

South Georgia Salvage

Roy Martin recounts another unsung saga of marine salvage, this time in the deep south.

The mountainous island of South Georgia is mostly just south of the 54° parallel, about 800 nautical miles east of the Falkland Islands. It is almost 100 miles long, lying roughly NW/SE. Though it is well outside the Antarctic Circle its climate is not dissimilar to that of Spitsbergen. It was first recorded in 1675 by a London based French merchant called Antoine de la Roche. Captain Cook made the first survey in 1775. It is interesting that the commercial chart that was produced using his work is 'south up'. (*The Admiralty did not set up the Hydrographic Office until 1795; they poached Dalrymple from the East India Company to head it.*)

Shore based whaling and sealing did not begin on the island until 1904, when Captain C A Larsen based his Argentina de Pesca operation at Grytviken in Cumberland Bay, others followed. Whaling ceased in 1965. Christian Salvesen, who had operated Leith, Stromness and Prince Olav Harbour, acquired the leases of Husvik and Grytviken in the early 70s. In 1979 Salvesen granted a salvage contract to Davidoff, an Argentinian scrap merchant. He began work at Leith some when in late 1981. Argentina seized control of Grytviken and Leith on 3 April 1982, and this marked the start of the Falklands Emergency.

In 1988 my colleague Lyle Craigie-Halkett suggested that we, Marine Salvage Services, should approach Salvesen about continuing the work, but without starting another war. An American financier agreed to fund the venture. Our timing was opportune as Salvesen had decided that there was no future in whaling and they wished to relinquish their leases. Before allowing this the Government was insisting that the stations should be cleaned up.

Our American must have decided that he had bitten off more than he could chew, for he faded away. We let Salvesen know of this unfortunate development. Shortly afterwards their Company Secretary came back and asked if we would still be prepared to survey the stations at their expense, and price the salvage and clean-up. This we were only too happy to do!

Early in December 1989 Lyle and I flew to the Falklands from RAF Brize Norton, with a refuelling stop at Ascension Island. We were to join HMS *Endurance*, with Dr Nigel Bonner and Mr Rolf Casperson, representing Salvesen. From 1953 Nigel had spent long periods in South Georgia, both as a scientist and an inspector; Rolf had been the Chief Engineer at Leith for many years. Lyle had been to the island a number of times. His grandfather, as Colonial Treasurer, was a signatory to the original agreement with Pesca in 1904. I was the only new boy in our party. Other passengers included Ian Hart, who later wrote a history of Pesca, and a representative of the Foreign Office.

The survey took just under three weeks, at the end of which we had assessed the amounts of fuel, asbestos, fibre glass metals and other residues that needed treatment. We also attempted to quantify the arisings that could be sold.

Having completed our work we were in Grytviken for Christmas Eve. Andrew Salvesen had arrived in another ship and cheered us all by settling our mess bills!

We visited Shackleton's grave at the cemetery. Days before we had stood at the door of the manager's house at Stromness, where Shackleton, Worsley and Crean had ended their epic journey from Elephant Island. After a sixteen day voyage in the twenty three foot *James Caird*, they made landfall at Fortuna Bay on the windward side of the island on 9 May 1916. They then established 'Peggotty Camp', beneath the upturned boat, further up the bay. Leaving two sick members of the crew there, with another to attend to them, the three set off at 0300 on the 19 May. They crossed the spine of the island, arriving at Stromness mid-morning on the 20th. Worsley afterwards described them as:

Ragged, filthy and evil-smelling; hair and beards long and matted with soot and blubber; unwashed for three months, and no bath nor change of clothing for seven months.

The manager and his wife fed them, then arranged baths and changes of clothing.

Those RN personnel on the present day HMS *Endurance* found it difficult to comprehend that these three were merchant seamen, like another of their heroes, Captain James Cook, had been.

We then went to the little church, the only one on the island, for a late night service. The FCO man played the miniature organ, while the ship's doctor drizzled brandy down the organist's throat. On Christmas morning the doctor didn't seem to be as bright as we expected. No wonder, he had spent much of the night stitching up the face of a soldier from King Edward Point, who had attempted to kiss a fur seal goodnight.

Christmas dinner was served in the Ward Room, unchanged since it had been the saloon when the ship was the *Anita Dan*. After the meal a weary Lyle rested his head on the table and fell asleep, opposite the Captain who had been invited for the meal. We anchored off Port Stanley about 29 December and the Captain managed to disembark us on the weather side, so we all got soaked – he got his own back!

