

Hoegh Osaka

Some immediate thoughts on the successful salvage operation

The dramatic grounding of the large car carrier *Hoegh Osaka* on the 3rd January raised the spectacle of first, how did it happen and second, how would it be removed. As I write this piece the salvors, Svitzer, have successfully brought the ship into Southampton, the cargo has been discharged and the *Hoegh Osaka* has been moved to Falmouth.

The ship sailed from Southampton at about 2020hours on the 3rd January. It has been reported that soon after leaving the berth she developed an alarming list. The Master and pilot became extremely concerned and just after passing the notorious Bramble Bank located between the mouth of Southampton water and Cowes on the Isle of Wight a decision was made to deliberately beach the ship on the bank. This action prevented what was seen as a possible



capsize situation and allowed the local RNLI and other rescue services to take all the crew off and to safety. Two crew were injured, but suffered non-life threatening injuries and were duly treated in hospital. The casualty lay aground away from the main navigable channel so the port was able to run normally with some speed restrictions near the *Hoegh Osaka*. The ship lay where she was grounded at a heel angle of 52 degrees. The UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch has started its own investigation that will examine every aspect of the ships sailing condition to try and determine exactly what led to the situation arising. Given the ship had on board some 1400 high value cars (Jaguars and Land Rovers) plus a sizeable consignment of heavier plant (JCBs) the value of the cargo is likely to exceed US\$ 80million.

The Bramble bank is known to be somewhat fluid. An early attempt of refloating had been planned for 7th January, but the discovery of water on board led to it being postponed. The ship had been reported to being “lively” at high water, giving salvors some encouragement that an early refloating was possible. Indeed, the *Hoegh Osaka* refloated the next day in an unscheduled moment when strong south-westerly winds combined with a high tide and took the ship off the bank. To many this might suggest the salvors were unprepared. First, the ship was brought under control rapidly and second, it is not unusual for grounded ships to refloat unaided. It is not known exactly what did occur, but the strong tides and associated scouring effect may have played a part in creating conditions suitable for refloating.

The next two weeks saw the ship placed, moored and connected to tugs, in the Solent between Lee on the Solent and Cowes Isle of Wight. While bad weather did threaten, she held her own and the salvage operation was able to continue once the weather settled down. Progress was initially slow; not surprising when getting about the ship initially at an angle of over 50 degrees is a slow and very dangerous operation (don’t try this at home!). Gradually water was pumped out and the ship slowly came nearly upright.

A decision had been made to leave the 500 tons of bunker oil on board. Clearly insisting on the oil removal would have put salvage workers in great peril, trying to access tanks, rig pumps and piping at 50° is extremely hazardous and all credit to the UK SOSREP (Secretary of State’s Representative) and the Salvage Master for agreeing that leaving the contained bunkers in situ was the preferred option.

Once nearly upright, the ship was towed into the port of Southampton where there will be a flurry of activity on many fronts. I suspect many surveyors and other experts will be busy on the following issues:

Salvage – the award

Cargo – What will happen to the 1400 cars and other heavy plant?

Causation – the MAIB (Marine Accident Investigation Branch) investigation will have priority so lessons learned can be put into effect

Causation – P & I, Shipowners, cargo interests and H & M surveyors will be busy, At the end of the day it will be all about “who pays”.

Finally, the salvors and UK authorities are to be congratulated in the success of the salvage especially in the challenging weather conditions that sometimes prevailed.

Past Captain John Noble

This article has appeared in the journal of the INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MARINE SURVEYING.