

REPORT OF THE CAPSIZE OF M/V BONITA – BY CHIEF ENGINEER

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The 'Bonita' of the 'clipper' class, was built in 1971, registered in Ecuador and flew the Ecuadorian flag. The crew were mainly Ecuadorians except for the refrigeration engineer, who was Spanish, and the First and Second Engineers, the Electrician, and myself as Chief Engineer, who were Norwegian. The ship was managed and operated by Irgens-Larson in Oslo. These vessels had a tonnage of 8400 gross registered tons and were typical fast and sleek reefer (refrigerated) vessels with powerful engines capable of speeds up to 22 knots.

I joined the ship in Hamburg on the 10 December 1981 while she was loading fertiliser in bags, bound for Panama. I was familiar with the vessel, and know that she was in good condition.

We were carrying passengers, for Captain Moran had brought his wife and 2-year-old son, and the First Engineer his wife and two daughters aged 14 and 15. We were bound to Panama to discharge, then to Ecuador to load bananas for Cork, Antwerp and Bremerhaven. Early morning on the 12 December, we sailed down the Elbe with acceptable stability. MV 'Bonita's' fuel consumption was slightly less than 60 tons per day, and we had 980 tons of fuel oil and 97 tons of diesel when we left Hamburg, sufficient for the voyage. The aim was to top up with bunker oil at Guayaquil, at a fraction of the cost to that of Bremerhaven.

Early Sunday morning, the 13 December, the Master told me that we would hit a severe weather system as we entered the Bay of Biscay. The wind gradually freshened to hurricane force with driving snow, and the vessel was rolling heavily. At 1220 the Master requested to reduce speed and by this time the ship was rolling so heavily that nothing remained on the shelves and lockers in my cabin, despite my best efforts to secure them.

At 1310 (40 miles north of the Channel Islands) we were hit by two giant waves on the port side, causing the ship to list heavily to starboard. It seemed as if a third wave hit underneath the ship and we listed further, and the vessel was unable to right itself completely after that. The cargo had obviously shifted, and she was not listed about 25°, and was rolling even more heavily. On the way up from the engine room, I met the electrician who suggested that he bypass the stop-functions of the diesel generators so that they would not stop due to the rolling of the ship. I stayed there as the electrician commenced to do this, but the starboard list was so great that water came rushing in through the engine room door and over us. I ordered us to get out.

The list was now averaging 30 degrees, and more when she rolled, so we had difficulty in climbing the Engine Room ladder and we could hardly open the engine room door up and outwards because of its weight. I continued climbing up to the bridge, where chaos reigned. The Master held on to the helm as best as he could, while his wife and the others on watch, lay in a pile on the starboard side of the bridge. When the Master saw me he cried "Give me more power on the main engine". We agreed that I should go down to the engine room, apply full power with the help of the emergency device – two buttons located on the main engine to be constantly held in. It would thus override the tripping function caused by lack of cylinder, piston cooling and lubricating oil pressure – caused by the severe list. The Captain would try to run the ship aground.

While I climbed down into the engine room, the Second Engineer had slipped on deck and at a great rate had hit the rail and crushed both legs below the knees. We learned later that he had sustained 48 fractures and a collapsed lung – needing 7 months in traction for both legs. The Electrician managed, despite the list, the rolling and the incredible wind, to save him and bring him to the bridge. The Captain's wife had managed to get down to her cabin, from where the Electrician carried her and her young child together with the wife of the First Engineer and both their children, to two decks under the bridge.

Down on the engine room lower floor, I climbed down to the thrust bearing and walked on the slanting main engine towards the manoeuvre-levers that could give us 18000 hp of thrust and thus maintain steerage way on the ship. Halfway there, both the auxiliary engines stopped, the lights went out, and the main engine also stopped, as it should during power outages. The battery-powered lights went on, but I knew that these would only last for a little while. In an incredibly short space of time, the ship turned beam on to the sea and the rolling became even worse. The engine room door, which was now under water, gave way and the sea poured down in a torrent. The spare lubrication oil tanks spilled over, and as I was standing on the engine the leaking oil soaked me, making it hard for me to see anything. Waves 9 metres high kept hitting the now exposed flat bottom of the ship with such force that I was sure the tilting main engine was moving on its foundation (a 9 cylinder Sulzer RND 68 weighs several hundred tons). The situation was far from ideal.

Wiping the oil from my eyes, my fear and frustration turned to rage after the thought passed through my mind that I could be drowned like a rat down here. That was probably why I managed to climb out again. As I got to the crew's hallway, the list was at 40 degrees. There were many frightened Ecuadorian crewmembers in the hallway, the starboard side of which was entirely under water. I ordered them to go out on deck and climb up to the bridge. I took to the stairs when I realised that I needed some clothes. On the second deck, one of the Ecuadorian deck officers was in shock and totally unable to move. I shook some sense into him and both of us climbed on upwards toward the bridge. Reaching my cabin, I managed to put on an overcoat and life jacket whilst lying slantwise on the bulkhead. I thought about taking the US\$ 18,124 with me that was in the nearby safe, and putting on some more clothes, I dismissed it from my mind. However, I was thinking irrationally and had the terrifying feeling that the next wave would capsize up, and anyway I desperately wanted to be on the bridge, as if that would make any difference. On the way up I passed the radio room and saw the Electrician sitting by the radio trying to call for help, as the radio officer had disappeared, in shock.