On 12 January we made our report to Salvesen and priced the salvage operation. There was quite a lot of preparatory work to do, so it was agreed that Lyle, his son who is a welder/fabricator, and two Falkland Islanders, would spend the remainder of the Austral summer on the island. They left from Brize Norton on 12 February. During the next three months they cleared many of the oil spills at the stations by hand. In their spare time they cleaned the indescribable waste from the manager's villa at Grytviken and made the building weathertight, ready for the full team to paint the place and stock it as a museum of whaling. Cruise passengers are now taken to the building, but nowhere is there any acknowledgement of the work of these two groups.

Back in the UK I carried on with the planning for the next seasons work. There was a major problem; we were without an expedition ship. We had looked at two vessels in the Falklands, neither was suitable. Even if they had been it would have meant shipping all the equipment down via the Danish ship *AES*. The only vessels that we could find, without going out onto the commercial market, were two RMAS ships in reserve in Portsmouth. We had looked at one, the *Throsk*, in the spring; but could not go over the other as 'no one can find the keys!' The third photograph on www.tynebuiltships.co.uk/T-Ships/throsk1977.html shows the 'laid up' ships.



Roy Martin, Nigel Bonner, Lyle Craigie Halkett and Rolf Caspersen

After a September meeting in Whitehall I was walking back to the FCO with Robert Macaire, a young civil servant who had recently taken over the Falklands and South Georgia desk. I told him that the project was in the balance because of the lack of a ship and that the Admiralty had two suitable ships, which they weren't using. It turned out that Robert's previous posting had been with the MOD and he promised to see what he could do to secure one of the vessels. He responded very quickly.



HMS Endurance alongside at Grytviken

There was no way the Admiralty would charter *Throsk* to Marine Salvage Services or me, even though I had been managing ships for twenty years. But they had been 'persuaded' to charter her to Salvesen; what they had not realised was that Salvesen had been out of shipping for quite a while. Once the charter party was signed, at a token one pound per month, the ship was handed to me to manage. Salvesen still had connections in the marine insurance market and were able to get Hull and Machinery insurance and P & I cover. One thing that did worry me was that the *Throsk* did not have a port of registry on the stern and was supposed to fly the Blue Ensign. Strangely this never caused a problem during the eight months we had her on charter.

The early weeks of autumn were the busiest I had known since my time in Singapore. *Throsk* was delivered to Southampton, towed by an RMAS tug – not a good sign! A & P Appledore dry docked her in KGV. The two of us set to work. We had to recruit a crew, bunker and store the ship, purchase second hand equipment for the project; while reporting regularly to Salvesens and the FCO. Denholms acted as our Agents, and found us some freight to reduce the costs. I was fortunate to recruit my friend William Sandell, formerly of Sandell Brothers, who took on the bookkeeping. I had seen an advert for some straightforward accounting software, so I ran a parallel set of accounts on my MS-DOS computer.

The problems were many, but do not need recounting here! Finally sailing day came and I was relieved to see the ship sail off down Southampton Water. I got home and was about to pour my second, or maybe third, drink. The phone went: 'this is Niton Radio, I have the *Throsk* for you.' There was a fault in the steering gear. The RMAS seemed not to have spares, even though they had two sister ships. I spent hours tracking down the piece that was required – delivery took two frustrating days.

Fortunately that was the only problem we had with that nice little ship and eighteen days later I was on the quay to see her arrive in Montevideo. There we loaded more stores and equipment, before she set off for Port Stanley and South Georgia. After *Throsk* had sailed I looked at a couple of tankers that the Agents had found for us and chose *Copemar 1*, a former Danish 499grt vessel equipped with a steam generator.

The crews worked valiantly, in the most trying conditions, completing the job on time. The tanker heated and loaded 1,800 tons of FFO and diesel, which she took back to Montevideo. There the Agents sold the cargo to a Montevideo utility company, at a good profit. However I got a call from the owners of the tanker, she had suffered so much heavy weather damage that they were considering scrapping her. We took her on for another voyage, so they carried out the repairs! On the second trip the tanker loaded about the same amount. Sadly the oil price had fallen considerably; in all we only made a profit of £697 on an outlay of £190,931. But most importantly the oil was off the island. We kept the remaining diesel for *Throsk's* homeward trip.



Copemar 1 steaming tanks

To carry out their work the team made temporary repairs to jetties, rail tracks and pipelines and dealt with bunkers in several of the abandoned catchers. In addition they entombed quantities of blue and white asbestos and large amounts of unused fibreglass in pressure vessels and oil tanks.

It would take far too long to list the work that was carried out, and be very boring! I can provide the information if required.

As with any salvage jobs this one was not without problems and lighter moments.

