an explosion occurred at the cracked tank 3 of the ship, which set fire to the expiring oil cargo of the ship. The ship initially requested that the crew be hid from a helicopter, 34 of the 37 people on board, including the captain, his wife and two-year-old son, and parts of the crew left the ship soon after with a lifeboat. The boat capsized in the heavy sea, killing all persons. The remaining three people on board were rescued by helicopter one day later. On January 4, 1979, a salvage team boarded the ship and the Havarist was later taken in tow. Because Spain, Portugal, France and Great Britain refused to drive their territorial waters through the Havarist, the Andros Partia was towed to the sea area south of the Azores and remaining cargo was lightened until 9 February 1979 at sea. After that, Portugal allowed the now empty tanker to be brought to Lisbon. Arriving in Lisbon, the insurers declared the ship to be a constructive total loss. The Andros Patria was sold for demolition and scrapped from June 19, 1979 in Barcelona.

Note: The Smit Rotterdam was the last tug that stays as salvage tug on station Azores. After this terrible winter the company decided to leave the station. The decision was taken due to economic reasons. The cost to have big ocean going tugs on station are much higher than the profit paid by the insurers. The salvage station Azoren after 57 year, 1921-1978, came to an end. However, the salvage company still exists and operates under the name Smit Salvage and is a part of Royal Boskalis. Salvages are carried out in a different way today. Tugs are hired and salvage material held standby at various strategic locations around the world. ISU president Charo Coll said: "We need to accept the realty of different ways of working" The shipping and insurance industries must, in their own interest, recognise the need to provide sufficient remuneration to encourage investment in vessels, equipment, training and the development of highly qualified staff in order to continue to provide an essential global emergency response capability."

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