When I arrived on the bridge, the Captain thought that we could save the ship, but I told him that we could forget about saving the ship now that she had no main engine. He sent a 'mayday' call on the portable VHF. The Danish container ship 'Charlottenburg' answered the call and arrived soon afterwards then circled us. It was impossible to launch any boats in such weather. We learned that two helicopters had taken off from Cornwall and rescue boats had left from Guernsey and Cherbourg. The Electrician and I wrapped those on the bridge with all the flags available, for those who had not managed to get clothes were feeling the cold terribly and shaking like leaves. The Second Engineer was badly hurt and passed out unconscious several times due to the pain. As his legs swelled up, we cut off his shoes.

First Engineer Sigursden, his wife and two daughters, together with twelve of the crew had sought shelter in the fan room behind the engineer's hallway. Sigursden climbed into the hallway, brought back all the clothes he could find and distributed them.

Several ships were not standing by close at hand, which helped to cheer us up somewhat, even though they could do little for us. Because of the snow showers visibility was virtually zero. An hour later a helicopter was over us. The helicopter attempted to lower a rescuer but it was almost impossible for him to do anything as the wind reached speeds of up to 100 knots (183 km/h). He was swinging

wildly and the helicopter pilot had to keep him clear of the masts and cargo rig, which was oscillating severely. After several attempts, he had saved four persons including the Captain's wife and their little boy. We were told that the helicopters' rotor blades kept icing up so that they had to return to base. Lifeboats were on the way, we were told.

Captain Moran was told that his wife and child were safe. It was obvious that this had been a heavy burden to him, and he began to think more clearly and became his old co-operative self again. We hung a pilot ladder over on the starboard side of the hull.

The lifeboat from Guernsey arrived at 1630 hours, and there was still a little daylight left. They told us to climb astern, as the lifeboat could approach the latter without the risk of being smashed. This was a great disappointment to us as the ship was now listing more than 60 degrees, and everyone was suffering from frostbite, in shock and exhausted. It meant that we would have to struggle along the outside of the hull to the stern. However, the First Engineer led his wife and two girls together with a number of Ecuadorians down to the main deck on the port side near hatch no. 3. They struggled through the rail and managed to hold on, and with what strength they had left they walked on hands and knees along the outside of the hull to the stern. Then the Electrician and I had the immensely hard job of trying to get the Second Engineer – with both legs broken – down to the main deck and through the rails onto the hull. The poor soul was in excruciating pain when we prepared slings and then pulled him over the deck, and down ladders that were at an angle of 60 degrees to the main deck.

On the hatch cover No. 3, on the port side was a Motorman with a broken thighbone. His foot lay up towards his shoulders. Next to him stood the steward in white gloves who was totally motionless from shock. The ship had turned so that the sea was hitting the hatches, and it was only a matter of time before they were washed off. We had no ropes so the Electrician and I threw a wire from the rigging to the steward several times. Unfortunately, the steward could not hold on any longer, and plunged into the water. He was killed instantly when hit the bulwark on the starboard side. That worsened the mental state of the line of waiting crewmembers, who, whilst holding on to the side of the hull, watched the steward's floating body for a long time.

In the black darkness, three helicopters relieved each other in directing searchlights on the scene of the stern of the 'Bonita'. The Lifeboat 'Sir William Arnold' rose and fell 50 feet in the swell whilst Coxswain Michael Scales manoeuvred ceaselessly as close as he dared to the stern. The crew on the fore part of the Lifeboat threw a heaving line at the right moment to those sitting on the 'Bonita's' stern. The plan was for two people to grab hold of the line together and jump as the Lifeboat pulled away from the ship, in order to avoid the propeller and rudder. One moment the Lifeboat was level with the top of the stern, next it was below the propeller and rudder, as the height of the waves reached ten to fifteen metres.

The First Engineer, his wife and both his children were stampeded as the crew panicked. As a daughter of the First Engineer jumped off the stern, one of the Ecuadorian crew hung on to her leg, and did not let go until both of them had been picked up. Engineer Sigurdson could not grab the next cast of the heaving line thrown by Second Coxswain Peter Bougourd because of the tangle the Ecuadorians had created, so he held his other daughter by the hand as he jumped. Once in the water they were unable to hold on to each other. However, the girl was picked up first, and if the helicopter had not managed to direct the searchlight onto the First Engineer, he would have surely have been lost.

