

Lloyd's List

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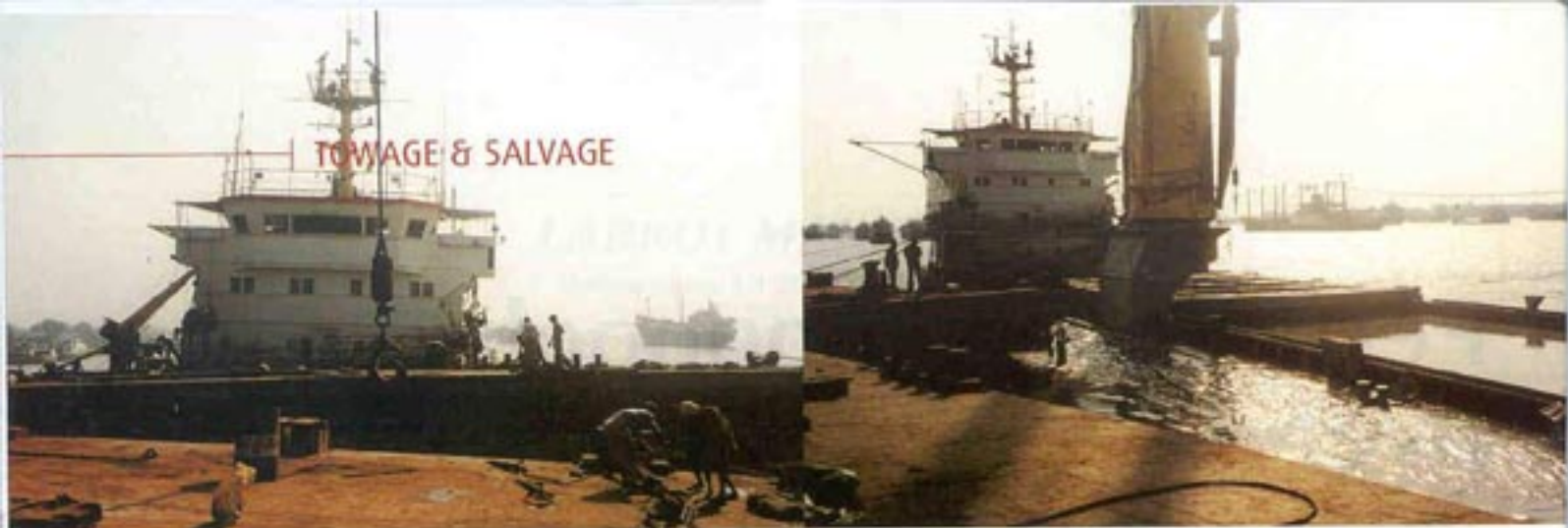
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Yen and the art of shipbuilding



Mission nearly impossible

When the M/V Southern Queen arrived off Chittagong on 28 November 2000, a bizarre set of circumstances ensued that led to the local salvage company being bathed in a qualified glory

The multi-purpose M/V Southern Queen docked at the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) in Bangladesh with a cargo of 2,002 metric tons of bagged copra. Two days later while discharge was continuing the local fire service had to be called out to respond to smoke and fire belching from the front of the hold. The fire service set about the job with no little enthusiasm, playing water into the hold and onto the cargo.

As the fire continued to burn concerned CPA officials insisted water also be directed into the hold to avert the risk of explosion. What had started as a fire was soon becoming a sinking. The vessel began to go down by the head and listed to starboard until the crane pedestal was resting on the

jetty, preventing her from capsizing.

She eventually sat on the bottom with a starboard list of about 30 degrees. Not surprisingly it was at this point in the proceedings when the fire was doused. To prevent drifting the vessel was bound to the jetty by wire ropes and left to the deliberations of the hull underwriters. It is important to note at this point that Chittagong port is located on the river Karnafully where currents between three and four knots are not uncommon and the variation of height during spring tides is as much as four metres.

