



## **s.s. Metula – berging Augustus 1974**

Overgenomen uit het boek "Smit 150"

The following pages were copied from the book Smit 150

# Metula bij Chili aan de grond gelopen

**9 augustus 1974 - De Nederlandse tanker liep in de Magellaanstraat voor de zuidelijke kust van Chili aan de grond. Door de 53.000 ton ruwe olie die uit het schip stroomde, werd 150 kilometer strand op het Vuureiland vervuild. Duizenden pinguïns kwamen daardoor om het leven.**

De vaarroute door Magellaanstraat was slechts enkele keren eerder gebruikt door grote tankers, zoals de Metula. Wegens slechte weersomstandigheden koos de Metula ervoor om deze route te nemen. De tanker werd begeleid door een aantal schepen, maar liep toch op de bodem. Het schip zat volledig vast.

Binnen twee dagen waren er over een lengte van 140 meter gaten in het schip geslagen en liep de machinekamer vol met water. Men besloot vervolgens het schip te verlaten. Inmiddels was het bergingsbedrijf ingeschakeld die een zware klus stond te wachten.

Na in totaal 47 dagen vastgezet te hebben kwam er weer beweging in het schip. Het schip werd in Brazilië ondergebracht en in 1976 gesloopt.





gave his crew 'the opportunity to go on shore leave' in Osaka on the Queen's birthday, as he entered in the port journal. Everybody was more than entitled to that!

*Tugs Clyde, Elbe, Albatros towing Aquarius into the estuary of the Malacca Strait.*

## Metula

The power and the treacherous nature of the Magellan Straits were even larger than the know-how and the combined experience of a tanker captain and two Chilean pilots. In any event, Metula fell victim: on 9th August 1974. The shallows known as the Satellite Patch were to keep the mammoth tanker aground for many weeks, but – as is known – the Dutch salvors do not give up easily; nor did they do so that year.

Eventually, the salvors managed to get the large ship off – some 65 years after Zwarte Zee and Oceaan had also overcome the problems of that narrow channel, when they had been towing a floating dry dock through it to Peru. Hans Walenkamp – by then having worked for less than two years for Smit Internationale Zeesleep- en Bergingsbedrijf – was present as a member of the salvage team. Previously, he had quite a few years of experience in the merchant navy but the strong current and the unexpected winds that sometimes blow through the Magellan Straits were new to him too: 'I had never gone through anything as bad as that. Captain Minkels, master of Metula, must have misjudged them as did the pilots. They were sailing with the current, but it was much stronger than they estimated. Moreover it was night-time, so it was difficult to assess its speed. However, I still think it was an error of judgement – the tanker simply sailed outside the channel!'

What was remarkable about Metula, which grounded on the pebble bottom of the Magellan Straits, was that the ship had twice before played a role between the salvors and Shell Tankers, the shipowners for whom the Antillian flag 210,000 tons VLCC was sailing. In 1968 Metula had taken part in an exercise off the Canaries and was towed by Rode Zee, the first of the three 11,000hp sea-going tugs Smit had commissioned. And six years later, on 6th June 1974, three Smit

harbour tugs assisted the *Metula* onto the berth at the new Shell Curaçao Oil Terminal, when she was the first vessel to dock. The very large crude carrier was gently berthed on the unloading jetty at Bullen Bay.

*Metula* sailed back to the Persian Gulf, where she loaded crude oil at Ras Tanura for the Chilean port of Quintero. Shell had an agreement to supply crude oil to the Chilean state oil company, ENAP, and the tanker was trading on the shuttle service. It had been considered sailing the ships via Cape Horn, but the shipowners thought that the uncertainty of the weather was too large a risk. Instead, it was decided that the route should be through the Magellan Straits; the quieter channel between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. The 325 metre long *Metula* was the fourth tanker in a row to pass that way, laden with 190,000 tons of cargo.

It was a nasty grounding. Initially only the fore part of *Metula* had run aground. However, two days later, the flood stream turned the ship through 180 degrees, so that the stern also struck. Laden tanks ruptured – as holes were ripped in the hull over a length of 140 metres – and the engine room was also flooding. So, there was no power and no water. A Chilean landing craft evacuated the 33 crew members and two accompanying wives from the casualty to Punta Arenas, the southernmost town in the world. Captain Minkels and some of his officers then returned immediately to their ship. Meanwhile, Shell asked Smit to tackle the salvage.

