SECTION 2
VOICES AND VESSELS
COURAGE AND SERVICE

166  DEDICATION AND SACRIFICE
169  WORLD WAR 2
174  ATLANTIC AND ARCTIC CONVOYS
183  BUSINESS AS USUAL IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD
186  BEYOND CONFLICT
190  DEALING WITH MAJOR INCIDENTS
197  EXTRAORDINARY CARGOES
198  GENERATIONS OF SERVICE
Dedication and sacrifice

While crossing the world’s oceans has always involved an element of risk, the 20th century proved to be a particularly dangerous period for merchant seamen. Two world wars and a variety of regional conflicts saw merchant vessels explicitly targeted, with a growing recognition of the importance of cutting an enemy’s supply lines as a sure way to win a war. Yet, throughout the past century, the crews of BP’s shipping arm, have continued to move oil products around the world, despite the considerable risks they have often faced in the line of duty.

Tanker crews have encountered many different challenges, sometimes relating to global conflict and at other times to political instability and economic uncertainty. But alongside these variables, there have also been constants: the inherent perils of being at sea; the need to go to the aid of those in distress at a moment’s notice; and the selfless act of putting oneself in the line of danger in order to help others who have required assistance at sea.

While the Merchant Navy is sometimes overlooked when heroism and courage at sea are mentioned, this chapter highlights the selfless behaviour of the company’s seafarers, not only during wartime, but also in routine service. It is thanks to this quiet, understated commitment to service that BP Shipping has been able to support the BP group as it has adapted to its ever-changing commercial environment, as well as playing a pivotal role in supporting the British nation and her allies during their most challenging moments.

Until World War 1, the Hague Convention, which stated that a merchant ship could only be sunk after she had been stopped and her crew removed to a place of safety, had been largely honoured. Things changed when U-boats entered the scene and there was no longer space in which to take prisoners or survivors; on top of that, merchant ships were being increasingly used to carry arms and so were considered legitimate targets. The Hague Convention was soon flouted and as attacks on the British naval blockade of Germany intensified, so the loss of life among merchant seamen increased.

The decision in 1914 not to escort British merchant ships in convoys brought Britain close to losing the war at sea, such was the loss of merchant ships, seamen and their cargoes – especially grain. The introduction of convoys – along with the effective requisitioning of the entire merchant fleet in the summer of 1917 – transformed Britain’s position.

There were five torpedo attacks on the fleet of the newly-formed British Tanker Company (BTC), with two ships and 18 lives lost as a result. British Viscount was the first BTC loss, sunk off the Skerries on 23rd February 1918 while requisitioned to make a coastal voyage from Liverpool to Queenstown. Six of the crew lost their lives. On 4th March, British Princess was torpedoed off the coast of Northern Ireland. John Straughan, the Third Engineer on board, recalled the white streak of the torpedo before it struck the amidships pump room, killing a Chinese crewman. Later that same month, British Star was leaving the River Tyne in England on her maiden voyage when she too was struck by a torpedo. Particularly tragic was the loss of Eupion – sunk a matter of weeks before Armistice Day in 1918. She had already narrowly escaped a double torpedo attack earlier in the year, but on 3rd October, her luck ran out when she was sunk by U-boat U123, 10 miles west of Loop Head, County Clare at the mouth of the River Shannon in Ireland. Eleven crew members from England, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Mexico and the Netherlands perished. Eupion had not yet received the ‘British’ prefix, as it was on Ministry service and was due to be handed to BTC at the end of the war.

While the rapid building programme established by BP’s chairman Charles Greenway, ensured that the overall fleet grew stronger in the immediate post-war years, the losses of Eupion and British Viscount were a powerful early lesson of the vulnerability of a tanker and its crew at sea.
Page 165: A Royal Navy Sea King helicopter embarks some of the 271 survivors of HMS Sheffield onto British Esk during the Falklands Campaign, May 1982.

