

A Salvor's Lot

By Roy Martin Part II - Fire & Wreck

Because the majority of our salvage operations were successful they do not appear in such books as Norman Hooke's 'Modern Shipping Disasters' or 'Lloyd's Confidential Index'. The exceptions are most of the vessels that suffered fires or which sank before we arrived on site and were the subject of wreck removal contracts, usually for one of the P&I Clubs.

The cargo liner *Cherry Ruby* was owned by Lion Shipping, one of Dolly Seah's Singapore companies. Madam Seah was a formidable lady, who, I knew from experience, didn't like being parted from her money – especially by *Ang Mo* (a red head - a foreigner). Her ship had been built as Ocean fleet's *Freetown*. In early April 1981 the *Cherry Ruby* was on fire off Penang, while on a voyage from Singapore to Colombo with cement: the crew had mutinied.



The supply vessel *Smit Lloyd 43* was first on site followed by one of Smit's larger units the *Smit New York*. We provided the salvage team and the casualty was brought back to the Jurong Anchorage off Singapore. The damage was so great that the ship was sold for demolition. A sad end for a fine ship.



The *Procyon*, had been built as the *Cunard Ambassador*, having been acquired by Cunard while under construction. The ship was only two years old when, in 1974, she caught fire while on a positioning voyage from Port Everglades to New Orleans. There were no passengers on board and none of the crew were lost. The cause was said to be a broken fuel line in the engine room. She was declared a CTL and sold to the Danish owner Clausen, who rebuilt her as the livestock carrier *Linda Clausen*. She was resold in 1980, becoming the *Procyon*, still fitted for carrying sheep.

In April 1981 she caught fire whilst bunkering in Singapore. Again the cause was a broken fuel line. This time it was the fuelling hose, which failed. The connection was via gun port door and a plate had been removed from the deck in that vicinity, so that diesel split onto a running generator and ignited. This time there was loss of life.

Selco and Smit fought the fire together. The ship was again repaired and suffered her final fire in 1984, when called *Raslan*.

The *Orient Welfare* put into Colombo with hull damage on 12 June 1981. At the time she was on a voyage from South Korea to Oman with bagged cement. She sank in the harbour on the following day. We were appointed by the P&I Club and our team re-floated the vessel and were then contracted by the club to scuttle her in deep water. The Sri Lankan Navy offered to sink the wreck with shellfire, if we would tow her out. This we did, but when we arrived on site the team found that the crew of the naval vessel were all seasick and couldn't man their guns; so our team boarded the hulk and flooded her down, then escorted the navy back to Colombo, arriving much later in the evening than they had intended.



Orient Welfare*, previously the *Kyotai Maru

Sometime later my Accountant, Lee Sook Fung, came into my office, she seemed quite agitated. 'Look, look' she said 'see what he has done now'. 'He' was Rainer and she

had in her hand his expense claim for the *Orient Welfare* job; included in it was an item \$50 for the pianist in a bar. Warily I called Rainer in and asked him about it, I got a typical Rainer explanation. They had arrived at this establishment sometime around midnight, shattered after their day scuttling the rat infested hulk. Not long after they got there the pianist put down the piano lid and was about to go home. The salvage team had intended to dance the night away, so Rainer slapped this \$50 note on the piano and told the man to keep playing, which he did till the early hours. I tried to explain to LSF that unless we had men like this who were prepared to do this extremely risky work we might as well shut up shop. I don't think she was in the least convinced.

As with most of these jobs I don't have the figure we received, but I did find out a few months later that I had acquired the nickname of 'Million Dollar Martin' in London. Someone in the clubs had worked out that whatever currency I quoted in that was my price for wreck removal. I was to lose that moniker on the next job.

In June 1981 we were returning from a weekend on a Malaysian island. As we approached Johore Bahru the radio in the car started to splutter into life; there was obviously a major incident in Singapore harbour. As we weren't licenced to use the frequency outside of Singapore I had to contain my curiosity until we crossed the causeway. When I got through I found that the Chinese cargo liner *Lian Hua Cheng* had suffered an explosion and was on fire. We had lost the job to SELCO and the Shell Pulau Bokum tugs. There is only a brief mention of this incident, in a Chinese technical paper, which says that the fire burned for twenty days and the total cost of the incident was Yuan 45 million.

