

A Salvor's Lot

By Roy Martin Part III - The Price of Oil

During my seven years in Singapore we successfully carried out 196 salvage operations. Most were saving cargo ships or tankers; but three of the casualties were drilling rigs:

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In November 1981 the oil rig *D M Saunders* struck a reservoir of inert gas while drilling in the Java Sea. This caused one of her three legs to sink into the seabed and the rig to tilt at about 35°. Rainer Kasel, our Salvage Manager, and I flew to Jakarta, as did David Hancox from Selco.

The following morning we met the Reading & Bates reps for a working breakfast, surely a short cut to indigestion! It was immediately obvious that the rig would require a serious heavy lift capacity, and, as Selco's only sheerleg was in Bandar Aceh, we were the only ones who could do the job.

Rainer outlined how he proposed to upright the rig, using our two biggest sheerlegs the *Smit Cyclone* and *Smit Monsoon*; we usually called them cranes, though they didn't slew. Between them they could do a main jib lift of 900 tons: then the biggest in South East Asia. Now the largest single unit in the Smit FELS joint venture, which we set-up in 1985, has a capacity of 5,000 tons.

I was asked what the units would cost and I gave a day rate of \$25,000 per crane/per day. The American said, 'we are talking US dollars aren't we?' I said 'of course'; with that Rainer slid under the table so that the man wouldn't see him laughing. Our pricing was always done in Singapore Dollars, at two to the US\$, so I had seized the opportunity to double the price.

Rainer reappeared and said, 'we're going to need one of the Mobile Salvage teams as well.' I was then asked what that would cost; I replied another \$25,000 per day. At this point the Texan went quite white and I realised I'd overdone it! However we both knew that he had no alternative, so we had a deal.



Rainer Kasel



A similar collapse

There was only one seat on the first helicopter, so Rainer went out on that. I went on the next flight and, as we were nearing the casualty, I could see that the rig had a jack-up accommodation unit next to it. The photograph (left) shows a similar collapse. When we arrived I found that the Texans were being ordered here and there by Rainer; one of them said 'Gee this is some Kraut, but we can't understand a word he says.'

The mobile salvage crew were quickly at work and one of the cranes, which had been salvaging a dredger in the Java Sea, arrived soon afterwards. The second one was towed from Singapore. Lyle Craigie-Halkett was in charge of one and Edward (Ted) Hosking the other. Both were ex Risdon Beazley men, made redundant when the firm closed earlier that year. With Ivan Woodford they made a great team of Salvage Officers.

With both cranes stabilising the rig for 24 hours, they cut off the lower leg. This allowed them to straighten the hull and allowed the rig crew to jack the unit down and disconnect the drill string, which had been under tension.

After recovering the remains of the leg the whole spread was towed back to Singapore. Another complex job, completed in about a week.

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One evening in January 1983 I went to a friend's house, who greeted me as always, 'still got your pacemaker on then', pointing to my pager. Shortly afterwards the 'pacemaker' beeped and I went to the car and called the Operations Room on the company frequency. I was told that they had Mr Kasel for me. Rainer's message was that, after leaving the Keppel ship repair yard, the drill ship *Eniwetok* fouled the Sentosa cable car. As I wasn't needed I went back to the party! Less than half an hour later the pager went again. It was Rainer - can you come down as 'this is getting political, the BG is here.' The BG was shorthand for the Brigadier General; Prime Minister Lee's eldest son Lee Hsien Loong. Some Singaporeans said that BG stood for 'Baby God.' Indeed that Lee is now the Prime Minister.

I made my way to the PSA tower, the north terminal for the cable car. It seemed that four cars, with thirteen passengers were stuck amid the fouled cables. Those in another two had been thrown in the water, killing seven people. Though we didn't know it at the time one youngster had survived the fall. Rainer told me that the *Smit Monsoon* was on her way; but that the PSA team couldn't, or wouldn't, tell him the height of the cables. When I insisted that we be told I was given a figure of fifty meters; this was just within the working height of the *Monsoon* with the 20 meter fly jib that she had rigged.

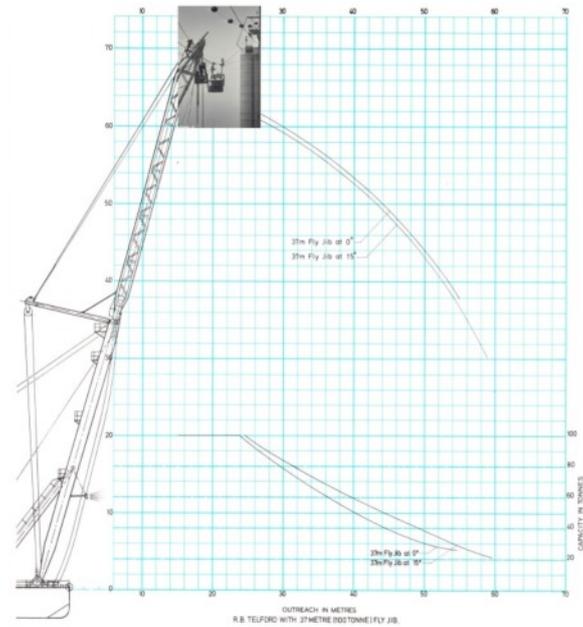
Not long afterwards the crane arrived. It was difficult to see from the tower, but it looked as if the jib was short by a tantalising amount. For Ted Hosking and his team, who were looking up, it was impossible to see. At this point it should be said that handling the crane in the strong current was a nerve wracking business, one error and more people would have been killed.

