

## A Salvor's Lot

By Roy Martin Part IV - The Price of Oil - 2

*The final episode of Roy's account of his time in Singapore*

The Iran/Iraq war began in 1980; but it was not until 1984 that serious attacks on neutral ships started. Lloyd's estimated that the conflict, which became known as the Tanker War, damaged 546 merchant vessels and killed about 430 civilian seafarers. The Iraqis launched about three times as many attacks as the Iranians. In 1987 the United States offered to protect neutral ships, but only if they re-registered under the US flag.

Early in 1984 both Smit and Selco sent salvage tugs to the area. From Singapore we sent the two 4,200 BHP (60 ton bollard pull) fire-fighting/salvage tugs *Smit Colombo* and *Smit Rangoon*; Smit International Middle East (SIME) supplied the *Drado* of 2370 BHP and the *Argus IV* of 800 BHP. Selco sent a similar fleet.

Rather than describe all the fifteen major salvages that were carried out I intend to concentrate on one, the *Tiburon*, as this is the only one that I still have on file. Coincidentally this earned the biggest salvage award. The *Tiburon* had recently been purchased by the Suisse Outremer Reederei in Zurich and registered in Liberia. The ship had been built by Kockums of Malmo, Sweden, as the *Sea Scout*.

Just after Noon on 27 June 1984 the *Tiburon* was struck by an Exocet missile fired by an Iraqi aircraft. The casualty left Kharg Island earlier that day with just over 250,000 tons of crude oil. The cargo in the centre tanks was heavy crude, while the wing tanks contained a lighter grade. The missile struck the vessel in the forward starboard bunker tank and the resulting explosion caused shrapnel holes in the main deck. The explosion, and/or the subsequent escape of steam, killed seven in the engine room and fatally injured an eighth. Seven others were also injured. Smoke and heat entered the accommodation and the intense heat, smoke and steam prevented the Chief Engineer entering the engine room wearing breathing apparatus. The owner's superintendent rescued the Radio Officer. The ship was left without power and was therefore immobilised.

Distress messages sent on the VHF and MF were picked up at Kharg Island and by SIME, their tug *Drado* and the station tugs *Smit Colombo* and *Salvanguard*. The station tugs sailed for the casualty immediately. At about 1320 two injured crew members were rescued by an Iranian helicopter and 40 minutes later a lifeboat was lowered and taken to the bow; where all but three of the surviving crew members and the owner's superintendent boarded. They were transferred to an Iranian Coastguard launch an hour later. At 1530 the flames had reached D deck in the accommodation block, so the remaining four left the casualty.

The Kharg Island tug *Karbal* was the first on site, with a crew of 12 and 25 from the Bushire Fire Brigade. The superintendent transferred to the Iranian tug, the Master and the rest of the crew left for Iran. The *Karbal* was joined by two Iranian fire-fighting tugs late that evening. They attempted to fight the fire, under the direction of the superintendent, while the *Karbal* towed the casualty downwind to minimise fanning the flames. Despite their efforts the fire was worsening.

The *Salvanguard* arrived at about midnight and their superintendent boarded. As the first salvage ship on site the Master expected to be awarded the contract; but when the superintendent contacted the owners he was told that an LOF had already been agreed with Smit in Rotterdam. Selco became the sub-contractor and would therefore share in any award. The *Smit Colombo* arrived shortly afterwards and the two Masters agreed that the *Salvanguard*, the most powerful of the tugs, would take over the tow at dawn, while the *Smit Colombo* fought the fire alongside.

There were changes in the Iranian tugs and a new arrival, the *Favardin*, with a salvage officer on board, connected and seemed to be attempting to tow the casualty back to Kharg island. This was not what the contractors intended and, in any case, this route would have involved crossing a 30 metre shoal; with the tanker's after draft of near 26 metres increasing by the hour.

Later that morning the Iranian authorities agreed that the casualty should be taken to Bahrain and the *Favardin* disconnected. The contractors thanked the Iranians and agreed to remunerate them for their services. The salvors brought the fire under control, only to suffer further explosions, which caused the fire in the vicinity of the engine room to intensify. The tugs were now running short of foam. By the 29th both salvors had salvage officers and their teams on site and additional chartered vessels with stocks of foam were arriving. The Salvage Association's surveyor also arrived.