Left: The uniform livery of the British Tanker Company. During WW1, a Captain Fryatt, Master of a railway steamer, rammed and sank a German submarine. Captured at a later date by the Germans, Fryatt was shot because he was considered to be a ‘civilian’, wearing a company livery and not a service uniform when he attacked a German military vessel. With the intention that in the event of another war, the merchant service should automatically become one of the services, an Order in Council was promulgated in 1918 to prescribe a standard merchant service uniform. In 1922, in recognition of the service rendered during the war by merchant seamen, King George V conferred honour and status on the merchant service by providing it with the title ‘Merchant Navy’.
Courthorpe Carrington was Chief Steward on British Petrol in June 1940, when she was sunk and the officers and crew captured by a German raider. Carrington died of his wounds and was buried at sea with an address given at the burial service by German Naval Commander Von Henrick Huckensheill. Carrington’s cousin, Edwin Ridd, was also on board as a cook and returned Carrington’s possessions, including the eulogy transcribed into his war diary, to his widow after he was liberated from the prison camp. The eulogy was donated to the BP Archive at the University of Warwick by Edwin Ridd’s family.
Historians often refer to the early days of the Second World War as ‘the phoney war’, but for the Merchant Navy, the reality was rather different. Within nine hours of Chamberlain’s declaration on 3rd September 1939, the passenger vessel SS Athenia had been torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat, killing 118 passengers.

In fact, for the merchant fleet, the perils of war in Europe started well before the declaration of hostilities. By the mid-1930s, passage through the Mediterranean was becoming increasingly dangerous, with war raging between Italy and Abyssinia, followed by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Even as a neutral party, British ships were not guaranteed safe passage. In September 1936, British Endeavour was bombed and machine-gunned off the Spanish coast, thankfully with no resulting injuries, while British Corporal was attacked by three aircraft near Gibraltar the following year, also escaping without damage. Other oil companies did suffer, and it was the good fortune of the Anglo-American tanker George McKnight that British Commodore was nearby when it was bombed and set alight off the Tunisian coast. The BTC crew was able to salvage the stricken ship and rescue its crew.

British Influence was sunk on 14th September 1939, the first BTC loss of the war. In what would be a rare moment of gentlemanly conduct in a war where international wartime conventions were quickly discarded, the commander of U29, Otto Schuhart, gave Captain H. L. McMichael and his crew ample time to evacuate British Influence before torpedoing the vessel. Schuhart even kept his U-boat at the scene until the crew’s rescue was assured. Such care for the welfare of seamen would prove increasingly rare; those from either side who may have wished to help others fleeing their stricken vessels were deterred from doing so by fear of attack or by lack of space in which to take prisoners. Few got away as lightly as the crew of British Influence.

And just as merchant shipping was among the first to be targeted at the start of hostilities, so it would be that at the end of war too, the final enemy action was a deadly torpedo attack against British and Norwegian commercial ships in the Firth of Forth, precisely one hour before midnight and the formal German surrender.

From the outset, the German military commanders knew that control of the seas was critical to their overall success. Pivotal to this was the ability to blockade the UK and choke the supplies of oil and other essential goods. For the British Government, the importance of maintaining a reliable supply line to the UK could not be overstated.

The convoy system of protecting ships by travelling together had not won universal favour among military tacticians when it was deployed in the latter stages of World War 1, but it was swiftly reintroduced in September 1939. On the one hand, the convoys provided the opportunity for the accompanying escort group to best defend against any enemy threats that might have become apparent. On the other hand, a large, slow-moving procession presented an easy target for a U-boat commander and the Luftwaffe.
World War 2 tanker fleet casualties
The period between 1940 and 1942 became known as ‘the happy time’ by the German Navy, as it inflicted large losses on the Allies’ merchant marine. By 1943, the tide had turned, as improved technology, intelligence and the Coastal (air) Command began to defeat the U-boats and Luftwaffe. This was depicted in the cartoons of the time, as shown above in the example by David Ghilchik, published in the UK’s Daily Sketch newspaper in February 1943.
Initially, convoys were used to protect merchant ships as they entered the Western Approaches to British waters; by 1941, they were expanded beyond 20 degrees west to include the trans-Atlantic route all the way to Halifax, in Nova Scotia, with American and Canadian naval forces offering support on the western side of the ocean.

