

# **GASOLINE - TANKERS AND THINGS...**

July '78, was it on a quiet hot summer-night and in a dead calm and oppressive overcast atmosphere when the Belgian motor-tanker 'Mare', ex 'Gulf-Belgium', loaded with 900 Tons of gasoline sailed in Dutch waters on the smooth but swiftly moving surface of the Krammer-River and with destination Antwerp. Around 11.00 pm, due to a navigational error, the ship went aground, and instantly, this until now silent and peaceful voyage went into a very dangerous and nightmarish situation... Because except for the hot and becalmed weather, the tide was just after high water and falling...still to go down for yet another 8 Ft in the next coming 4 hours...



The Skipper, very scared and nervous, tried at once -at first reasonably calm but soon in desperate fear - by using his engine full power on forward and reverse alternatively, to free his vessel from the sandbank. He also kept trying for quite some time, but when he finally gave up, he had not succeeded...

Therefore, when he finally alarmed the traffic-authorities and we received the red-alert message, it was already far too late for us to have a decent chance whatsoever for refloating the ship at the same – falling - tide. Nevertheless, the ships-crew was still very glad to see us arriving at the scene. Because the three of them felt very lonesome on their grounded vessel, and very worried also about what could happen in this situation and with this particular cargo, from which they all knew the great risks so well...

We made fast with Fury-2 on starboard alongside Mare, on the far end aft, and with only two very thin ropes. Because the insignificant little puffs of wind that one sometimes could feel came from the East, so on that spot we were at least

in theory above-wind from the cargo vapors. If disaster should happen and we had to haul ass very rapidly - if there would be any chance left for us to do so in the first place - the only thing I had to do in that case was cranking my engine in reverse, and the flimsily moorings would for sure both snap instantly...

All other shipping was been halted and banned for miles around by Traffic-Control. Our surrounding looked completely deserted, pitch-black dark, and the silence was deafening.

Meanwhile, the only thing we could do was waiting how the ship would hold on until the tide had reached her lowest level and turned rising again. In such a risky falling-tide situation and on such a short notice finding another tanker for transshipping the cargo is virtually impossible and even not worth considering. Their respective captains, politely invited for such an enterprise would all say very realistically, "Thank you, but no thanks...," meanwhile probably thinking, "What kind of a nutcase he is!?"

The crew from Mare came over to us, after they had switched off and shut down all electrical and other systems onboard of their ship, and we gathered the five of us in our tiny wheelhouse, waiting on things to happen... On regular intervals, we checked the situation on deck of the ship...walking with care, with no shoes on and with empty pockets. No metal objects, matches or such other dangerous stuff were been allowed to carry around or moved, or even thought about touching them for that matter...

The Mare was a very old ship and she was completely riveted together, and I still believe, being strongly convinced even, that this fact was our savior then, considering afterwards what was about to happen...

Because the Mare sat on a particular bad spot of this sandbank...! All of her 12 tanks from the cargo-sector were in a straight angle spread over and across the long stretched and steep upward curved sandbank, with the fore and aft part on deep water... A very unfortunate and unhealthy position indeed...

By the time the water started to fell rapidly; which goes as you probably know along a sinus-shaped but non-linear form, starting slowly and increasing to maximum around half tide – which on this particular spot could go up to a rate of 3 to 4 Ft an hour - and then slowly decreasing again until the low-water level is reached; the poor Mare started to bend...

**Slowly but irresistibly she bended further and more, like an angry alley cat, slowly taking over the exact shape of the sandy bottom on which she was lying captured. In such a situation, it seems that every single minute stretches itself out into a full hour...!**

**Every few minutes, one could see the ship changing a little, taking on another and more pronounced arched shape, making tiny, muffled, very mysterious and alarming little ticking sounds here and there... Then other, very real things started to happen, very sorrowful and scaring things, the water going down and down forever, it seemed...**

