

M.V. KOWLOON BRIDGE

When discussing diving in Ireland the Kowloon Bridge always manages to filter its way into the conversation. One of six combination carriers classified as OBOs (ore, bulk dry cargo, oil), she had modifications made to the odd numbered holds which allowed the vessel to carry ore in these holds. The even numbered holds remained empty under normal circumstances. She had originally been called the English Bridge but had her name changed twice to Mercurio and Crystal River before arriving at her current name.

The six sister ships were all known to have had serious problems since their construction and whether this was due to poor design or faulty construction remains the source of heated debate. The East Bridge (formerly Tyne Bridge) suffered deck cracking whilst on a ballast passage across the North Sea in heavy weather in 1982 and had to be abandoned. Recovered later and repaired, it was determined that grade A rather than grade D steel had been used in her construction.

The Kowloon Bridge was on a voyage from the St. Lawrence River port of Seven Islands in Quebec bound for the Clyde River terminal at Hunterston. She sailed on 7th November, 1986 carrying 169,080 tonne of iron ore pellets consigned to British Steel.

On Tuesday, 18th November the Kowloon Bridge diverted to Bantry Bay to seek shelter from

bad weather. Captain Rao, her master, called Valentia Radio and informed them that his vessel had sustained damage crossing the Atlantic due to heavy seas and strong winds. There was a crack between number 9 hold and the pump room and the ship's windlass was broken. He also called the owner's agents in London and told them he felt the vessel was unseaworthy.

Captain Rao had cause for concern as on an earlier voyage from Japan to Australia, whilst in ballast, a crack had appeared in the main deck just aft hatch 9. This had happened in August 1986 and although she continued to Italy for survey and repairs, it is not known how adequately these had been done. She was due for extensive repairs upon her arrival in Glasgow. She anchored in Bantry Bay early on Wednesday 19th and four teams of surveyors arrived to inspect the vessel. Those from the U.K. were particularly concerned because of the vessel's connection to the Derbyshire, a sister ship, that sank in the South China Sea in 1980 with the loss of all on board.

The Lloyd's survey found that the vessel had suffered routine heavy weather damage during her voyage across the Atlantic. However, none of the damage affected the longitudinal strength of the ship and it was recommended that temporary repairs be carried out in Bantry Bay.

On the morning of Saturday, 22nd November, the starboard anchor chain parted in a rapid change of wind and Captain Rao



decided it would be safer to ride out the storm in open rather than in the confined but unsheltered area of Bantry Bay. Another vessel, the Capo Emma, had also sustained damage in the same storm and was anchored less than a mile from the Kowloon Bridge. She was carrying 80,000 tons of crude oil and the possibility of a collision between the two vessels would have had disastrous results.

The Kowloon Bridge may have grounded at the stern on a nearby reef when she swung but never the less she sailed back out in the storm. The seas were so rough at the entrance to Bantry Bay that for the next few hours she made little headway. Seven hours later at 1423hrs she was only three miles west of Sheep's Head. As she cleared the land the Kowloon Bridge ran into 15 metre swells and 70 mph winds.

At 2305hrs the Captain radioed that the ship's steering gear had failed and requested immediate assistance. A crew member was later quoted as saying "All hell broke loose around 11pm when most of the crew were asleep.

The bow crashed down into the swell and didn't come back up".

Due to the dangerous nature of the situation, the Captain decided to abandon ship at 2330hrs. The 28 man crew and two shipping company represen-

DETAILS:

Built by Swan Hunter in 1970

Gross tonnage 89,438

Type - OBO Carrier

Size - 294 x 44 x 25 mtrs.

Sank - 22 November 1986

Depth - 8 to 36 mtrs.

tatives were preparing the life boats when two RAF Sea King helicopters arrived and took them all off in mountainous seas. At the request of the helicopter crews, the engines were left running to facilitate the rescue. The vessel was fully lit and was still making about 1 knot when the last crew member was taken off.

The Kowloon Bridge was located by the Irish patrol vessel L.E. Aoife at 0515hrs on the morning of Sunday, 23rd November and proceeded to follow her until she was called away to deal with another distressed vessel. She was spotted again by light aircraft at 1230hrs erratically moving in towards Cape Clear. The Aoife resumed contact at 1830hrs and reported her moving north towards Sherkin Island. The engine was still running but along the south side of Sherkin she clipped a high point in the sea bed and stalled.

