

The Rescue and Salvage of MV Essi Silje

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In June of 1982, HMCS PROTECTEUR (AOR 509) and her embarked HELAIRDET from 443 Squadron were returning to Halifax after having been deployed in support of STANAVFORLANT in the Eastern Atlantic since PROTECTEUR's departure from Halifax in early May.

While conducting a night crew trainer on the early morning of 11 June, our crew flying in CH124141 were alerted to an SOS from the Motor Vessel ESSI SILJE by PROTECTEUR. ESSI SILJE, a specialty chemical tanker registered in Norway, had a raging fire in her port engine room and the crew were abandoning ship. We immediately returned to the ship to pick up a Rescue Diver and then proceeded to her reported position. Another Sea King, CH12413, was also launched and joined us at the scene of action.

There was a full overcast so it was one of those "Black Ass" nights with no visible horizon requiring at least one pilot to be on instruments full time. We located the ship and her two lifeboats without too much difficulty. However, being under orders from the PROTECTEUR not to pick up anyone unless life or limb was at immediate risk and not having any direct contact with the ESSI SILJE's crew in the life boats, the decision was made by the Aircraft Commander to hoist one of the crew members aboard the aircraft to determine if there were any injuries that required medical attention and to enquire if all the crew were safely onboard the two lifeboats. Thus, the rescue diver was hoisted down and the ESSI SILJE's engineer was hoisted up to the aircraft.

I remember the hoists as being rather difficult because of the sea and visibility conditions, with disorientation being of particular concern. After ascertaining that thankfully there were no injuries to any of the ship's crew and that all had made it safely into the lifeboats, the rescue diver was hoisted back into the aircraft. Both aircraft remained standing by until the arrival of PROTECTEUR on scene. On arrival, PROTECTEUR completed the rescue of the rest of the ship's crew and by this time the sun had risen and both aircraft were then recovered onboard.

All this had taken place within sight of the stricken ship and although a fire was still raging on the ship, it appeared to be diminishing. Therefore the Commanding Officer of PROTECTEUR decided to stand by and called for a salvage tug to be dispatched in the hopes of salvaging the ship and preventing her cargo from polluting the ocean. As the ESSI SILJE's cargo was considered to be very toxic, her sinking would have caused a major environmental disaster if the chemicals she carried were dispersed into the ocean. (For the record, ESSI SILJE was transporting 9234 tonnes of tetraethyl lead (anti-knock compound), 2176 tonnes of caustic soda and 355 tonnes of potash.)

This had all occurred on 11 June, and after a couple of days it was obvious that the fire had

burned itself out and the ESSI SILJE was still afloat. Thus, while waiting for the salvage tug, a decision was made to put some personnel on board her and assess what might need to be done to ensure she would remain afloat and be capable of being towed to a suitable port.

At first, the ship attempted to transfer equipment and personnel to ESSI SILJE by ship's boats, but after finding it extremely difficult if not downright dangerous, they tasked the Air Department to assist. So commencing on 15 June, a number of flights were made over a period of two days to transfer people and equipment between PROTECTEUR and ESSI SILJE to carry out the repairs and pumping required to keep her afloat.

These flights required that all transfers be done by hoist or sling to and from the ESSI SILJE. The sea states were not very cooperative, and as the ship was adrift and totally at the mercy of the sea, the transfers were conducted under difficult circumstances with the ship rolling and heaving heavily with her rigging presenting a particular threat while in the hover over her deck. Over the course of those days, pumps, generators, and other various pieces of equipment, and numerous personnel were transferred back and forth from PROTECTEUR to ESSI SILJE.

After completing the required repairs, PROTECTEUR took ESSI SILJE under tow and proceeded to move her towards a meeting with the salvage tugs. On 17 June, the tugs finally appeared and the tow and part of the ship's crew was transferred to the tug, with the Sea Kings again playing a part in effecting the various transfers of towing bridles, equipment and personnel between the three ships.

HMCS PROTECTEUR finally arrived back in Halifax on 23 June, a week later than her original arrival time, with a large part of ESSI SILJE's crew still on board.

As PROTECTEUR's crew and embarked HELAIRDET had played a major role in the salvage of the ESSI SILJE, the salvage court, after a period of approximately two or three years, awarded them a portion of the salvage proceeds.

The flight crews of HELAIRDET PROTECTEUR consisted of Captains J. Cox, D. Rozon, P. Barnes, J. Armour, R. Feathestone, Lieutenants J. Boucher and J. Atwood, Warrant J. Richard and Sergeant T. Hansen. The maintenance chief was CWO L. LeBel.