

A Salvor's Lot

By Roy Martin Part I - Off to Singapore

Clausentum Yard was where a 22 year old Risdon Beazley started his company in 1926. The yard took its name from the Roman port that had occupied the site; it is now part of Bitterne Manor. The marine salvage side of the Normandy Landings were managed from Clausentum, as were many salvage operations in peacetime. In May 1979 I was in my office there, reasonably happy with my lot, when I got a phone call from the Director of the International Division of Smit Rotterdam.

He told me that I had been chosen, from a list of candidates, to become Managing Director of Smit International South East Asia in Singapore. This came as a surprise as I had never applied for the job, assuming that it would go to a Dutchman. It was rather like one of those phone calls that you get to tell you that you have won a prize in a competition that you hadn't entered. Gert Niemann, the previous MD, had died in January. He had been Operations Manager for Ulrich Harms when I did the same job in Risdon Beazley and we had become friends. I also knew several of the others in Singapore as we had two of our salvage ships working in the South China Sea.

I asked what the package was, he said 'how do you mean?' I replied that I wanted to know what the salary, pension, housing, car etc were. JW called back less than an hour later and gave me the information. I said I would discuss it with my wife when I went home at lunch time; but I was told that had to give my decision there and then. The situation was clearly desperate. I assumed that those who had been offered the job in Rotterdam had turned it down, so this was a suicide mission as far as the Dutch were concerned!

When I got home I just said 'we are off to Singapore!' to my wife's credit she didn't even question why and how! Within a month I was off, the idea being to come back during the summer holidays and bring the family out.

It wasn't until some years later I was having a drink with Weia Peltenburg, by then she was the Managing Director of Smit Spido, that I heard more of the story. In 1979 Weia had been Secretary to the Peter Kleyn van Willigen, the President of Smit International. She was taking the minutes at a board meeting when the subject of the vacancy in Singapore arose. She suggested that they should call me, which JW did.

I arrived in Singapore to find a very demoralized team. The management had done all they could; but the opposition had taken full advantage and allowed very little work to filter through to SISEA. The one job they had, a small tug and two barges ashore in Indonesian waters, was not going well. The office in International Plaza was festooned with photographs of their greatest job, the salvage of the tanker *Kriti Sun*. I didn't make myself very popular when I told them that they should keep only two of the photographs and we were going to replace the rest with new jobs.

There were a number of smaller salvage companies and one very large outfit SELCO, owned by Ernst Kalenburg. EEK had escaped from Germany to Shanghai in the late 30s and he therefore had a hatred of my German predecessor and his team. It soon became obvious that SELCO were hoovering up most of the Lloyd's Form work that made the money.

Lloyd's Salvage Form had been in existence since 1908, but there had been earlier versions. The idea was to provide an agreement that masters of two ships could sign without arguing over the cost of the salvage service: the quantum being settled later by a Lloyd's Arbitrator. The agreement was No Cure – No Pay.

I could not achieve any improvement in the short term and even wondered if it was worth uprooting my family: but I did and in late September we had our first stroke of luck. An Argentinian cargo liner ran ashore on the Helen Mar Reef, on the southern side of the channel, in Indonesian waters. At low water the *Catamarca II* was high and dry. Our salvage manager, Rainer Kasel, and David Hancox from SELCO arrived at the same time. Rainer had managed Harms Argentina for some years and spoke fluent Spanish. He also had a score of Spanish jokes that cheered the old man up somewhat and he agreed to a Lloyd's Form.



Catamarca II

We mobilised two tugs, a sheerleg, and one of our mobile salvage crews. The first job was to lay out two ground tackles; our team then started discharging the containers from the deck. Once the ship had been lightened sufficiently the deck tackles were tensioned and the tugs were made fast. After a few hours the casualty was afloat and the next day was spent reloading the cargo.

The salvor acquires rights over the ship, cargo, bunkers and freight at risk if any. To release the property the owners are required to put up security. We detained the cargo that was discharged in Singapore; but allowed the vessel to sail on to Hong Kong. We had asked for 2 million Dutch Guilders, which the owners in BA had promised to put up; but by the time the vessel was nearing Hong Kong no money had been forthcoming.

Our lawyer there arranged to have the ship arrested on arrival. This worked and I had an immediate call from BA, saying that they would send the money straight away if I would arrange for the arrest to be lifted. I refused and upped my security demand to a total Dfls 3.75 million (over £1 million). I was called what I assumed were a lot of nasty names; but the money was lodged at Lloyd's at start of business on the following day and the ship was released.

When the divers had checked the area where the deck tackle anchors were laid they noticed a pattern in the coral. Rainer jettisoned one of the tackles, which gave us an excuse to go back a couple of days later. The marks on the reef proved to be the remains of a wooden ship, with a cargo of Export Ming pottery – of low value but definitely of interest. They retrieved several hundred pieces, which, when cleaned, were distributed among the staff. Six pieces remained, when I asked why I was told that they were for my secretary. I asked Kim why she had not taken her share; she replied that she could afford new porcelain, so why should she want old stuff? After about 18 months we were awarded Dfl 1.3m, including interest.

