

THE KOKOHEAD

By Michael Cotton (1997)

Were you one of the few people in Bedwell Bay on October 27th, 1981, who, as we all do from time to time, glanced out at the calm waters? If so, and if your timing had been right when you looked up the inlet, you would have been astounded to see two large ocean going tugs pulling an enormous, barely floating, structure around the reef marker and into the bay. It appeared to be the size of a football field and although it rode low in the water it was not well balanced. One side was out of the water about three feet higher than the other side. Nobody had been forewarned of the visit and we were unprepared for the events which were to take place in the next six weeks. And most certainly none of us knew the story which leads up to this barge's unprecedented arrival.

Since at least the middle chapters in the saga occurred right here in Belcarra, with your permission I'd like to relate the incredible but true saga of the relatively short life of the barge called the "*Kokohead*."

She, (and her sister ship the "*Diamond Head*") were built in Portland Oregon in 1964 specifically to haul cargo to Hawaii. Both were built of steel, were 328 feet long, 68 feet wide, and the hull alone was 24½ feet deep.

After the Hawaiian run, the Kokohead was sold to a Seattle firm for use between Puget Sound and Nome Alaska. She was contracted jointly by the owners, the charterers and the shippers. In 1975 she was carrying a full load of lumber, steel, cement and tires stowed in the deckhouse, while containers (eight to ten high) and machinery were secured on deck. A large crane was mounted above her steel deck house to load and off-load supplies. The total height was ninety feet above sea level. Heading north, a severe storm made the crossing of Millbank Sound very slow and difficult. Just off Klemtu she struck a rock and rolled over, and most of the deck cargo disappeared. The tug towed the overturned barge into Swanson Bay where it was found conditions would not be suitable for an attempted salvage. *Seaspan International*, who was in the area, was engaged and a Seaspan tug towed the barge to Klutze where salvage operations were undertaken. Six smaller barge loads of materials and machinery were taken off and returned to Seattle.

The salvage of a thirty-six hundred horsepower generating plant from the ocean bottom at the location where it first struck the rock was a major feat in itself. This power plant was being shipped to the City of Nome, Alaska, and after it was recovered from the ocean bottom it was sent back to Seattle — completely overhauled and then sent back up to Alaska.

At Klutze, a temporary patch was welded over the hole in the barge's bottom and the salvage tug "*Sudbury II*", with the help of several other tugs, attempted to turn the barge right-side-up. The barge rolled over easily when submerged and lying on the ocean bottom, but as the tanks were deballasted she flipped over once more. The barge filled with water and was again rolled over by the tugs and once again she flipped upside down.

The *Seaspan* Salvage Master suggested that the deckhouse be cut-off to stabilize the hull, but this idea was rejected by both the barge's owners and the insurance underwriters and therefore the salvage effort was abandoned.

Months later the court awarded the barge to *Seaspan* as a partial payment for the salvage effort. Although the barge had been left on the bottom of the ocean during all this time, *Seaspan* now raised it (still upside-down) and towed it to Vancouver Harbor in September of 1978, where it was anchored to a mooring buoy north east of the Second Narrows Bridge. *Seaspan* had spent considerable money on salvage attempts and at that time there was no more money allocated to right the barge.

In 1981 more money was allocated to right and repair the barge hull. On October 26th, 1981, four anchors, each weighing six and one-half tons were placed in Bedwell Bay in order to secure the barge. The next day the *Kokohead* was towed (still upside-down) into the Bay by two *Seaspan* tugs — “*Seaspan Defender*” and the “*Seaspan Piper*” — where she was tied to the waiting anchor buoys.

McCallister Contracting from Montreal was hired to do the first part of the salvage operation. They, in turn, hired *Can-Dive* from North Vancouver to do the on-site work. It was decided to cut-off the 300 ton deck house, still hanging upside-down from the deck and therefore all the steel connections except eight (two at each corner) were burned-off. Then explosives were wired to the remaining connections and when all was checked and ready, they were blasted apart and the unattached deck house plunged to the ocean bottom. With the huge weight gone, on November 29th an attempt was made to right the barge in the middle of Bedwell Bay. The attempt was unsuccessful and the barge, now on its side, was towed to shore. Work was carried out around the clock. The huge hull bottom became a working platform and a small camp was assembled on it. Generators, high intensity lights, welders, materials storage and washrooms, all magically appeared, and a large, noisy, busy construction project took place twenty-four hours a day right in front of the shocked Bedwell Bay residents. The intensity of the construction lights was almost as annoying as the continual noise of the generators and welding. Today — with all the environmental safeguards and controls — such a project would never be allowed. Although some of the citizens complained bitterly about the disruption of their heavenly life-style, most realized that this was a temporary project and that eventually it would be completed.

The “*Seaspan Commodore*” and the “*Seaspan Piper*” with two smaller tugs attempted to roll the hull over. Finally, after two days, a combination of ballasting and deballasting was successful. Near the high tide they made their move. Those who saw the actual “flip” of the hull (including the writer) were privileged to witness something that few people will ever see again. The action in our bay is hard to describe. Here was this huge hulking hull, with cables passing under her and being pulled to the south by two powerful tugs with their engines at top revs, while two other equally large tugs were pulling toward the north with cables attached over the top of the wallowing mass. The slack was taken out of the cables as the tugs slowly began to exert tension. Slowly, slowly, oh so slowly, one side rose out of the ocean while the opposite slowly dipped below the waves.