**With our (gas-safe) searchlight, we continuously kept the ship surveyed and at one moment, there was something going on in the ships starboard side, directly in our sight, moored on that side as we were. But the same thing happened at the same instant on portside also of course, on her dark side, invisible for us... Tiny spots of a darker, a kind of wet looking black color appeared in the old and weathered tar covering the hull plating on starboard and portside; the dark spots growing bigger by the minute and in numerous and ever-increasing numbers.**

**The ship started literally to sweat in her agony about this outrageous abuse...**

**Like a beached whale threatens to suffocate fatally under her own weight as soon as the massive and heavy body is no longer being supported by water, exactly the same great threat endangers a loaded ship that runs aground at falling tide.**

**The natural lifting power from water -normally surrounding the submersed part of the vessel and spreading out her wonderful supporting force equally on every square Feet of the hull - starts decreasing along with the falling tide. Leaving the total weight from ship plus cargo no other way according the Laws of Gravity then gradually finding vertical support for this full weight on whatever there exists beneath the ships bottom...encountering no matter what shape, sort or form...**

**The ship started to sweat gasoline...! Clouds of highly inflammable gasoline vapors were growing larger and thicker by the second, and because of the lack of any amount of sufficient wind, surrounding and covering the ship with a deadly dangerous blanket... A dead robe of an invisible but very explosive mixture of gasoline vapors and oxygen descended over the ship!**

**Nevertheless...She struggled back! That's what she did! By giving in little by little... This was her only possible way and known method to survive the terrible forces caused by the 900 Tons of her dangerous cargo and the approximately 300 Tons of her own weight, which joined together now in evil conspiracy for trying to break the back of her body.**

**She did fight back by the single possible way she could... Every part of her body; from the large sheets of steel hull plating, the bulkheads, the heavy angle-steel struts and beams, held together by -and communicating with - the numerous tiny rivets, worked together! They all gave in a little, trying as much as they could, everyone for his own part, a little bending here, a little shifting there, pulling and pressing and stretching, to divide and spread the tremendous destroying forces that held her body under siege.**

**Because of the enormous stress building up in the ships hull, the thousands of rivets started to reposition themselves, each one a very tiny little bit in their respective holes in the steel plating, the struts, and the beams. The rivets stretched to the very maximum of the strength, given to them by the physics of the steel from which they were been forged from, a long, long time ago. They simply had to hold on, keeping the other parts from the body together! But by doing so, they were bleeding pure gasoline!**

**While this terrible and almost dead-silent struggle continued, again some minutes later, a kind of little cracking sounds nearby and further away could be heard, spread out along the length of the cargo sector towards the forward. We went very cautiously out on deck on the outermost windward side, for whatever wind there was.**

**In the central longitudinal deck-part where all the pump-lines, tank-vents and valves are grouped together, there's also a 3" steel mantle-tube containing and protecting all the electric wiring from the ships electrical systems, running from the engine-room and wheelhouse at the stern to the forward part of the vessel. On regular intervals in this line, connecting-boxes are been situated for feeding the various deck-lights, cargo-level-gauges, alarm-switches and so on, everything properly sealed and gas-proof of course, normally... But this was a far from anything but normal situation now...**

Now...on both ends of each and every connection-box, the 3" steel tube was moving out of the box-inlets -by an inch or so already - because of the ever increasing upward bending of the deck lengthening the distances between the boxes. Now...we could clearly see the various wires and cables, already stretched out to the max inside the still widening gaps... Boy, oh boy, major shit was about to hit the fan for sure, we thought!

Suddenly, we had just returned into Fury-2's wheelhouse, a loud metallic BANG! sounded, scaring us almost to dead..., and then immediately followed by another even louder one...! And we...waiting another couple of long, long minutes for final disaster to take place any split-second now.

We were all staring very tensed out of the wheelhouse windows. Staring to that gigantic time bomb about to go off now any instant, peering into the dark, only dimly and because of the harsh shadowing spooky lit, Me with my hand hovering very close above the engine-controls already, the air-starter lever sharply adjusted, just one quarter of an inch away from the start position...the point of no return that is...

