DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE DAMAGE FIX THE BLAME

By Capt. Don Rose

Some times a small action takes place that causes another action and then a whole chain of events follow.

In 1971, I was first mate on the "ROSARIO STRAITS" with a crew complement of five that mainly towed Chip barges between the Fraser River, Vancouver Harbour and pulp mills at either Harmac or Crofton. On occasion we also towed log booms from Howe Sound to the Fraser River as well as ship docking at Texada Mines. The crew configuration was Master, First Mate, Second Mate, Engineer and Cookdeckhand. Our tour of duty was two weeks on and two weeks off, crew changing every second Wednesday.

Watch system
00:00 to 0600 First Mate and Engineer
06:00 to 12:00 Second Mate and Cookdeckhand
12:00 to 18:00 First Mate and Engineer
18:00 to 20:00 Second Mate and Cookdeckhand
20:00 to 24:00 Master and Second Mate
The Cookdeckhand's watches *were 05:00 to 13:00 and 16:00 to 20:00*

With this system at least two crew members were on watch at all times. It came about when regulations first required crew members on west coast towboats have a minimum of eight hours rest every twenty-four hour period. (Two hours unbroken during one off watch followed by six hours unbroken during the next off watch) except for the period of 20:00 to 24:00 the Master was a non watch keeper. This system was used on only two tugs until the regulations were amended requiring all crew members to have their eight hours rest during the same calendar day. Because, with this system the Cookdeckhand could not do this therefore the system was changed to the conventional towboat watch system and crew configuration that is, Master, Engineer, First Mate and two Cookdeckhands.

Standard watch system
00:00 to 06:00 First Mate one Cookdeckhand
06:00 to 12:00 Master and one Cookdeckhand
12:00 to 18:00 First Mate and one Cookdeckhand
18:00 to 24:00 Master and one Cookdeckhand
With the Engineer standing the same watch as the Master

The First Mate on the other crew had a family emergency so I joined the tug three days early to relieve him and worked with his crew doing our normal work towing chip barges. The crew that I normally worked with joined the tug at the company dock in Vancouver Harbour on the regular crew change day. We took on stores, fuel and water, did a number of barge shifts in the harbour and then departed for the North Arm of the Fraser River. There we were to pick up two loaded chip barges destined for Harmac. The weather forecast was for Gale to Storm Force SW. While we ran light to the North Arm the wind and sea conditions were increasing. On arrival at our barges the Captain decided that we would wait for the weather to improve before departing.

The Captain was a very competent Ship's Officer who was held in high esteem by all who knew him. He also had a very un canny sixth sense and at times it seemed that he was able to see into the future. His boat handling capabilities were excellent. Manoeuvres that others found extremely difficult he performed with ease. At all times his manner was calm and cool

with complete control of all situations. I felt it was a pleasure and privilege to sail under his command. The rest of the crew like the majority of tow boaters were very competent, performed their duties well and were a pleasure to sail with.

The tug was secured alongside the barges we were to depart with. It being close to midnight, I was just preparing to come on watch and proceeded to make a pot of coffee. When I turned on the hot water tap a large burst of steam followed by boiling hot water came out of the faucet. The engineer, immediately checked out the hot water tank in the engine room and found the control for the electric heating element damaged. The previous engineer had bypassed the control with a heavy piece of wire. At this time I remembered the previous engineer mentioning in the morning before crew change, that he had done a repair to the hot water system.

This repair worked fine except that over a period of time without using great amounts of water it would be heated to boiling point with the danger of explosion. Because the other crew was using a considerable amount of hot water for last minute cleaning and showers the water did not reach this point. However, after supper we had not used a great amount of water, therefore it was heated to almost the danger point. The engineer shut off the power to the heating element in order to allow the water in the tank too cool. There was a replacement heating element on board that he would install after the water cooled and the tank drained.

The Captain believing that the engineer and I had the situation under control retired leaving instructions to be called after I received the 04:00 weather forecast. The engineer and I busied ourselves doing jobs that could not be done while the tug was underway. The hot water was run until cool water came out of the faucet. With the main engine shut down and all the engine room fans operating, the engineer figured at about 01:30 the hot water tank had cooled enough to be drained and proceeded to do so.

When the drain for the hot water tank was opened, steam came out with enough force and temperature to set off the engine room CO2 flooding system. *(At that time the mechanism for triggering the CO2 system was heat sensitive.)* When the engineer became aware of what was happening, he immediately left the engine room.

Because the engine room fans were operating at full capacity there was enough fresh air coming into the engine room for the generator motor to keep running. Its engine slowed down, however, it did not stop and black out the tug. To check the oxygen content in the engine room we decided to lower an oil lantern into the engine room with a heaving line. Because we were seldom on log tows all our log towing gear including oil lanterns were stowed in the aft hold. I brought up a lantern and set it on the aft console. *(This was one of the few places on the outside deck where there was sufficient light.)* There I filled it with kerosene, trimmed the wick and lit it. We then lowered the lantern through the escape hatch into the engine room where it burned brightly without the slightest flicker. Assured that the engine room was safe to enter, the engineer went in and changed the element with me watching through the escape hatch. After changing the heating element he also changed the main engine oil filters.