Zwarte Zee was closest to the faraway stranding spot: just five days sailing away. That was quite lucky because the 9,000hp tug had just delivered a scrap ship to the Brazilian port of Rio Grande on 10th August and was able to sail immediately. However, before captain Peter de Nijs and his crew could arrive at the Magellan Straits, salvage inspector Kees Rom Colthoff, together with the shipowner's representative Dirk Jongeneel, had been able to see from the spot that the refloating of *Metula* would not be a normal job.

Zwarte Zee could not manage the salvage by herself, certainly not of a fully laden VLCC. Submersible pumps were urgently needed and also lots of other salvage equipment: diving gear, compressors, generators, hoses, steam heating coils, cables and warm clothing. It was wintertime at the southern tip of South America! Smit Salvor and the Japanese tug *North Sea*, chartered in to supply extra towing power – between them 12,500hp – mobilized from the Caribbean, via the Panama Canal down the South American west coast and so to the Magellan Straits. This trip was to take the two tugs twelve days.

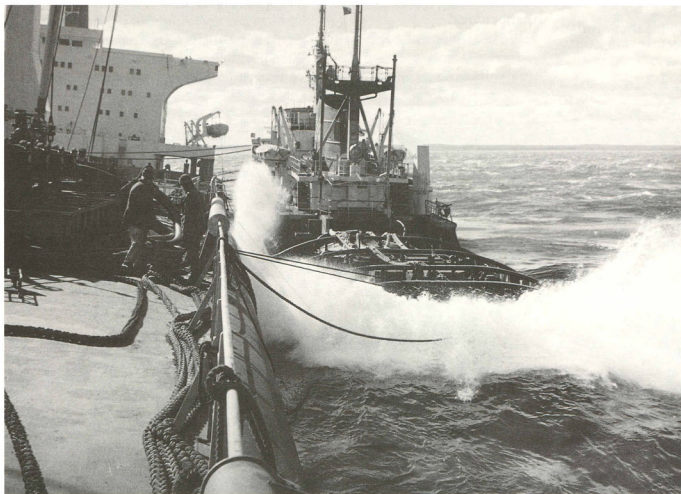
The salvage equipment arrived in the same plane as Walenkamp and the thirty man salvage team. They arrived at Punta Arenas at almost the same time as Zwarte Zee. Former merchant navy mate Hans Walenkamp had come along 'for the logistics story', as he puts it himself. 'I was the co-ordinator for the tugs and equipment'. He had already acquired some salvage experience by bringing to safety Ben Cruachan – which had hogged off Durban – and also refloating the pirate radio station ship *Veronica*, which had grounded off the Scheveningen beach. But the salvage of the *Metula* was to be quite a different job.

A strong current, at spring tide upto seven to ten knots, which the salvors calculated meant a pressure of 9,000 tons thrusting against *Metula's* hull. Then the wind had to be considered; one moment force three – and almost immediately afterwards, force eight. The conclusion was obvious: refloating had to take place at slack water, when the current was some four knots. However, before this the weight of the tanker had to be reduced by discharging part of the cargo.



The salvors assumed that some 40,000 tons of oil had been spilled. In the strong westerly wind, most of the slick had been blown away into the Atlantic Ocean and only a small residue had washed ashore; in less than a year all traces of the pollution would be gone. The salvors calculated that approximately 100,000 tons of oil remained in the tanks, which meant that about 50,000 tons had to be pumped out over-the-top to a lightening tanker.