However, nothing of the worst or else seemed to happen; so after waiting another couple of minutes, we went on deck again for investigation. Now we found out that two heavy 8" cast-iron valves, connecting both parts fore and aft from the main cargo-pump-line at amidships, were both broken in two pieces. Gasoline was still dripping out and gathering in the large and spreading puddles on the deck. The stench of gasoline fumes on deck and everywhere was almost suffocating by now.

The ship was arched upwards now for more than 2 Ft, but luckily spread out equally over the whole length of the cargo sector. Both bow and stern part were clearly deeper down in the water now. In fact, the water had reached and flooded the outermost last part of the stern-deck, pushed down as it was by the heavy engine and other machinery, plus the only just the day before topped-up fuel and fresh-water tanks, and the whole weight of the living-quarters...

Anyway, after this 'longest night' - the kind of night in which one is actually aging a little faster and more than the duration of nighttime itself - around 04.00 hours the tide was at the lowest level at last. Moreover, good old Mare was still in one piece! She was not losing more cargo than the rather little amounts that escaped still from her sweating rivets, evaporating instantaneously, and continuously into the open air.

**As the tide slowly started rising again, the chilling suspense among the crew from Mare -and us (!)- eased slowly away in the same pace as the tension and stress on the badly beaten ships hull was decreasing slowly. But of course, it wasn't really safe already, not yet for a few more exhilarating hours and events to happen...**

**At a certain moment short before the brake of dawn, the Skippers wife sneaked silently and quietly out from the wheelhouse of Fury-2, stepped over on Mare, and disappeared into the trustful and familiar surroundings of her own living-quarters.**

**A few minutes later, I spotted her in the dark wheelhouse from Mare, with the doors and windows wide open because of the warm weather. She just lighted a candlestick in front of a statue from the Virgin Mary, the keeper from all sailors... Being ever so grateful, and thanking Her for Her protection and safe-keeping in those past hours of great danger and despair...!**

**I stumbled out of my wheelhouse in her direction, my bare feet ever so slightly touching the deck or whatever in the greatest of possible haste, moving so swiftly as if in an almost supernatural elevated fashion...**

**"Pfff...Pfff... Please Madam. Please just wait a little while longer with that, if you please!"**

**Despite of my so clearly showed - but so well meant - terrible lack of honor and very little respect for the Virgin Mary, everything worked out well for the Mare after all...**

**One hour before high water, we made our towrope fast from Fury-2 on the Mare to keep her steady in de swift stream, only to prevent her from shifting her position with the current into a deep but inaccessible part of water behind the sandbank, and on the very top of high water she was floating again!**

**Back on the deep again, the ships load-marks, three on each side, were neatly back in one perfectly straight line with the water surface.**

**This beautiful element of Nature! H-2o! Water! With among her many other qualities, her great lifting power, so vitally needed by ships...and humanity!**

**With great lifesaving elasticity and gently carried by the water again, the ships hull had reformed herself again in her good old, trusted and familiar shape. The shape and form in which she was been built, a rather long time ago...**

**A younger, modern and all welded together - and therefore much more rigid - tanker would almost certainly have had been broken in this situation. And on top of that, such a disaster takes only place after a gradually build-up from tremendous stress on the hull construction, rising slowly to a fatal height... Then very suddenly releasing all this build-up stress in one big, violent, steel tearing, breaking, and bending outburst of power. Large parts of heavy steel banging and rubbing into and against each other with great forces of pressure and velocity... Creating easily so as many hotspots and sparks ... Changing the vessel instantly into one great bright ball of hellfire in such a case ...and very probably us too in the process...**

**We towed the Mare into a small harbor basin nearby, after which another tanker took over her cargo, and after she was empty and de-gassed, she could set course to a shipyard for making repairs.**

**Noting of her electric systems on the forward was still working, because of the many stretched out and broken connections in the various power, control, and data lines. And anyway, two 8" valves broken in half on a gasoline tanker aren't a welcome sight either... You'll better replace them too, being busy with repairs as you are already...**

**And for us...? Next job please... However, this time one on large joyful waves and with lots of fine refreshing winds and some beautiful heavy rain maybe, if possible, yes? Because, we sometimes just love these wonderful forces of Nature!**

**THE END**