Ten months later the *Chios Captain* grounded in Bombay. The Salvage Association surveyor advised the master to sign with us. It was a hard and dirty job and the Greek owner refused to put up security for the vessel to enter the port. We towed her all the way to Singapore, venting air from the damaged double bottoms all the way – there we had the same problem. Eventually we got our security of Dfls 5 million, lodged under protest. The owner had not finished with his tricks; he got a telexed quote from a Japanese shipbuilder to effectively rebuild the ship. This quote exceeded the sound value. He contended that the vessel was a Constructive Total Loss, so there was no salvaged fund to pay out an award.



Chios Captain in a former guise as *Silvertweed*. She was finally wrecked in a typhoon in '85, as the *Dennis Carrier*, while laid up in Mariveles in the Philippines

He arranged to have the vessel towed from Singapore to the Philippines, where we heard on the grape vine that it was repaired. Our Commercial Manager said that he could get a copy of the repair invoice. In the meantime I saw in Lloyd's List that a sister ship had been sold; they quoted the price paid, so I had a 'sound value'. The owner very reluctantly agreed to a net salvaged value of £1.05 million, about DFIs 3 million. This was still well below the real value and the Arbitrator awarded us slightly more than that. This was the only time that I am aware of that a salvor has received over 100% of the NSV; the owner appealed, but the award was upheld.

Shortly after the award I was at a meeting in Rotterdam when the subject of what they called the Chaos Captain came up. In addition to the 25% of the award that I had to pay to Smit Towage, they were demanding 12.5% because they had a tug in Bombay at the time of the salvage. I refused as their tug had taken no part in the salvage and had not even allowed our salvage crew to get a hot shower on board. Somewhere in the conversation I complained that I was being screwed, and this wasn't the first time. The then President (Rom Scheffer) took umbrage and we almost ended up having a fist fight in the hollow centre of the table. That evening I was due to have supper with the International Director at his home on the coast. When I got there he gave me a silver miniature milk churn to apologise.

By now we were averaging about twenty jobs a year, about one third being Lloyd's Forms; but I had cash flow problems as the arbitrator's decisions took so long. It was usually about eighteen months before the cash was in the bank. I talked to our bankers about using the LSF's as security for loans, that didn't work. So I made two changes: in future vessels owned by us, they had previously time chartered from the parent, and I started to settle a percentage of the jobs amicably.

Many of the operations are just names to me now. In October 1980 we were in joint venture with Selco fighting a fire on the tanker *Oceanic Grandeur* off the Johore Shoal, my list shows that the total award was about S\$ 2.5 million, of which our share was about two thirds. This may have been the time that we chartered a BP VLCC to take the cargo. The Singapore pilots declined to put the tanker alongside the casualty, so our salvage officers did the job. With Rainer Kasel on one bridge wing and Ted Hosking on the other our salvage tugs did the berthing. At one point in the operation the Master of the BP tanker said that he assumed that Ted had an Extra Master's ticket to do his job, Ted who had been one of Beazley's divers, said he muttered something about being 'extra to the master.'

One evening in February 1981 my pager beeped; I went out to the car and called the office, 'Base – Mike One'. The ops room staff told me that the bulker *Yalung Career*, with a cargo of iron pellets, had grounded off the Philip Channel. These Indonesian waters were the haunt of pirates. As the ship and cargo owners couldn't agree who should be the salvor, I was faced with the possibility of doing a job as a 'Common Law Salvor' and I knew that there was no such thing as Indonesian Common Law.

I decided that I would leave it until the morning, to see if SELCO would joint venture. Shortly after eight in the morning the direct line phone on my desk rang; as he always did the caller said K l e n b u r g, stretching it out as long as he could. We did the job together, but my salvage coordinator walked out. In all we carried out three salvage operations in 26 hours, two with SELCO, earning a total of S\$1.8 million. You get good days and bad days!

The *SA van der Stel* grounded on the Helen Mar in September 1982; surely one of the most attractive ships to come to grief there. Our team salvaged her and brought her into Singapore. With a full general cargo security became an issue; we were given a copy of the manifest and I started to guesstimate the value of the cargo. There was one significant exception - a parcel that had been loaded in Singapore, without a description. The agents couldn't, or wouldn't, give us answers. In my frustration I asked if they would accept that it was valued at US\$1,000 per ton, my rule of thumb at the time; oh yes they said. We intended to base our security calculations on that: but there seemed to be a degree of relief on the SAFMarine side, without further ado they put up an open guarantee.



SA van der Stel

It rather looks as if most of the casualties were on the Helen Mar, but we had many on the other reefs and rocks, such as Batu Berhanti. There were of course many mishaps further afield. In the same month that we re-floated the *van der Stel* the container vessel *Pacific Express* and the tanker *Botany Tribute* both ended up on Pulau Angsa, north of Kuala Lumpur. We had not long re-floated those vessels when the LASH ship *William Hooper* grounded on the same island.

In 2001 the container ship *CMA CGM Normandie* grounded on the Helen Mar. Readers may well know this vessel by her later, and final, name *MSC Napoli*. The Helen Mar Reef is now marked by a light, as is Batu Berhanti.