The wind had backed northerly and the waves were 15 metres high when the children jumped. The Captain, Nils the Electrician, the Second Engineer and myself were the last in the line clinging to the hull, and we had no way of advancing to the stern in order to clear up the confusion that reigned there. Some did not dare to jump; others caused the heaving line from the Lifeboat to part by making it fast. Many times a new line had to be prepared on the Lifeboat, which was rolling so heavily that the aerials

touched the water. The Lifeboat crew were all professionals in every way, who were all secured with harnesses as they worked.

After many hours clinging to the hull, I was so exhausted and frozen that I felt the urge just to let go and slide into the raging sea to get away from this nightmare. The thin boiler suit had been ripped to shreds by the wind, and even my socks were gone. I shall never know completely how I avoided freezing to death before it was my turn to jump at 1950 hours. Because of his broken legs, the Second Engineer was unable to jump, so we signalled to the helicopter to winch him up. We managed to assure the pilot that the winch strop would not be made fast to the ship. We could have touched the wheels as the helicopter flew past us with the strop trailing back due to the force of the wind. At the third attempt, the Electrician grabbed the strop and we secured the Engineer in it. So off he went and we were saddled with one problem less. We watched as he landed on the deck of a nearby ship; but when they saw the state of his legs they put him in the helicopter and he was flown to hospital.

At this point, after 17 successful rescue attempts at the stern of the ship, the crew of the Lifeboat were so exhausted that they left us for a while so as to find some sort of shelter from the weather, in order to rest. We did not know this, and thought that they had abandoned us. After a while they returned and recommenced their dangerous rescue work. Once the Lifeboat was driven by the swell under the transom stern of the ship, and at one heart-stopping moment both engines stopped – and just before the boat was about to be smashed to pieces, the engines were restarted.

When the Electrician and I jumped into the sea, there were three people left on board: the Captain who was to jump after us, the man with a broken thighbone on hatch no. 3, and a seaman clutching the rail who was completely frozen with fear, and could not be induced to move. After shouting, “See you in Liverpool”, we flew about 15 metres through the air before performing a belly flop in the trough of a wave. Although the water temperature was only 3° C, it felt wonderfully warm. In the water I heard Nils say, “Are you hanging around, Chief”? I replied, “I’ll give you three guesses”, before we were hauled onboard the Lifeboat.

I waited on the Lifeboat to see if the Captain had brought the panic-stricken seaman with him; however, the Captain was alone. Then I insisted that the Lifeboat Mechanic, Bob Vowles, contacted the helicopter to attempt to save the man on hatch no. three. The rigging of the ‘Bonita’ was now totally submerged, the ship having a list of more than 90° and the waves hitting the funnel.

The Lifeboat crew continued to try to persuade the reluctant seaman on the stern of the ship to jump, and after ten attempts, the man appeared on board the boat. After a total of more than 50 forays, the last man but one had fastened the heaving line around his wrists and was pulled off the ship and on board the Lifeboat.

We commenced running at full speed for the nearest port of Brixham to prevent people from dying of hypothermia. I was in the fore cabin where the chains supporting the bunks had collapsed, leaving us on the deck amongst the excreta, urine and vomit.

After about fifteen minutes the Mechanic opened the hatch and told us that Motorman Villacres on hatch no. three had been rescued by the French tug standing by. I could not resist bursting into tears! For it had been the greatest regret of my life to leave him lying on that hatch, powerless to do anything about it. It was particularly painful as he had brought his family aboard two years earlier and I got to know his children. The joy I felt there and then was indescribable. It turned out later that he had been washed into the sea when the helicopter needed to refuel. The crew of the French tug ‘Abeille X’ had waited until he was clear of the Cargo Rig before picking him up. Few would envy him that swim!

One person had not dared to jump into the sea, but instead jumped straight on board the Lifeboat as it was being swept across the stern of the 'Bonita'. He hit his head on the deck and lay in a coma for much of the three-hour journey to Brixham, that was reached at 2313 hours. Coxswain Michael Scales kept us on board until there was sufficient number of ambulances and blankets to protect all of us from the biting wind. The ambulance personnel noticed that the comatose seaman had fatally cracked his skull, and sadly he died later in hospital.

We were all suffering from severe hypothermia and most of us were put under silver reflector blankets to begin warming up. My body temperature was down to 31.6° C four hours after my "swim". Thirty-five of us managed to survive, thanks to the tremendous efforts and great gallantry of the crew of the Guernsey Lifeboat.

I continued as superintendent/inspector for the same Company and often visited Guayaquil where most of the 'Bonita's' crew came from. Unfortunately many of the crew suffered psychological injuries and were unable to sail anymore. Second Engineer Knutsen spent one and a half years recuperating. He went on to sail as First Engineer on a ship for which I was responsible. But after a period his legs would not allow him to continue at sea, and today he is on welfare. The First Engineer and his family, the brave and resourceful Electrician, the Refrigeration Engineer and Captain Moran and family are all going strong, apparently at least on the surface.

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