In July the Chinese called for tenders to remove the wreck and the cargo. There were a lot of chemicals among the cargo, these were obviously fire damaged and mixed. The industrial chemists could give us no real idea of how to deal with them – except to warn us that there would be an ever present risk of another explosion. We tendered four million US dollars, but SELCO were one million dollars cheaper.

I wasn't overly sad to lose what was obviously a difficult job. Shortly afterwards I flew to Rotterdam for a meeting; then intending to join my wife in the UK for summer leave. During the meeting a message from Singapore was passed to me; Captain Yang, the General Manager of COSCO Shanghai, had declined to contract with SELCO. Apparently Ernst Kalenburg had arrived with two Chinese women lawyers and the manager had strongly objected to this.

I told the Rotterdam directors that I would have to return to Singapore that night to deal with the situation. Rom Scheffer, the President, said, not to worry as they would send their senior salvage master. I declined as that was likely to aggravate Captain Yang still further.

There was no KLM flight that evening so I used my ticket to London and the office rebooked me on the BA flight back to Singapore. I rang my wife to say I wouldn't be home and boarded the flight. We were climbing out of Heathrow, with a glass of wine on the table cloth in front of me, when the aircraft seemed to level out short of its cruising altitude. A flustered stewardess came to clear the table, saying they were 'stopping service'. I refused to give up my glass until it was empty, saying that if I was going, I was going p****d.

It seemed quite a while before the Captain announced that we would be making an unscheduled stop in Munich. As we landed we were escorted by fire engines and ambulances. We were told to make a hasty exit; none of us hung about, though we did not need to use the slides.

We were ushered into the airport terminal and there we stayed for a couple of hours. None of us had any Deutchmarks, if we had they would have been of no use as the shops were closed.

We were then taken out to the taxiway and told to identify our luggage, which was then reloaded. When we taxied for take-off some hours later there were still a couple of suitcases on the tarmac. We learnt that a note had been found in one of the lavatories. This purported to come from the Black September Movement and said that, if we did not land in Munich before midnight, they would blow the plane up.

By the time we landed back in Heathrow it was daylight and, after a couple of hours in the terminal we re-boarded, the same aircraft! Now about twelve hours late I assumed that I had lost the job.

Early the following morning we arrived in Singapore and I was taken straight to a meeting with Yang. Fortunately my ever efficient secretary Kim, married to our salvage officer Ivan Woodford, left briefing notes in the car. I met Captain Yang and his interpreter. From them I gathered that we could have the job, but only at SELCO's price of three million. The ship was not entered in a P&I Club. We also had to hire a China Salvage ship for half a million US to take the chemicals back to China, where they could deal with them. I was reasonably happy with this last condition, not knowing how we would dispose of the stuff otherwise.

We agreed, then Yang stood up and said 'well Ma-tian we should get something to eat.' Over breakfast I asked him why, as his English was so good, he used an interpreter. He just said 'it gives me time to think.'

Some months later, as the job was drawing to a close, Lee Sook Fung came in waving a sheaf of papers – 'Boss, you should not take on these jobs, we will be lucky to break even.' I asked for a meeting with Yang and explained the position to him; he said that there could be no more money, but he would give me the ship. I said please don't 'give' it to

me you will get me the sack. I suggested is that he could sell it to the company, for a token dollar – this he agreed to do. I called Rainer, who got in touch with Mr Ho at National Iron and Steel, Singapore. He offered us half a million US; we were in no position to haggle as both sides new that the broken backed hulk would never survive a sea voyage.