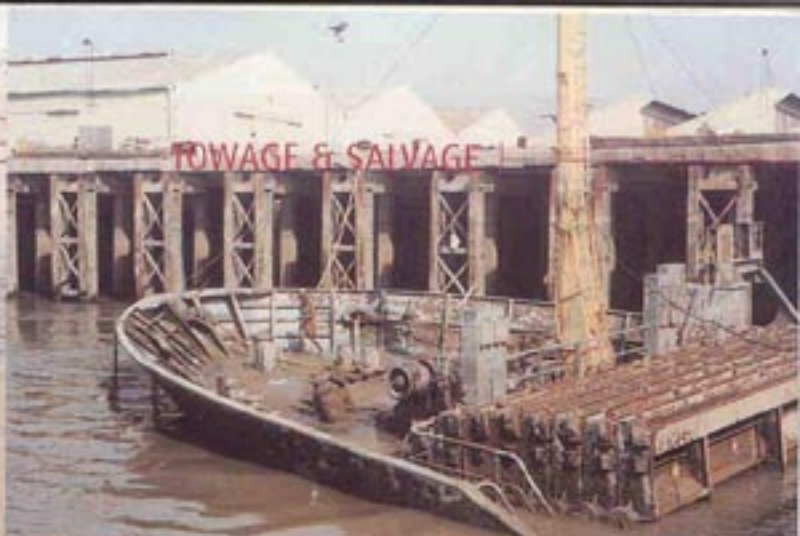
By 5 December 2000, the CPA was getting concerned by the lack of action and threatened to remove the vessel itself. By 21 December the vessel's hull underwriters agreed the vessel could not be economically sal-

vaged and repaired and declined the notice of abandonment. The cost of removing the vessel fell to the P&I Club.

At first the Club sought quotes for the work from the Salvage Association. Various proposals were made, some of which required the use of specialised heavy salvage equipment while others involved cutting up the vessel — all involved prohibitive cost. By this time the Club had hired Captain Quincy Lloyd of Carmichael and Clarke Co Ltd as a salvage consultant. Thus began the search for a local alternative.

It was a risk but by 31 January 2001 convinced that the equipment at hand could be adapted, the Club hired local salvors Prantik Marine Services Ltd.





The removal operation began on 7 February. In order to raise the vessel divers were to tunnel through parts of the vessel to position wires for the lift. All went well until an obstruction was met. After digging out the said obstruction it was found to be a pillar from the previous jetty. The pillars had been preventing the vessel from sinking further into the silt.

After a very rapid laying on of four pontoon barges all efforts were made to seal a large number of leakages. The work was completed despite the fact that the vessel's technical drawings bore little resemblance to the stability data.

By this time spring was on its way. Salvors had to play a waiting game. On 26 April the vessel was lifted at high water and towed to a location next to the CPA boarding pontoon where, it was assumed she could lie safely. This was not to be.

On 30 April winds began to gust and the weather became squally when the motor tug *M/T Stone* meandered by with a barge in tow. Within moments the *M/T Stone* found itself without the benefit of its natural element as it sat precariously on the deck of *Southern Queen* (see photograph bottom left). At this point salvors can be forgiven for getting their calculators out and working out a bumper payment for themselves.

As observers looked on open-mouthed the barge eventually drifted away. But the tug stayed obstinately where it was and at one point looked as if it were about to topple into the hold. Fortunately it held its position and was removed on 1 May.

Meanwhile, although the various leakages had previously been stemmed to enable pumping out, once pumping stopped the engine room again flooded and pumping had to be repeated. More leakages were discovered and sealed and the vessel was finally refloated — but was not yet out of the danger zone.

The final stage of the operation was to be the handing over of the vessel to the P&I Club. Just as that process was getting underway a flotilla of vessels upriver parted company with their moorings and headed armada-like for the *Southern Queen*. Floating downriver as one unit their passage was only halted when they shunted the stern of a vessel which had just moved to the *Southern Queen's* last location. Had the *Southern Queen* remained in its previous position there would have been extensive damage to an already lame boat. But it did not end there.

A few days later the *Southern Queen's* mooring buoy

chain cable parted, causing the vessel and buoy to drift aimlessly down river. Her progress was only halted by dropping anchors.

Eventually the *Southern Queen* was sold for scrap much to the disappointment of the local salvors, who, it was acknowledged, had carried out the largest salvage operation ever by a local Bangladeshi team. Alas no evidence. On reflection Captain Quincy Lloyd was prompted to quote an insightful anonymous sage on the work of salvage: "Ship salvage is a science of vague assumptions based on debatable figures taken from inconclusive instruments, performed with equipment of problematical accuracy by persons of doubtful reliability and questionable mentality!"

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