Ted decided that the only way was to climb up the jib; in the dark and with a strong breeze, this was no easy task either.

When he got to the top he found that we were indeed short by a couple of meters, however he was able to talk to the terrified people in one of the cars. Now Ted comes from the land of Francis Drake and his report, which seemed to come through at full volume, was 'there's three women and two children in this car; um's scared, but not as s*** scared as I am.' Rainer shouted 'kill that radio', as it was near I reached across and switched it off. I then went to the PSA managers. They at first claimed 'your crane is too short.' I replied that they had given me the wrong height, it turned out later that this was the clearance height.



The only photograph I have found: the bold hero at the top is believed to be Boatswain Danny MacDonald.



up the jib and lash it somehow, to evacuate the passengers. I invited him to come and show us how this could be done, but he declined!

Our involvement in that part of the operation was over; but we remained to be treated to the finest display of flying that I have ever seen. An Australasian helicopter pilot, and his Malay winchman, succeeded in rescuing all the trapped passengers. At the time we thought the pilot was a Kiwi, but it now appears that he was an Australian.

Rainer had spent much of his working life with the Harms cranes, *Monsoon* had been their *Magnus II* (and then the *RB Telford*). He felt that we could untangle the wires after 'flipping' the cars. We offered to do this for a day rate.

The tugs took the crane back to our Jurong base. The crew spent the night lowering the jib to the horizontal, removing the 20 meter fly jib and fixing the 37 meter jib in its place. When you consider that these men had done a day's work, had their well-earned evening drink interrupted, and had spent all evening under stress; it was to their great credit that the crane was back on site for the mornings work.

At the end of that day one car remained to be untangled. I went back to the PSA tower to tell them that it was too dangerous to continue in the dark and we would need another day, on hire. They seemed confused that I hadn't charged for the rescue attempt, but now wanted to sting them for an extra day. I pointed out that seamen don't charge for life salvage. They couldn't get their heads round that and we got the sack. I was mad as we had done the hard bit! On the way in Singapore Broadcasting Corporation had asked me for an interview. I gave it on the way out and those who heard it told me that my 'frustration showed' and I was broad Dorset.

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Late in October 1983 we received a message that a drill ship *Glomar Java Sea* was missing in the South China Sea. On further enquiry it seemed that the ship was on hire to the Chinese, but was working nearer to Vietnam, in disputed waters. At 2348 on 25 October the Assistant Rig Manager had called the owners to report that the ship was caught in typhoon LEX and experiencing 75 knot winds. He also said that she had an unexplained 15° list. The call was broken off and nothing further was heard from the *Glomar Java Sea*. The Chinese let it be known that they suspected the Vietnamese of 'taking' the ship. We offered the *Smit Manila*, one of the former Risdon Beazley vessels, which was fitted with a hull-mounted sonar: probably the only such unit then in South East Asia.

Our ship was loaded with anchors and chains, to moor over the casualty if we found it; plus a small ROV and all the other tackle that we thought we might need. The decks were well cluttered. Late in the evening the American charterers turned hostile, saying that if the vessel didn't leave by midnight we would be off-hired. As the crew still had much of the sea-fastening to do it was agreed with the Salvage



Smit Manila 5,000 BHP

Officer, Lyle Craigie-HHalkett, that we would sail; but only as far as our floating base the *Eastern Salvor*. There the crew made the ship properly ready for sea.

Smit Manila arrived onsite and began searching, within hours she had found a large contact. As the deck was encumbered the moorings were transferred to a Chinese supply vessel, who laid them, more or less to Lyle's requirements. Once on the moor the small ROV was deployed and the contact was confirmed as the *Glomar Java Sea*. Subsequent reports said that the Master of the drill ship had wanted to pull the moorings as typhoon Lex was forecast to track over the ship. He was overruled by the Offshore Installation Manager, who insisted that the ship remain so that drilling could resume as soon as the typhoon had passed.

As far as we could work out: some time after the typhoon struck, the starboard bow mooring chain parted and the ship capsized in 317 feet of water. Eighty one people died, including, we were told, two teenagers who were sons of people in the management team.

One of the lifeboats may have been launched, but no one seems to have survived. On the 27th a merchant ship reported a distress message from a station using the *Glomar Java Sea's* call sign. The US Coastguard report on the tragedy said that this could only have been a manual transmission from the lifeboat. The following day a capsized lifeboat was spotted by a Chinese helicopter. There were wild stories that some of the American crew had picked up and were imprisoned in Vietnam. This was yet another in a long line of disasters in the marine oil industry.