A few weeks later I was at the shipbreakers with Rainer and Halim Noor, our salvage co-ordinator, who had re-joined us. The salvage officer who was piloting the vessel up the creek called on the radio: 'I'm passing Yellow Pinky's (SELCO), shall I scuttle her here?' I said, 'no, we need the money.' As our tugs pushed the casualty onto the mud we enjoyed a glass of Champagne! The following year I found out that the way that China Salvage had 'dealt with' the chemicals was to dump them on the voyage back to Guangzhou.

Some weeks later the duty man in the operations room called asking for the go ahead to take on a salvage operation. It was a hot evening and I knew that Sook Fung would be sitting up waiting for the temperature to drop before going to bed, so I called her. I asked whether we should take the job on. She said 'Boss that is for you to decide', I said 'yes and don't you forget it in future, I have already given the OK.'

Not fair, I know!

On the 4 February 1983 we heard that the Taiwanese cargo ship *Tung Ching* was on fire in the South China Sea. She carried 82,000 boxes of oranges destined for Singapore. We dispatched our salvage tug *Smit Singapore* who located the abandoned and gutted derelict and took it in tow. We learnt that the crew had been saved from the life rafts by a tanker, complete with their suitcases! We could see that we were on a hiding to nothing. Others had heard too, soon my chief tormentor was on the phone, 'K a l e n b u r g, I'm in the market for some hot orange juice, ha, ha.'

A quick survey confirmed our worst fears and the best deal we could come to was to take the ship out and scuttle her. The P&I Club paid us a measly US\$60,000 for the job. The Lloyds book Modern Shipping Disasters says that she was 'deliberately sunk with explosive charges near Indonesia.' Where we got the explosives from I do not know! We pieced together a probable scenario: the oranges would have been for Chinese New Year, which that year was on 13 February; in all probability the cargo would have arrived too late to get it to the shops.



Balstad had previously been the Oakland Star

A better payer was the Panamanian motor ship *Balstad*, laden with 10,000 tons of bulk sugar. Fire had broken out in the crew accommodation while the ship was bunkering off Singapore. Our tugs extinguished the fire and put the vessel to anchor, but she was declared a CTL and was sold for breaking. We were paid just over S\$900,000, but I suspect that included delivering the casualty to Taiwan.

As salvage income is unpredictable we would usually keep a couple of tugs on contract towing. Our cost base was always higher than much of the competition, so we generally got the more difficult jobs. After the 1984 recession there was a steady stream of work towing VLCCs and ULCCs, mainly from lay-up in Labuan Bay, to Taiwan for scrap. As our tugs were comparatively low powered we needed two to undertake each tow. It took many hours to get the tow up to speed, if you can call four or five knots 'speed.'

One such tow was handled by the Mississippi, Orinoco or Hudson, plus the Smit Colombo or Smit Rangoon. The rivers were old style single screw Smit tugs, fantastic heavy towing machines, but of only 2,400 BHP. The other tug was much more modern, twin screw and about double the horse power. Part way through one such tow the twin screw tug suffered a complete power failure and quickly lost way. The tow showed no signs of slowing and the bulbous bow was getting ever nearer. Fortunately the single screw tug was almost able to slew the tanker clear of her disabled sister, which only suffered minor damage to her mast and radio aerials.

After one tow I got an angry call from the scrap merchant in Taipei, he called my crew nasty names as the tow had arrived almost devoid of brass. The scrappers made good money selling compasses, telegraphs and the like. After a bit of questioning I found what was happening. During the tow the crew would put the launch down and visit the tow armed with a set of tools – they would then sell the spidge to other scrap merchants.

It dawned on me that we could make more money if we bought the tankers and sold them on delivery. This we did for a while, but it was a worrying business. If the price of scrap fell during the tow, the merchant would find every excuse not to accept delivery. I had visions of having to tell Rotterdam that two of the tugs were off Taiwan with a hundred thousand of scrap that we owned and no one would accept. Fortunately it never came to that. Some of the last tows had a sad end, the crews were told to leave the old tugs with the tow as they had been sold: as increasingly the oil industry would not charter tugs 'with one wheel.'

Rt: Sook Fung and Kim with 'The Mem', as she was always called, in about 2008