*Zwarte Zee along-  
side Metula: heavy  
work!*

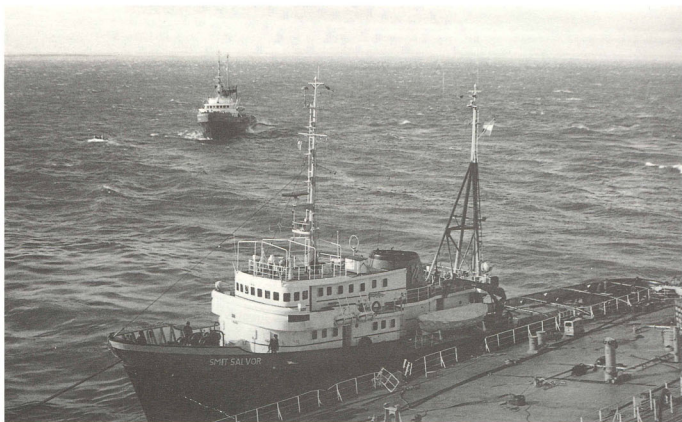


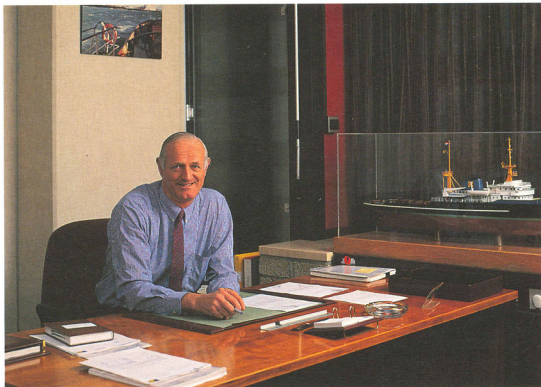
*Working on the deck of Metula in strong wind.*



Shell had nominated Havella, 18,000 dwt (sailing for Shell, Argentina), as the lightening tanker and this discharging operation was to take place four times. Walenkamp: 'We alternately stayed on Metula and on Zwarte Zee. We had no shortages of anything as the re-provisioning from Punta Arenas was excellent. We had a good time with lots of laughter. We appointed Metula's chief engineer as the harbour master, so he prepared the mooring plan for the ships which berthed alongside. I think in total, there must have been one hundred and fifty manoeuvres'.

*Smit Salvor nearby Metula with Zwarte Zee arriving.*





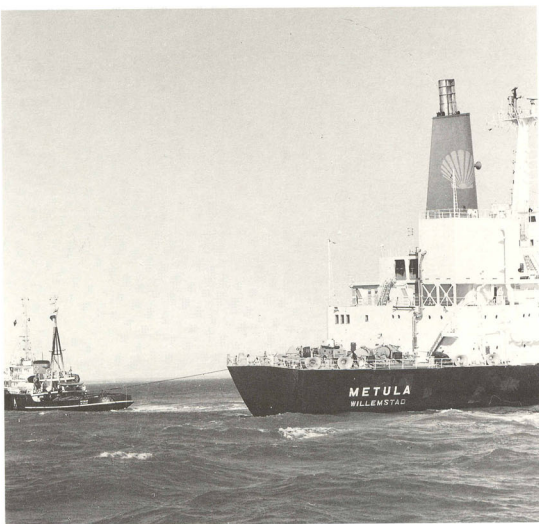
Hans Walenkamp,  
with a model of  
*Zwarte Zee* (1992).

The Dutch salvors had been given voluntary (and free) assistance by a team of United States Coastguards. In the seventies, the Americans had little experience of this type of salvage and they were keen on learning. 'They flew in all kinds of things, by Hercules plane', recalls Walenkamp. 'They had hydraulic pumps with them and they proved to be much better than our electric ones. Later on, we were to use them as well. The hydraulic pumps had a better pumping rate than the electric pumps – and moreover were safer'.

Havella transferred the oil, in small parcels to Bergeland, at anchor ten miles off Metula. Bergeland was also involved in the shuttle transport from the Persian Gulf to Quintero and Metula's cargo was also carried to the same destination.



Smit Salvor, close to  
the tanker Berge-  
land.