As the tugs gradually increased their enormous power they created a minor tsunami at the end of the bay while the whole area was whipped into a frothing, boiling, churning whirlpool! As the water created more resistance on the deep side than on the high side, the tugs, with the barge cradled in cables, slowly moved as a unit to the north. The tugs at the south then increase their power and the barge stopped and gradually started moving south again. More and more power was applied! The whine of the huge engines echoed off the rock cliffs as the high side reached further toward the sky while the low side slipped deeper and deeper towards the bottom of the bay. The cable angles became more acute providing more tension as slowly the top side of the hull climbed higher and higher until finally it was standing on its edge in an upright position! It trembled as it stood in such an unnatural position and with one final nudge the forces of gravity were overcome and with a huge gasp she slowly settled back into the water.

I believe that after six years of being upside down, she had become so accustomed to the position that she resisted any attempt to return her to her original floating position. Since “force of habit” indicated to her she should float upside down, she did not give-up without a horrendous fight, but finally she was floating the way she was designed to float — with her deck above, rather than below, water.

After pumping all the water out of the hull compartments, the barge was towed back to the moorings near the Second Narrows and later dry-docked and underwent much needed repairs. Salvage operations were rumored to be approximately \$900,000 and that another \$800,000 was spent to make the hull seaworthy once again.

After the salvaged hull was towed out of the bay, two other scows were anchored - one with a large dragline on it. It then proceeded to reach down to the bottom of the bay and grab any materials which had sunk. It brought these to the surface and loaded them on the second scow. However much material escaped and many local residents (including yours truly) celebrated an early Christmas that year. Many, many, “porta-potties”, rolls and rolls of polyethylene, pressure-treated 2”x4”x26' (full of toredo holes), and many other products, somehow made their way to the occasional do-it-yourself home project. Villagers found it very convenient to have a floating building supply outlet so close to home.

Belcarra Mayor Verna Barrett and Alderman Al Beebe raised some concerns about the conditions in the bay. In a letter of January 28th, 1982, The Honourable Jean-Luc Pepin, then the Minister of *Transport Canada*, wrote to Mr. Mark Rose, M.P. for Mission-Port Moody. This letter stated in part:

“This salvage operation, which was successfully effected, was closely monitored throughout by the Port of Vancouver. No negative environmental repercussions were anticipated as an anti-pollution boom was installed around the barge, the salvage operation was confined to daylight hours and the noise level generated by this operation was considered to be within acceptable environmental standards. ...”

The Honourable Pepin did not have as strategic a viewing position as some of us in Belcarra, and therefore he was not aware, as we were, of the number of power boat propellers that became bound up in floating polyethylene. Nor did he see the oil seeping-out of the barge and washing-up on the shores.

The barge had been salvaged and at least some of the mess on the bottom of the bay had been cleaned-up. But there was still the 300 ton steel deck house which had been blasted loose from the scow deck, and which had sunk to the bottom of the bay. Two cranes and two scows were towed into the bay and cables were attached to the deck-house and it was carefully lifted off the bottom. The two scows, with the deck-house suspended between and below them, were slowly pulled out of the bay and up Indian Arm. When they reached the deepest part of the arm the last remnant of the once proud *Kokohead* were taken care of.

And so that is the end of the story, you say! Well just hang on here a darn minute! Whatever happened to the scow on which all this money had been spent, and which had finally been salvaged and rebuilt? Well, as it turns out the story didn't quite end there! She was sold to a mining company who mounted a gold dredge on her and was again sent to Alaska. The mine was not successful and she was again sold, this time to *LaFarge Cement Co.*

LaFarge used her to haul limestone from Texada Island down to the United States. But one night in a big storm just off Merry Island near Sechart, she again sank. And there to this day, she sits on the bottom of the ocean.

Now my theory is that the *Kokohead* was never happy being dragged all over the Pacific Ocean and that from the day her keel was laid, she had a subconscious, but deep rooted, desire to be a submarine. When she first sank in Hecate Strait, was it just the storm or did she perhaps help to scuttle her chances of survival?

Because she wanted to be a submarine!

And when the best talents in the world tried to salvage her and bring her to the surface deck side up, why did she resist so vehemently?

Because she loved it on the bottom and she wanted to be a submarine!

Why did she keep flipping-over?

Because she felt at home under water and wanted to be a submarine!

And when, on that fateful day in Bedwell Bay when she was being bullied by four of the largest, most powerful tugs in the world, and when she was standing vertically in the water, why did I see her quiver as though all her life was finally drained from her? It appeared she could fight no more and was humbly admitting to defeat.

She had done everything she could to come out of the closet and admit to her submarine yearnings, but man did not even bother to try to understand and was determined to make a scow out of her.

Later as she devoured whole banks of gravel in the endless quest for gold in Alaska, and again as she was dragged unceremoniously up and down our remote coast — perhaps she was just biding her time. Perhaps she was waiting until she could once more turn bottoms-up and settle to the lifestyle of which she had glimpsed a few times, and which she still had hopes of achieving. And when she ran into a storm at Merry Island, she was only too happy to slip once more to the bottom of the sea where she felt so at home.

And I for one, believe mankind should forget her salvage value — the profits she could generate — and respect her wishes to remain where she now lies. And if it gives her peace of mind to think she is a submarine, **then so be it!**

What business is it of ours to try to convince her otherwise?