

FOUR TUGS - EACH WITH AN INVOLVEMENT IN ONE SALVAGE SAGA – ARE IN PORT.



*De Hong, the tug that refloated the platform
A Turtle from Tristan da Cunha.*



*Ruby Deliverer that in vain joined the search for
Petrobras XXI (aka **A Turtle**).*



*Mighty Deliverer was unable to recover the tow in
the South Atlantic in March.*

According to reports, the tug **Mighty Deliverer** was towing the oil platform **Petrobras XXI** - also known as **A Turtle** - from Brazil to Singapore for repairs when she released the tow during bad weather in the South Atlantic on 30 April last year.

For nearly three weeks, the tug maintained contact but heavy seas prevented her reconnecting the tow. Thereafter - radar and all - the tug "lost" the rig, and a consort, **Ruby Deliverer**, joined the fruitless search for the wandering platform.

Early in June, islanders found **A Turtle** at Trypot Bay on the south east coast of Tristan da Cunha where cliffs, carved over centuries by the turbulent Atlantic, tower hundreds of metres above the sea.

A salvage team left Cape Town a week later aboard the tug **Zouros Hellas** to try to refloat the platform, but hampered by prolonged wild winter weather during which the salvors could board the platform for brief periods only, operations were abandoned in late July.

Since various marine flora and fauna - from Brazilian waters - had attached themselves to the platform, eco-divers assessed the risk of these invading the island's pristine environment. As most of the "passengers" had apparently succumbed to Tristan's cold water, the overall threat to the local marine life was minimal.

In December, Florida-based salvors **Titan Maritime** were contracted to remove the platform from the island for which they chartered the Chinese tug **De Hong** to tow her to deep water off Tristan da Cunha where they would scuttle **A Turtle**. Two of the ships that serve Tristan from Cape Town - Edinburgh and Kelso - were also chartered to carry equipment and supplies for the Titan team and by early January, the job was in full swing as salvors cut away some of the platform's top-hamper to increase her buoyancy in preparation for refloating.

The first big heave early in February was unsuccessful as the starboard side of the platform remained fast on a reef where dark volcanic sand had built up around the legs of the structure. On the spring tide in mid-month, **De Hong** tried again, but the towing line parted. The third attempt proved successful and the tug hauled the platform clear of the island to the designated position for the scuttling.

De Hong, said to be an extremely maneuverable, hi-tech tug, arrived in Cape Town last week to discharge some of the equipment used in the difficult salvage operation.

Mighty Deliverer had put into Cape Town for supplies but, according to sources close to the industry, the court attached her for wages allegedly owed to the crew and for payment owed for bunkers. A similar fate befell **Ruby Deliverer**, now languishing at the Repair Quay, and perhaps the underwriters of the oil platform will engage local solicitors to claim for her loss as well.

Always observant, dockland folk have noted the unusually high and narrow superstructure of **Mighty Deliverer**. Her design, I understand, is that of a pusher-tug used on inland waterways, including the Mississippi and Great Lakes where such vessels make fast to the stern of a specially configured lighter and the tug literally pushes her charge. The height of the wheelhouse enables the tugmaster to see ahead over any cargo on the lighter.

A salvage expert wondered why **Mighty Deliverer**, with her short afterdeck that is suited more for river or lake operations, was considered suitable for a tow across the South Atlantic, notorious for heavy seas and gales.

Thus **Zouros Hellas**, the first tug to attempt to salvage **A Turtle** in June last year, **Mighty Deliverer** with its connections to the tow, **Ruby Deliverer** that assisted with the fruitless mid-ocean search, and **De Hong** - the successful tug and berthed metres from **Mighty Deliverer** - are in port.

Along the coast, another tug - allegedly from the same stable as **Mighty Deliverer** - is under close surveillance by the authorities as she tows the derelict Agate Islands - once a reefer vessel and more latterly used as a trainingship - to the breakers.

The sad convoy first came to the attention of the authorities as it closed the coast near Cape Columbine. As the tug required bunkers urgently, a launch ferried a consignment to her, and off they went with the local salvage tug **Smit Amandla** having been instructed to shadow this curious tow.

Off Durban, more bunkers went out to the struggling tug and shortly before my deadline for this column, she was heading slowly along the northern coast of KwaZulu-Natal.

The Peninsula coastline has seen several wrecks where vessels under tow by low-powered tugs came to grief : the stranding of the crane barge **Bos 400** at Sandy Bay 13 years ago, the wreck of the tankers **Antipolis** and **Romelia** along the Atlantic coast in 1977 while under tandem tow, and the barge whose bones lie at the foot of the Cape Point cliffs. The old passengership **Sun** capsized off the Cape coast while under tow to the breakers. Last year, a bulker was found adrift south of the country with no sign of the towing tug. Other similar local incidents may have escaped my dimming memory. Worldwide, several such cases occur annually.

Dodgy tows passing this way make the South African coast particularly vulnerable. Should the towing industry and insurers not scrutinise a tug's capacity as well as the calibre of her owner and crew more thoroughly before a towage contract is concluded?