Dirk Geelen, one of the engineers, asked if he could spend the night ashore at Stromness. Depending on which version of the story you believe, this was to observe the wildlife or to get away from the endless Pavarotti issuing from the next cabin. Dirk was kitted out with all the right gear and a VHF schedule arranged. The next morning he called earlier than expected. As he sounded very disturbed the launch was immediately sent from the ship at Leith. Dirk was waiting on the jetty, with his gear. It was some hours before they found out what the problem had been. Dirk had crawled out of his sleeping bag to look out of the window, with its one remaining pane of glass, hoping to see the reindeer grazing near the building: instead he saw a naked blonde washing in the stream, tough girl!



Summer! Throsk alongside

What had happened, in Lyle's words 'The Greenpeace clapped-out ex supply boat *Gondwana* had hove in (to Stromness), with her attendant oil slick from a leaky stern gland.' Obviously some of the crew had gone ashore, including the blonde.

'Interaction' with Greenpeace was part of life. Lyle was left with one of the oil tanks, well away from the tank farm, with the piping shot. The oil had to be disposed of, so they piled dry timber on the almost solid oil and set it alight. The smoke went straight up (I have a photograph – but one column of smoke is much like another). Along came



The team at the Grytviken manager's villa that they had renovated and stocked in their spare time

the environmentalists, who asked what the heck he was up to. Lyle, not thinking, said 'it's alright there's a hole in the ozone layer and the smoke will go out through that'! To be told, you are not taking this seriously Mr Halkett.

I was next to have a problem. I received a message through Portishead Radio; a clumsy business because messages one way or the other had to be sent by the Post! The team had found about fifty tons of acid in a tank, what should they do with it? I called the chemists that we used to use in the Risdon Beazley days. They said that the important thing was to add the acid to water to dilute it, not the other way round. I worked out a disposal method; which was put to Greenpeace. When they rejected it I asked what they suggested. The answer I got was to the effect 'it's your job to suggest a solution and our job to tell you that you can't do it'. Helpful!

In the event the Master and another of the engineers took the job on, they camped ashore, with only blonde reindeers and brunette fur seals for company (plus a few thousand penguins). They set up piping and slowly drizzled the acid into a nearby

fast flowing stream, thence to the sea where it was massively diluted.

With the task completed the *Throsk*, loaded with plant, non-ferrous metal and whaling artefacts, sailed for Port Stanley. Much of the plant was sold in Stanley and, after a short break the UK crew sailed for home.

The stay in Portsmouth was brief. The metals were sold locally, for a profit of £45,890. This might have been more, but the merchant claimed that there was no market for the metals that the Corvette propellers were made of and we didn't have time to find another buyer. The Corvettes had been purchased by, or allocated to, Salvesen in lieu of war losses; they had been used as catchers until replacements could be built. The Norwegian skipper/gunners had them removed because they blamed the drop in catches on the 'singing' props! There were also ASDIC sets and domes in the stores.

About eight Konsberg whaling guns were distributed around various museums; from memory we only got acknowledgements from two or three. Two steam donkey engines that had been built in Bourton, Dorset, were sent to Breamore House near Fordingbridge.

The job was budgeted at £662,000. The final bill, a year later, was £679,711.

We wanted to put in an offer to buy the *Throsk* but she was transferred to the Ecuadorians instead. There was no newspaper coverage about our efforts. An article about the clean-up appeared in the Independent on Sunday, but it failed to even mention us. The idea was that the job had been done by the FCO, or the whaling stations were 'self-cleaning.'

However on 13 March 1992 the Chairman of Christian Salvesen wrote:

I write formally now to thank you and your company for the highly professional operation carried out on our behalf in the most difficult of conditions.

It was not only well done technically in terms of fully meeting the exacting conditions laid down, but it was also done within the critical timing conditions and within budget.

It was an operation that could only have been performed with the highest degree of skill, resourcefulness and initiative and we congratulate you and thank the Director and crew involved in this significant achievement.

Yours sincerely, John West

I wrote to Robert Macaire to thank him for his help, he sent me a charming reply. Last year, when I handed most of my papers about the project to Lyle, I asked Robert's permission to include his letter. He replied by e-mail:

Dear Roy

It was delightful to be reminded of my days on the Falklands and South Georgia desk, and the operation to clean up the whaling stations. You and the team did a great job, as I recall. And it was a fascinating project to be involved in.

Of course I am very happy for you to include whatever I wrote at the time as part of the archival record.

I hope you are well, and wish you the very best. Since we last met, my career has taken me to Romania, the US, India and Kenya (As High Commissioner, after which he was made a CMG) and I am now working for an oil and gas company, though only temporarily before returning to the Foreign Office. But I still remember those Falkland Island days with great affection.

Yours ever Rob



Left, Roy Martin, the author,

as a Harpooner

and

right, fit for a

Christmas Card,

Grytviken Church