Because of the water ingress, and intentional ballasting, the vessel was getting ever lower in the water. Photographs taken that afternoon show waves breaking over the deck edge: the freeboard was estimated to have reduced to about half a metre. The heat on the deck was causing the cargo valves to exhaust heavily. That evening a Smit fire-fighting expert and his team boarded and started an inspection. As they neared to starboard bunker tank there was another explosion. It was assumed that the foam blanket had been breached. The boiler room casing was red hot and it was obvious that the fire was both deep seated and intense.

Late on the evening of the 29th the casualty and the salvage vessels were closing the oil fields near the Saudi Arabian coast; so the course was altered to give more sea room. Boundary cooling continued through the night and several course alterations were made due to wind shifts. During the morning the wind freshened and *Salvanguard* swung the casualty on to a heading of 030. By now the after main deck was continually awash.

Early in the afternoon it appeared that the foam blanket and the constant cooling had extinguished the fire. The tow speed was increased from three to about six knots with several of the tugs connected. But at 2200 the fire re-ignited on the starboard quarter and in the engine room, so the tow speed was again reduced. Within half an hour the fire was brought under control and at 0030 on the 1st July the convoy was clear of the war zone. Only half an hour later the fire broke out again, this time on the boiler casing. The fire was out by



*Tiburon as the Sea Scout*

0215, but cooling continued through the night. By this time the fire - fighters had been divided into four teams, with two in action at any one time, supplemented by members of the tug crews.

Towing and cooling continued throughout the day and the after deck was about two feet under the water. During the last of the daylight the casualty's anchor was prepared for letting go and the *Salvanguard* increased speed to four knots to arrive at 0600 on the 2nd. Near dawn it was necessary for the *Smit Colombo* to assist by side towing, but this caused the tanker to sheer violently. At 0600 a US Navy escort arrived. It was not until 0930 that the *Salvanguard* was able to begin shortening her tow. At 1045 the *Drado* found a shallow patch ahead of the tow, this was negotiated and at 1135 the tow with slipped. The other four tugs took way off the casualty, which was anchored by noon and the *Salvanguard* was released.

Work on the *Tiburon* continued throughout the day. The forepeak was filled to reduce the stern draft and the engine and boiler rooms were filled with foam to prevent gassing. The two teams of divers began a full bottom survey. This had to be abandoned because of the strong current, but two large holes were found some forty feet below the main deck in the way of the boiler room. By midnight the after freeboard was about two feet.

At 2200 on the 6th the chartered tanker *Kourion* (35, 000 Dwt) arrived, her tanks were inspected next morning and the *Drado* put her alongside, with Yokohama fenders between the two tankers. Portable inert gas generators had to be used. The intention was to discharge the light crude from the wing tanks; but the centre tank, with heavy oil, was draining: this meant that the grades were mixing. The *Kourion* loaded 27, 152 tons and sailed. By then the weather had deteriorated to Force 5, with a 6' sea.

On the evening of the 8th the salvage team were informed that BP's *British Renown* (261,000 Dwt) had been chartered to take the bulk of the cargo. At around 1500 the next day came the news that the British tanker had been struck by two Iranian missiles. One had hit near the cargo manifold and caused a small fire, which the crew extinguished; but the tanker needed to return to Dubai for inspection and repair.

As the *British Renown* had only been about 12 to 15 miles away from the casualty when she was hit, it was decided to move the *Tiburon* further south to safer waters. The move had to await the arrival of a U S Navy escort, which was promised for about 36 hours hence. At 0700 on the 12th they began raising the anchor, using two air compressors. The tow began at noon, when the first of the escorts arrived; the second joined shortly afterwards.



*The British Renown*

At 0830 on the 13th came news that the *British Renown* had been re-chartered and had given an ETA of the 15th. The tow continued throughout the day, but approaching midnight the towage connection parted. The remaining tugs managed to keep the casualty on course, with the *Smit Colombo* taking over the tow until the *Salvalour* could reconnect at daybreak.

