

TO THE RESCUE

On the evening of September 26, 1956, the USS Ponchatoula (AO-148) was steaming westward across the Pacific toward Sasebo Japan. Around 2100 a distress call came in from a stricken tramp steamer adrift about 100 nautical miles south west of our position.

I was standing the evening "Quartermaster of the Watch", in the pilot house. Part of my job was to make up a weather report, each hour, to be transmitted to the Weather Bureau. After completing the nine o'clock report I took it down to Radio Central for transmission. Just as I was entering the Radio Shack they were receiving the "Mayday" from the stricken ship.

The SS Venus a tramp steamer of Panamanian registry, on her way to Japan had lost her screw and was drifting helplessly in the path of an oncoming typhoon. Shortly after receiving her distress call, we received a message from the Navy Base in Yokosuka Japan. The Base had been monitoring the frequency and heard the "Mayday" and determined we were the closest vessel to the stricken ship. We were dispatched to locate the Venus and take her in tow.

Make preparations for towing

By the time I returned to the pilot house, the "Old Man" was on the bridge. He and the Navigator just finished plotting a course that took us south west of our present location. It was estimated it would take us eight hours to reach the stricken ship. That would place us on station around 0600 the next morning. The weather reports indicated the approaching Typhoon to be about twenty-four hours away from the Venus' location, so time was of the essence.

Before he left the bridge the Captain made a new entry in his night order book, which read, "At 0400 the deck force is to break out the ships towing cable and have it ready for use the minute we arrived on station".

On station

The next morning after chow I grabbed a extra pack of smokes and headed for the bridge. It was around 0700 by the time I got to the signal bridge, Jim was already there. "Boy, the weather's really miserable this morning", I commented. "And it's going to get worse", commented Jim. "The sky was ominous looking, a strong wind was blowing and the waves were white capped and looked threatening.

“Have we reached the freighter yet?” I asked. Jim said, “Yes, she’s just off our starboard bow” as he pointed to her. There she was, the SS Venus, bobbing up and down like a cork. The sea wasn’t being very kind to her and I was sure her crew must have had one hell of a night.

The order came down that we would start the towing operation right after morning chow. The huge towing cable was stretched out from forward to aft on the starboard side. As soon as all hands were on station the “Old Man” began maneuvering the ship around to bring our Port side to, to the Venus. The idea was to try and get as close as possible so a shot line could be sent over.

Maneuvering in the rough seas proved tricky. For refueling at sea we could easily steam side by side with the receiving ship, sixty feet apart because we were both moving. But, this was different; the Venus had no power or steering control and was dead in the water. We couldn’t possibly get any closer than a couple hundred feet due to her lack of mobility and the fact that she was bouncing all over the place.

Getting hooked up

The Skipper got us in as close as possibility. In the mean time, one of the Gunners mates and a Boatswain mate were standing by to send a line over. Because off the distance and skittishness of the Venus crew, it took three attempts, using a Line Throwing Gun, to get a line across. Each time the Gun was fired the crew on the Venus would duck and miss the line. Finally one of her crewmembers got hold of a line and the slow process of passing the tow cable over began.

Attached to the line, from the gun, was a series of other lines from small stuff to the final hawser. The hawser, about 150 fathoms in length, was passed through the *pad eye* over to the towed ship and attached to her anchor chain through the Bull nose. It took a couple hours of work but finally we were ready to begin the towing.

Towing

By the time the cable was hooked up and we were ready to start towing, the storm was closing in on us. The sea's got considerably rougher and the sky was now a dark dismal dark grey. It was

apparent that it was time to get the hell out of here. Our Captain set a course to allow us and our tow to skirt the parameter of the storm.

But, the process was slow. Towing the Venus proved extremely difficult, because of her limited maneuverability. We could barely make ten knots and the Venus, with no power, was having real trouble staying in our wake. She constantly veered off course to port or starboard requiring many course and speed changes on our part. We could not allow her to get too far port or starboard of us for fear that the huge towing cable might be pulled into one of our rudders or screws. If that had happened both ships would have been in big trouble.

Communications

Communicating with the Venus was a big problem. Her crew was all Filipinos and only a few onboard her could speak any English, and not very well. Our Officer of the Deck was becoming totally frustrated attempting to communicate course changes to her.

We'd had only been underway for a few hours when he came up on the signal bridge and asked us to try and raise her by signal light, so we did. It turned out that their Radioman could read light and did

understand a little English. But, unfortunately the Venus didn't have a real signal light; it was more of a search light, mounted atop the pilot house and not easily accessible.

After an hour of running the poor Radioman's ass off he asked us to please go back to the Radio. That was fine with us (signalmen), because every other word we tried to send had to be repeated several time over because he was having trouble understand the words. Not only that but every time we called the Venus the poor guy had to climb up a ladder at the back of their pilot house to reach the light and get on his knees to operate it.

We're being relieved of our tow

The evening of the 28th we received a message from the Salvage Tug, the USS Reclaimer. She had been dispatched to rendezvous with us the next day to take the Venus off our hands. On the afternoon of the 29th the Reclaimer showed up. We were now in much calmer water and the transfer went off like clock work. Once we were relieved of our tow and reeled in the tow cable we were able to continue on to Sasebo. The whole thing was quite interesting and a real experience for everyone involved.