At 04:00 I listened to and wrote down the weather forecast and reports from local lighthouses. The wind and sea conditions had not improved so I called the captain and advised him of our situation. His exact words were **“give me a shake at 06:00"** and after breakfast we’ll

run to Kent Street and have the CO2 system recharged." (*Kent Street was a repair and maintenance depot that the company used to operate in Mitchell Slough on the North Arm of the Fraser River.*)

At 05:00 The Cookdeckhand came on watch and proceded to cook breakfast. At 05:30 the engineer went to the engine room and started the main engine in order for it to be warmed up and ready for us to run to Kent Street.

I was in the galley when the engineer was starting the main engine. It seemed to be exceptionally hard to start. When the engine did start it made noises as if it was going to come up through the deck. I commented to the Cookdeckhand about the noise and at the same time noticed that the tug was starting to move. The engine was labouring hard and increasing its R.P.M. rapidly. It was evident that one of the four main engine controls was in the full ahead position. I immediately made a run for the wheel house and just as I was about to enter it, the tug broke free from her mooring lines, surged ahead causing me to fall down the companion way onto the deck below. While I was trying to pick myself up the tug was charging down the side of the barge bouncing off and crashing back only to bounce off and again crash back onto it again. (*Talk about giving a shake at 06:00!)*

I eventually made it into the wheel house tried to take over engine control but at first I was unsuccessful. I did manage to steer the tug away from the barge and out into the middle of the river. Because I had been in brightly lit areas until the action started happening my night vision, was to say the least, poor making it difficult to see. However, I was able to keep the tug pointed in a safe direction and continued trying to take over engine control.

Eventually I gained control of the engine, steered the tug back to our barge, tied up to it and did a damage survey. As you probably guessed the Captain was on deck by this time and supervised the damage survey.

Surprisingly, the only damage to the tug was all the "D" rubber on the starboard guard from the shoulder aft had been scraped off. The crew was a little shaken up but no one was hurt. Pieces of the "D" rubber were sticking out of the box planks of the barge we had been tied to. However, there was no damage to the barge. The metal where the "D" rubber had been attached to the tug was as shiny as if it had been chrome plated.

With the damage survey completed the Captain was satisfied that the tug was in a sound and seaworthy condition. He looked at the engineer and me and said ***"I'll be back in ten minutes, you two get one story straight! All I want is one story."***

I asked the engineer why the engine had started up in full speed ahead? His reply was that before he started the engine he had pushed the button that transferred engine control to the engine room. However, obviously the engine control was not transferred. He became aware of this when the engine started and again tried to transfer control but was unsuccessful. He then went up on deck and found that the button on the aft console was stuck down and the aft engine control in the full ahead position. He then put the engine control in neutral and physically pulled up the button. After he pulled up the button, I was able to transfer control to the wheel house.

The reason the aft station selection button had stuck was due to salt water corrosion on

the metal. It is possible that I had pushed it down when I set the lantern on the aft console.

The Captain returned and we gave him our story. He understood how this could have happened and commended us on our quick actions that prevented a bad situation from becoming worse. I told him that I would write up a report on what happened for the Office. His reply was that all they needed to know was that the CO 2 had accidentally discharged. When I mentioned the “D” rubber, his reply was that we could get by quite well without it and in good time we would find a way to explain it. His next instructions were to cover the guard where the rubber had been with black paint so it would not be so noticeable that it was missing.

We went to Kent Street, had the CO2 system recharged. The captain took the tug into the dock port side to. When we departed he backed the tug a considerable distance down river before turning it around. By doing this none of the shore personnel noticed that the rubber was missing on the starboard side.

The weather was now improving considerably so we departed with our chip barges for Harmac. We made several runs to Harmac and Crofton after which we were dispatched along with a sister tug the “GEORGIA STRAITS” to Texada Mines. There we were to assist a ship into the dock and standby for approximately thirty hours while the ship loaded, then assist it away from the dock.

When we arrived at Texada Mines the ship was also arriving as well as our sister tug. Our Captain suggested that we work on the starboard shoulder of the ship with our sister tug working the starboard quarter. This way our starboard side was not visible to the other tug or the crew of the ship we were assisting. After the ship was secured at the dock we went to a nearby bay along with our sister tug. They anchored and we tied up along side them port side to. None of the crew members on the other tug noticed that our starboard “D” rubber was missing.