Captain Stuart Allen, who served on British Patience in both Atlantic and Arctic Convoys, recalls how the ships would judge their relative positions within the convoy. “I remember the spacing of the convoys. It was three cables astern and five cables apart. We used to carry a little prism to judge the distance and we’d line it up with the ship mast in front. Depending on whether it was up or down, we could tell what the distance was. Originally, we had to use a sextant, but then they brought out this small prism.”

Convoys were attacked on a regular basis, particularly during the early years of the war, when Allied shipping losses were at their most severe. After the invasion of France and Norway in the first part of 1940, Germany had acquired the capability to launch attacks farther into the Atlantic, both by air and by sea. The U-boats enjoyed undoubted superiority during this period, a time which the German submariners referred to as ‘the happy time’. It was anything but happy for Allied shipping, with horrific losses suffered by both commercial and military vessels, especially in the area to the northwest of Ireland, where ships would leave the shelter of the British Isles and enter the open waters of the Atlantic.

While merchant ships were heavily dependent on their escorts for protection, most ships were also equipped with their own guns and crew trained in the use of these weapons, although they provided minimal protection against a determined air attack or a U-boat with an armed torpedo in its payload. By February 1940, 82 of the
BTC fleet’s 89 ships had guns of some kind; 29 of these were low-angle guns that could not be used against air attacks, although these were gradually upgraded during 1940.

The introduction of 20mm automatic cannons greatly increased the defensive capability of tankers, with the Oerlikon and Bofors guns able to fire explosive shells against attacking aircraft. These guns were released by the Royal Navy from 1941 and by the end of 1942 they were fitted to most BTC ships, with some tankers having as many as six on board.

George King – then serving on a Blue Funnel tanker and having recently completed gun training on HMS Eaglet – recalls an exchange with a U-boat: “I knew the sight-setting drill, and for the next hour or so, I had plenty of real-life practice. Once the terror of realising that those bastards out there were serious had passed, it was surprising how quickly the gun’s crew settled into exchanging fire. I felt perfectly safe on the left-hand side of the gun, both hands outstretched on the two circular sight-setting scales with ‘Widd’ on my right, hunched against his padded shoulder-rest, eye to telescope, hand to trigger. Even the crash of the gun became near-acceptable with the Oerlikon and Bofors guns able to fire explosive shells against attacking aircraft. These guns were released by the Royal Navy from 1941 and by the end of 1942 they were fitted to most BTC ships, with some tankers having as many as six on board.

Salomons, standing to one side with binoculars glued to his eyes, was a confident and steady influence. Once he thought we had scored a hit, but it was probably just a close splash – enough, however, to keep the U-boat out of his gun’s maximum range.”

Merchant shipping losses mounted steadily throughout 1941 and 1942 and for the men serving on the North Atlantic Convoys it was a nervewracking time, not knowing at any moment whether there was an enemy vessel with its sights trained on them. The crew continued to go about their duties, maintaining a business as normal approach as much as the situation allowed. As Stuart Allen recalled: “We just assumed we were going to be unlucky if we were attacked. We couldn’t let it get us down; we just accepted it happened. What could we do? If we were attacked, we’d deal with it when it came.”

While the defensive capability of tankers to withstand enemy attack was limited, there were occasions when the bravery and competence of the crew did thwart enemy attacks and almost certainly saved many lives. British Valour under the command of Captain J. W. Ross, was attacked by a submarine while sailing in an unescorted convoy. The gunner on board British Valour opened fire on the submarine, which immediately dived, resurfacing a short while later only to come under fire again, with reports of a bright orange flash indicating a direct hit. The submarine was not seen again.

