

# Lack of a U K Marine Salvage Capability

Roy Martin expresses his concerns

Press interest in the recent salvage of the *Hoegh Osaka* in the Solent overlooked the total lack of a U K salvage capability.

In the early part of the nineteenth century Britain pioneered the development of both steam tugs and salvage vessels; this meant that most salvage contracts were governed by English Law, with disputes being resolved in London. In turn this led to the development of the Lloyd's Standard Form of Salvage Agreement 'No Cure – No Pay'. The contract was often called the Lloyd's Open Form, because the parties left the reward to be decided by Lloyd's Arbitration Branch. Many U K solicitors and barristers came to specialise in Admiralty Law and many other maritime professionals were UK based.

In peacetime the British tended to neglect the actual performance of salvage, only to suddenly rediscover the need at the outbreak of war. In 1914 the Admiralty found that there was a desperate shortage of all types of salvage craft. They had new salvage tugs built and handed the provision of other salvage services to what was then the Liverpool Salvage Association. After the war the craft were sold off in stages. British operators saw no need to develop better vessels, when they could acquire ex Admiralty plant cheaply. The result was that their continental counterparts soon overtook them. The Dutch particularly saw the possibilities of rescue towage; in 1933 Smit took delivery of the first diesel powered rescue tug, the *Zwarte Zee* of 2,400 BHP.

In 1939 Britain again found itself with a very limited salvage capability. The Admiralty requisitioned those tugs that were available. They were fortunate that the French Les Abeilles company had set up a British subsidiary, Overseas Towage and Salvage, which had built new tugs in Britain. They were doubly fortunate that the builders of those ships, Henry Robb, had designed a new diesel tug to compete with the *Zwarte Zee*, this later became the Admiralty 'Bustler' class of eight 3,000 BHP tugs. In 1940 many of the Dutch tugs escaped to the UK to join the fleet.

A salvage fleet was cobbled together and managers were appointed, each being responsible for salvage on part of the British coast. Many of the vessels were old, the oldest dating from 1880! The last of the managers to be appointed was Risdon Beazley of Southampton, who took over the management of more vessels than the rest put together. Metal Industries Ltd provided the Principal Salvage Officers.

Two new classes of salvage vessels were built. Most of these were put under Beazley's management and, when D-Day was planned, this Southampton company became responsible for the salvage vessels off the three British landing beaches. They also made a significant contribution to salvage work off of Utah and Omaha and then the clearance of the port of Cherbourg; which had been deliberately blocked and booby trapped by the retreating troops. This task was to have been an all American effort; but they recognised the need for the British lifting craft, a type of vessel that they did not have.

After the war it was agreed that Britain would never again leave itself without a salvage capability. The war-built units were put under Admiralty management, with some being bare-boat chartered to commercial firms. Risdon Beazley took two of the salvage ships and kept an enormous stock of salvage equipment at its Southampton base. The company also tried to venture into ocean towage, with a Bustler class tug, but were soon overtaken by various continental companies, who were able to work freely in Britain. Beazley went on to concentrate on salvage and wreck removal, plus cargo recovery.



Two British companies continued in rescue towage, Overseas Towage and Salvage of London and United Towing of Hull. OTS was acquired by Smit Internationale of Rotterdam and was sold abroad in the early 70s. United Towing's last ocean-going tug remained in the Falklands until 1991, when it returned it was sold and the company wound-up.

In 1965 the East German cargo ship *Magdeburg*, with a cargo that included forty two buses destined for Cuba, capsized in the Thames after being in collision with the Japanese *Yamashiro Maru*. The task of removing this large casualty was beyond the Port of London Authority lifting craft and a new type, the sheerlegs *Magnus*, was mobilised from Hamburg. Up-righting this large ship also needed the newly built *Magnus II*, which came later. Both cranes were owned by Ulrich Harms GmbH, which had been formed in 1962. Wreck removal was changing and neither the British nor the Dutch had equivalent vessels.

By 1969 Risdon A Beazley was in poor health and he decided to put his company into voluntary liquidation, it was said that this was to prevent the Dutch gaining control. He was persuaded that a joint venture with Ulrich Harms was a better option. Harms took a controlling interest in the Southampton company. In 1973 Smit bought Ulrich Harms, and with it Risdon Beazley Ulrich Harms, which closed in 1981. Harms soon followed.

As far as the authorities in Britain were concerned none of this mattered. Smit and Wijsmuller had a fleet of rescue tugs and Smit Tak now controlled a large fleet of salvage cranes. Additionally the Admiralty still had a salvage organisation; but by 1994 that had also been run down. In May of that year Lord Donaldson's report 'Safer Ships, Cleaner Seas' led to the deployment of a fleet of four large salvage tugs as Emergency Towing Vessels. This contract was terminated in 2012 following the Comprehensive Spending Review of 2010. One vessel, under the Swedish flag, remains based at Orkney; it is locally funded.

The combined bollard pull of the berthing and terminal tugs in the main ports might seem to be adequate to provide the required coverage, but berthing tugs have little salvage capability. They have crews of three or four, who work on a shift system, so there needs to be a crew change several times a day. They have no pumping capability, nor patching materials; most cannot lay out anchors to secure the casualty and none have additional accommodation for salvage crew or divers.

At this point it should be said that even rescue tugs are often not the best craft to render salvage. As we have seen the clearance work following D-Day was achieved by lifting and salvage craft rather than tugs – though the tugs did fantastic work towing the Mulberry harbour units and assisting casualties at sea.

Previously Britain could rely on back up from the continent; but the principal Dutch tugs have now been scrapped and the German and French tugs are funded by their governments and committed to protecting their own coasts. The Danish company Svitzer are now the only ones in northern Europe providing salvage teams. Their Salvage Masters and crews are former Wijsmuller men based in Ijmuiden, though it seems that they no longer operate salvage tugs (or salvage vessels?).

**This should be a cause for concern. Though it will not matter if there is another war: our merchant fleet, which sustained us through two world wars, is now but a shadow of its former self, so we could be starved into submission within months.**



**Parbuckling *Hornland*, Rotterdam Waterway 1969?**