The Captain on the “GEORGIA STRAITS” was self proclaimed to be the best tug boat captain on the west coast as well as an expert at many other occupations. At all times he seemed to be over flowing with nervous energy and in a complete rush to do everything. If he had spent only a few years at every profession that he claimed to have mastered he would have been approximately two hundred years old. It had been said by others that your chances of winning the 649 were better than hearing the truth from him. We all knew that it bothered him that our captain was so calm and cool at all times, took his time, evaluated situations acted accordingly and at the end of the day accomplished more. However, he was a very kind and generous person. While we were waiting for the ship to be loaded he kept us entertained with his stories. Some of them were an insult to your intelligence if he expected you to believe them.

When it came time to assist the ship away from the dock, it was dark, therefore our missing rubber was not noticed. We completed the un-docking, then departed light tug for Harmac there we were to pick up two empty chip barges and tow them to the Navy buoy in Vancouver Harbour. The “GEORGIA STRAITS” was also dispatched to Harmac, to pick up two empty chip barges and their destination was the North Arm of the Fraser River. It was after midnight when we departed and I was on watch. The Captain’s instructions were that if we

arrived at Harmac any time after 05:00 I was to tie up to one of the empties and we would have breakfast before we yarded our tow together.

The “ROSARIO STRAITS” and “GEORGIA STRAITS were almost identical in configuration and power, consequently they made the same speed. The first mate on the other tug and I had several conversations on the V.H.F. while travelling. I told him that we were going to be arriving after 05:00 therefore would be having breakfast before yarding our tow. He thought that was a great idea but knew that their captain would want to get the jump on us so they would be yarding through breakfast. I commented that after we delivered our empties to Vancouver Harbour our next job was two loads to Crofton. Because of the current in Porlier Pass we would still have to wait approximately two hours for tide. He said that they were also going to Crofton only they would have to wait longer for tide and have ruined breakfast to boot. They were going to hurry up and wait.

When we arrived at Harmac the time was 05:20 so I tied the “ROSARIO STRAITS” port side to alongside one of the empties we were going to depart with. Both of our empties were on the north side of the channel so yarding would be fairly simple. One of the “GEORGIA STRAITS” empties was on the south side of the channel and one was on the north side so yarding for them would be slightly more involved.

We sat down expecting to have an enjoyable breakfast before yarding and the other tug went across the channel and picked up one of their empties. While we were half way through our breakfast there was a loud crash, our tug lifted up and dropped about a foot at the same time. Our captain had a fork full of eggs half way to his mouth at the time, all he said was **“oh that *%&*<>@ idiot he ran his pennant out, let his empty slam into us, go tell him all the rubber is gone from our starboard side.”**

I went to the wheel house, called the other tug on the V.H.F., told them that their empty had slammed into us and that all the rubber was missing from our starboard side. His reply was is there anybody hurt or any other damage. My reply was, that at this time I did not believe there was. *(Do not go away the story is not over yet.)*

We finished breakfast, yarded out our empties and departed. During the transit to Vancouver the other tug called us numerous times to check on us as he seemed quite concerned. I mentioned to our captain that I did not feel good about blaming the other tug for damage that was not their fault. Our captain’s reply was, that we did not blame him, we just mentioned that it was gone and what he assumed was his problem. However, if I felt the way I did, we would let it die.

We delivered our barges to the Navy Buoy in Vancouver Harbour. While preparing to depart with our two loads for Crofton, the office called and asked us to come over to the company dock. Since the company dock was on the south side of the harbour we travelled along the north shore to keep our starboard side from close view and then we approached the dock port side to.

As we approached the dock we could see four people waiting for us. They were the

captain from the “GEORGIA STRAITS”, the senior vice president, the labour relations manager and the marine superintendent. This was a Sunday, now whether they happened to be in the office or whether the other captain called them in, is something I never did find out. The other captain had delivered his barges to the North Arm of the Fraser river and ran his tug to Celtic Shell oil dock and took a taxi to the company office.

As we approached the company dock the other captain bellowed out for us to turn the “ROSARIO STRAITS” around so that the others could see our starboard side. When we did this he immediately pointed out that the “D” rubber was missing. He claimed that the brake on his towing winch had slipped as it had many times before allowing the barge he was towing to slam into us. He claimed that he had requested many times that the problem be repaired and that the maintenance department had failed to do so, now there was more damage for them to repair. He also commented that he felt terrible that he could have hurt somebody on the “ROSARIO STRAITS” who according to him were his best friends.

The blame had been fixed on him and he just fixed the blame onto somebody else.

The other three people on the dock did not seem concerned about the missing rubber. They did seem quite relieved that nobody was hurt.

At a later date the “D” rubber was replaced on our starboard guard and the towing winch brake was overhauled on the other tug.

It was our intention to someday tell the other captain that although he shook us up that morning, that was not when the “D” rubber was knocked off. Unfortunately both captains passed away before this was revealed. The remainder of the crew members from both tugs later knew the truth and have had several laughs about the event.