In a similar unrelated incident, G. R. Mackillican of British Workman fought bravely against an enemy aircraft that was attacking his ship. Manning the Hotchkiss machine gun, Mackillican almost certainly scored a direct hit on his attacker, which left the scene with smoke pouring from the nose of the aircraft and without having inflicted any damage to the ship.

Both Captain Ross and Mr Mackillican each received an engraved gold cigarette case at a luncheon given by the British Tanker Company in their honour on 8th September 1941. Captain Ross was commended “for his skill in organising and directing the defence of his ship as a result of which an enemy submarine attack was frustrated”, and Mr Mackillican for “his bravery and devotion to duty, which resulted in the failure of an enemy bomber attack upon his ship and led to destruction of the aeroplane.”

With the ever-present dangers of a U-boat attack and the slim chances of survival when a ship was destroyed by a torpedo, being captured alive and taken prisoner might have seemed like a lucky escape. Certainly, those on board British Advocate were fortunate to survive when their ship was captured on its way to Abadan from Swansea. The entire crew was taken prisoner on board the German battleship Scheer on 19th February 1941. Having spent several weeks at sea in captivity and then further time in a grim Bordeaux jail, the men were then put on a train bound for Germany and a POW camp near the city of Hamburg.

Able seaman W. J. Evans was determined to avoid spending the rest of the war in a German prison and before light on the fourth morning, he crawled out of the window in his compartment and stood on the footboard of the carriage until the train stopped four hours later. He lay on the ground between the tracks as the train pulled away above him and then somehow negotiated his way through Germany into Belgium and France without getting stopped. He was assisted by friendly locals and helped on his way to Marseille. From there, he travelled to the Spanish border, where he was apprehended and put into a series of Spanish concentration camps, before finally securing the assistance of the British Embassy in Madrid. He found his way to the safety of Gibraltar, where he was given homeward passage to Liverpool, arriving back in Britain on 11th October 1941. While his story is one of great courage in escaping capture and surviving incredible hardship, Evans reported his adventure to a BTC superintendent in an understated way, saying merely, “I took a chance and it came off.”

Even more remarkable is that a month after seaman Evans’s escape from captivity, another BTC able seaman, John Dawson, had a similar escape after his ship, British Strength, was destroyed and her surviving crew taken prisoner. Together with a prisoner from another company, they jumped from a moving train in France and got away to Spain, eventually making their way to freedom.
Atlantic and Arctic convoys

Atlantic Convoys would typically choose northerly courses, occasionally within sight of Greenland, as the pack ice at these latitudes made it difficult for U-boats to operate in these waters. Iceland was used as a base for aircraft support for the convoys from 1941 and also provided valuable refuelling capability.

Ralph Maybourn recalled his early years at sea, when he made several journeys as a senior apprentice in the Atlantic Convoys. “I spent two-and-a-half years on the North Atlantic run and probably made 15 or 20 round trips in that time. We had equipment for trailing a pipeline over the stern and escorts would come up and refuel when the weather permitted. Otherwise, you went across to the United States, loaded the oil and then joined the next convoy to bring back the fuel to the UK, where it was very desperately needed. I remember the really bad weather and how it was difficult maintaining your position in convoy. If the convoy wasn’t attacked, it could be uneventful. If it was attacked it was more eventful, depending on how things developed.”

Many ships did experience those ‘eventful’ moments to which Maybourn refers. *British Ardour* was one of many vessels sunk in the Atlantic Convoys. Her time came in what was probably the last big convoy battle of the war in April 1943, when she was torpedoed forward of the bridge. John Dahl was serving on board *British Ardour* and remembered how the ship became a mass of flames that only began to diminish after 15 minutes or so, as all the fires were put out. It was a lucky escape for the men of *British Ardour* as the corvette *HMS Snowflake* was on hand to pick up the grateful crew.