The casualty was re-anchored at 2038 on the 14th. The *Kourion* was already anchored nearby. The *British Renown* arrived at 0200 on the 16th and by 0830 on the 18th the *Smit Colombo* and the *Drado* had safely berthed her alongside the *Tiburon*.

The transfer was completed on the 30th. Throughout the operation it was found that various tanks were interconnected and hydraulic valves could not be operated, so the lightening tanker carried one homogenous grade. Fortunately the *British Renown* was able to supply inert gas throughout. Divers continued patching the casualty and other temporary repairs were made as required.

The service was terminated on 3th August. After the salvage the *Tiburon* was sold as the *Stib* and subsequently re-sold and broken up, in Kaohsiung.

We in Singapore were not involved in the management of the Gulf salvage operations, but we received a significant proportion of Smit's revenue, having provided the two most significant salvage tugs.

In March 1985 the Pan Electric Group Singapore, Selco's parent company, had been sold to local interests. On the 18th November 1985 Pan Electric requested that their shares be suspended, pending restructuring. On Friday 29 November we heard that receivers were to be appointed. I hurriedly arranged meetings of my colleagues and the other the affected parties for Saturday 30th. These took the form of two working breakfasts at home. The first was for Moslems, the second for the others. June and our Amah served breakfasts to both groups. During the second meeting we heard that the appointment of the receivers had been confirmed.

On Monday morning we learnt that both the Singapore and the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchanges would not open. By this time bankers and others, including the President of Smit and his team, were flying in and other meetings followed. The Stock Exchanges remained closed for three days, re-opening on what, inevitably became known as Black Thursday.

My notes for the main meeting are headed 'Board Room 6th Floor, Room 632 (Old Wing). I suspect that this was in the Monetary Authority of Singapore Building 10 Shenton Way, as I have a memory of the Gurkha guards there. When the meeting got underway we found that Selco had borrowed using the Lloyds Forms from the Gulf Tanker as security. Not only had the various banks ignored the fact that Smit were sub-contractors on the Selco LOF's; they had also advanced considerable sums on the LOFs where we were the prime contractor. To compound the problem two banks had both advanced funds on several of the same contracts, so much for 'due diligence'!

We estimated total receivables from the Gulf LOFs at US\$29 million; of which Selco were due \$14 million. But Selco had borrowed a total of US\$26 million against the contract, plus an unknown amount advanced by Bank Paribas. The meeting became acrimonious. At one point an American banker shouted 'we will make sure that not a dollar of this money will leave New York until we have been paid in full.' I pointed out that not a pound of the money would even leave London until we had been paid our rightful share. Pan -El's total debts amounted to S\$453 million, owed to 35 banks; 60% this was unsecured. Much later there was a court case when Paribas claimed that Citibank had advanced money on the forms against which they had already loaned substantial sums.

I spent time in December valuing the Selco fleet, so that Smit in Rotterdam could decide what vessels they might put in an offer on. In the event the Singapore Authorities arranged for Sembawang to take over Selco; lock, stock and barrel.

Late in January I was hospitalised with stomach cramps. It turned out that the cause was only Diverticulitis, which I had suffered from for several years. After a few days the surgeon friend who had taken me to the hospital came in for a chat. Basically he told me that I was overdoing things in a big way; he finished by saying 'most of all you get away from her b\*\*\*\*\* social life, because it will kill you man'!

I had already declined to sign a third three year contract, with the promise that I could stay until I chose to retire, and now told Rotterdam that I would like to be replaced as soon as they could arrange it. In July Karel Kaffa came to take over and, after a round of parties, we left in August.

An extract from De Sleeptros for October to December 1986:

*The departing man and the new arrival accompanied by their wives;  
Left the Martins, right the Kaffas.*

Mr Scheffer recalled the many good, and also difficult matters with which Mr Martin found himself faced during his directorship. 'More especially in recent times have I cooperated intensively and closely with Captain Martin and always have I greatly appreciated his views and support'. During Captain Martin's Singapore period there was considerable fleet renewal. Older units were sold, many new ships arrived: 'Smit Rangoon', 'Smit Colombo', 'Smit Belait', 'Smit Sumatera, the sheerlegs 'Smit Cyclone was rebuilt.



Appropriately pictured by the EXIT