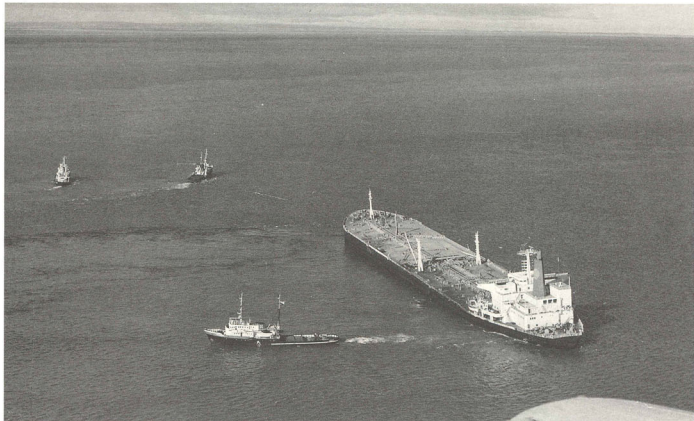
The transshipments took place between 28th August and 14th September but sometimes work had to be stopped for several days as heavy gales pounded the Magellan Straits. For every ton of oil discharged from Metula, the same quantity of ballast water had to be pumped in; that way the ship would remain in the same position. Finally the water would be pumped out again to refloat Metula and because of the tides, the six metre reduction in draft had to be pumped in less than twelve hours.

The tugs' towing ropes were attached four days after the last oil had been discharged from the tanker; two wires were connected to the fore part and one aft. However, the tugs could not tension the wires, as a strong gale blew up which lasted five days and obstructed every salvage attempt. But on 24th September the moment finally came. The tanks were deballasted and several compartments were pressurised with compressed air. With the rising of the flood tide and maximum pulling effort from the three tugs, the casualty started to move.

Later on, by now two thirty in the morning, Metula finally came free – 47 days after the tanker grounded on the rocks of the Magellan Straits. The weather was still stormy and the tugs manoeuvred the tanker in the dark to an anchorage ten miles up the coast at Bahia Felipe.

Again the Metula was grounded, just outside the channel but this time it was deliberate as grounding was the best way of making sure the tanker was secure in bad weather. With the starboard anchor and 280 metres of chain veered out, the ship was safely moored. She was even able to withstand a hurricane of force thirteen! Another two weeks passed and the salvage continued with the

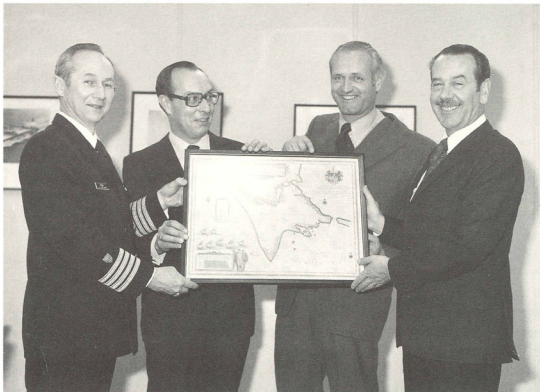




*An aerial view of grounded Metula. In the foreground, Smit Salvor; in the background (right) Zwarte Zee and North Sea.*

discharge of about 90,000 tons of oil and divers carrying out underwater inspections. The below water damage was severe; Metula's rudder and keel had disappeared.

Hans Walenkamp stayed on, the longest of all the salvage team. He recorded in his diary: 'From 15th August to 12th December, some three months. I stayed there until the tow reached the sea. I was taken off by helicopter and then flown back to The Netherlands'.



*After the successful salvage and to commemorate the event, Smit reproduced a map of the Magellan Straits originally made in the second half of the 17th century by the well known cartographer Joan Blaeu. On the left a Chilean navy officer, next to him W. H. Brouwer, manager of Shell Tankers, Hans Walenkamp and a representative from the American coast-guard.*



*A sober picture taken from one of the tugs with Metula towed by the stern in the background.*

Metula was towed stern first to Angra dos Reis in Brazil – the temporary destination – as the forepart was too heavily damaged and the management of both Smit and Shell thought it too risky to apply too much pressure on the vessel's bows.

Smit Salvor and North Sea had demobilized sometime earlier and their place was taken by Rode Zee – arriving from Abidjan – and together with Zwarte Zee, the two tugs towed Metula to Angra dos Reis in seventeen days. Hans Walenkamp later learned from the three runners who had been onboard during this trip that they had had a rough time.