Baltimore Lifeboat was on scene and reported that she missed Kedge Island by about 150 metres at 1100hrs. It appeared that she might ground near Baltimore. However, at about 0254hrs on Monday 24th November, 1986 the Kowloon Bridge was driven ashore a lobe of reef that runs out from the Stags, a knife-edged formation of rock off Toe Head.

As the tide fell away beneath her it became apparent that she was broken between holds 2 & 3. Her fuel began to leak, causing a serious pollution problem to nearby coves and beaches. It was reported that she was carrying approximately 1,650 tonnes of heavy fuel oil, 180 tonnes of diesel oil, 50 tonnes of lubricating oil and 38 tonnes of gas oil. Estimates on the severity of the spills differ but a conservative estimate put it at 100,000 gallons.





Over the next few days the weather moderated allowing salvage operations to begin. Two deep ocean salvage tugs, the Smit Rotterdam and the Typhoon attempted to tow her off by the stern on each successive high tide. Despite the joint efforts of two of the world's top salvage companies, Smit & Wijsmuller, the wrecked Kowloon Bridge could not be refloated and, when she suffered further damage on the rocks in subsequent bad weather, all salvage attempts were abandoned. On Wednesday, 3rd December, the Kowloon Bridge sank and by that evening only the funnel and part of the bridge were visible. She was left to the elements to pound to pieces.

She is still an impressive ship. She lies approximately a quarter mile south west of the Stags with her bows to the NNW. The main hull, although broken open runs back almost the stern engineering/ accommodation

spaces. Here she is split and cants off at about 45° to port towards the stern which, after the holds, has toppled over on to its port side.

It is impossible to get around the wreck in one dive, so don't even try it. It should only be dived at slack water and most divers choose to do it in sections as only the foolhardy expect to cover nearly a kilometre underwater and get to see everything.

The bulbous bow stands in 35 metres with the anchor winches in about 8 metres. Until 2002 the starboard hawse pipe, where once ran the chain that held the massive ship in Bantry Bay, was empty. Unfortunately the winter storms in 2001 dislodged six links of chain that have dropped down to partially obscure the pipe,



each weigh about a hundred weight. It is still possible for a diver and twin set to get down it but suck that gut in and duck your head and be prepared to be spat out the other end if there's any swell! The second anchor, an impressive 3 metres long, still hangs on the port bow. From there it's a free-fall down the bow to the bulbous nose which looms like a great carbuncle above the cargo littered sea bed. The holds have split open and spilled the partially processed iron ore pellets over a wide area. By swimming up the port side back from the bow, divers pass along an alley where hatch covers and hull plating have imbedded themselves into the cargo. Just level with hold 2 it is possible to re-enter the wreck and so work your way back to the top of the bow for a safety stop.

The majority of the hold areas are about 25 metres and it is possible to swim back through the ship, hopping over the separating bulk heads to the stern which has become a twisted mass of machinery in the storms that ravage the coast in winter. The sheer size of the

wreck makes it difficult to orientate yourself. In order to recognise details you have to imagine that everything you remember from other wrecks is at least twice as big, if not more. There are large areas where it is possible to penetrate the hull and it has been known for divers inside the bow to have deeper computer readings than those outside. The immenseness of the wreck just has to be seen to be believed. Every dive reveals some thing new so she retains diver's interest for many years. Whilst diving in exception visibility last year, I discovered a 5 meter long winch drum stood upright in the sea bed. I had passed it many times without paying it much attention. I suddenly saw it in its entirety and realised that all control gear were still attached to the plate on which it sat. It was almost as if you could lift it up and sit it on the deck of a trawler.

Most divers visit the bow area as it is easier to stay orientated and therefore get back to the bow to carry out safety stops in a comfortable depth. Those that choose to dive the stern need to have some idea of ship layout or the mass of metal becomes a maze of pipe work and bulk heads that infuriate more than they enthral. The bridge area with starboard docking wing can be located and parts of the accommodation. The aft working with winches lies close to what was once the swimming pool. The engine that once stood 15 metres high is now on its side but by thinking carefully it is possible to recognise where you are. Not on the first few dives, maybe, but certainly the more you do the better an idea you get.

No matter where you dive or what the visibility, the dive is always worth it for the chance to explore the largest piece of our marine heritage.



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