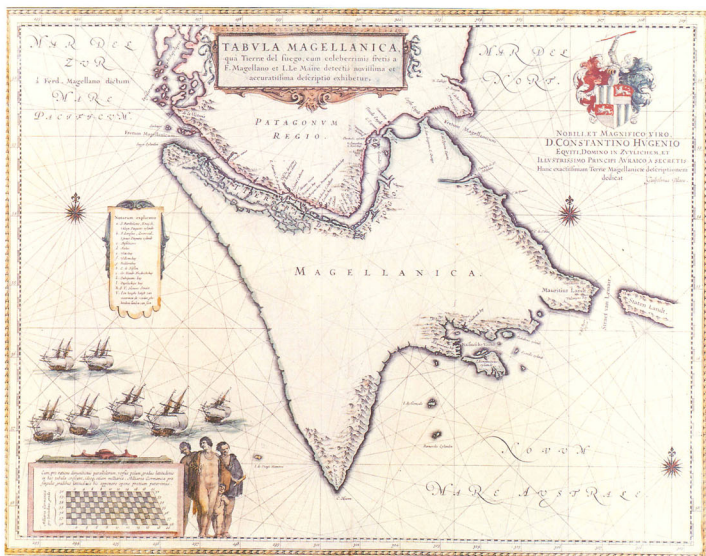
The tanker, which was ultimately to be scrapped, appeared to be rather unstable and the pounding of the waves on the stern of the casualty were at times unbearable. However, the tough time was compensated for by a party for all crew members and salvors alike who had taken part in the sensational salvage. In the words of their made up song:

*Boys, keep your spirits up  
And let's sing together now.  
Whatever is going to happen  
We can blame onto Magellan.*

But blame or no blame: more actually was to happen and even after this towage, the misery was not over for Metula. The ship was anchored on 29th November in Angra dos Reis Bay and continued to lie there for over a year — until finally, in January 1976 the tanker's future was decided. Metula had been built at a cost of about 110 million guilders and a survey had revealed that the repairs would cost 25 million guilders. Bearing in mind the low freight rates at that time, both the shipowners and underwriters thought that repair was not the best solution.

The ship was sold and Eckhardt & Co. of Hamburg became the new owners. In April 1976 this company chartered the tug Fraser Salvator to tow Metula to West Germany. The Tula, as the tanker was re-named for the voyage to Brunsbüttel, was then on sold to the Spanish shipbreakers Ricuperaciones Submarinas, who had never dealt with such a large ship before.

*The historical map of Magellan Straits; Cape Horn is located at the southern tip of South America.*



The Tula was re-flagged to Spanish flag and on 14th June 1976, finally arrived at Santander in North Spain, where eight harbour tugs tried to manoeuvre the unwieldy ship from the bay through a narrow canal to the breaker's yard. This operation was far from smooth, as some dislodged hull plates were hanging down below the hull and partly ploughed the seabed of both the bay and the canal. Two miles off the breaker's yard Tula was grounded so as to cut the hull plates free, which happened only after a great deal of effort. A month after arrival at Santander, the tanker finally berthed at the breaker's yard; the VLCC was less than eight years old!

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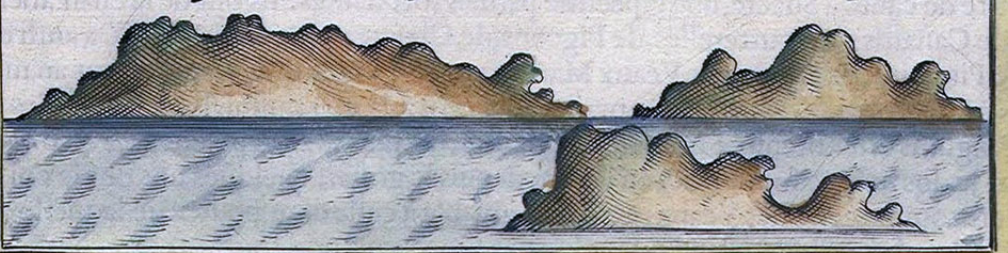
D E L

N O R T

Exquilita & magno aliquot mensium periculo hustrata et iam resecta Freti Magellanici Facies.

Eigentlike afbeeldinghe der Magellanischer Strate die nu met veel gevaers ettelijcke Maenden doorsien van nieuw ondeckt is.

Dese Eijlanden die in gheene Pascaerten aengeteckent bevonden en worden, Liggen van d'incomste der Strate Magellani 0. N. O. verscheyden 50 mijlen op de hoochde van 51 graden.



SCALA

Germanicarum Milliarium.

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