There was a gap of several thousand square miles where land-based planes couldn’t reach and where submarines weren’t threatened by aircraft; it was here that the convoys were most vulnerable to attack. In an innovative move designed to provide further defensive capability for the convoys, Merchant Aircraft Carriers (or MAC ships) were produced. These were tankers converted to aircraft carriers by the installation of a large steel deck. They carried up to four Swordfish aircraft (but usually three), capable of taking off and landing on the 460-foot long makeshift runway on the deck of the vessel. The ships flew the red ensign and carried their normal merchant crew along with personnel from the Fleet Air Arm, including pilots, observers, air gunners and a full complement of ground maintenance staff.

Despite having a flight commander, an air crew, a doctor and the flight service crew on board, the Captain remained completely in command as far as the ship’s movements were concerned.

Maybourn served on one of the MAC ships and recalled, “We would patrol those areas where the land-based planes couldn’t reach and keep the U-boats below the surface if possible. So, we carried about 10,000 tons of oil cargo, but we had three Swordfish aircraft on the flight deck that flew sorties whenever the weather permitted. I even took a flight in a Swordfish once. Before each convoy started from the UK, the aircraft would land and take off from their base a few times and another cadet and I persuaded the Captain to let us go on one of these flights. That was when I flew for the first time and it was very exciting, too, I can tell you.”

The work of the pilots in completing antisubmarine duties from the MAC ships was highly successful and their operation coincided with a sharp decline in U-boat attacks. For the tanker crew, having a flight deck on top of a heavy cargo of oil posed obvious safety hazards. On one occasion on *Empire McCabe*, a pilot missed the landing wires and his aircraft came to rest on the tail of one of the other two planes. Within a few minutes, all three planes were in flames and with burning fuel flowing from the flight deck and aircraft rockets firing off in every direction, it was a nervous few moments for everyone on board. Although the aircraft were destroyed, the crewmen were uninjured but badly shaken, and only too aware that the outcome could have been far worse.

In June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union and it fell to the Allied forces to maintain a supply line of oil and other essential goods to the Russians. The Arctic Convoys were established and several BTC ships were involved in the supply of oil from the US across the Arctic Ocean, north of the Norwegian coast and into Northern Russia.

If the risks taken by the men in the North Atlantic Convoys were severe, those faced by the Arctic Convoys were at an even greater level. With the Germans in full control of Norwegian air space, the convoys travelled well within the range of enemy aircraft, a further unwelcome hazard to the constant menace of U-boats. As if the enemy wasn’t enough to worry about, there was the extreme weather with which to contend. In the winter, temperatures of -60 degrees Fahrenheit below freezing were recorded on the vessels. Yet ships would prefer to travel through the icy waters in a region where the long winter nights offered the cover of almost constant darkness, choosing...
the bitter conditions over the mild summer months, when 24-hour daylight left the convoys dangerously exposed.

The casualty figures for the Arctic Convoys are startling – from a total of 78 convoys to Russia, 85 merchant vessels and 16 Royal Navy warships were destroyed. It is no surprise that these journeys were known by the men involved as ‘the suicide missions’. The bulk of casualties occurred in the 1942 convoys; in one particularly disastrous convoy, PQ17, only 14 out of 38 ships made it through an enemy onslaught to deliver their precious cargo to their destination in Russia.

If the conditions at sea were not bad enough, the situation on arrival at the Russian port of Kola was icy in more than just the weather. Commander J. P. Mosse, who was Master of HMS Mermaid in convoy JW59 from Loch Ewe to Kola, recalled ruefully: “We lay alongside the naval base for three days and not a single courtesy call was paid. Were we allies or just two nations fighting a common foe?”

By 1943, the Allied forces were gaining the upper hand against the German air and sea forces. With a steady supply of new ships coming on stream, the growing ability to intercept German communications and, most crucially, development in the use of radar and sonar to detect U-boats and coordinate attacks, the number of losses fell dramatically, although there were attacks on convoys reported right up to 1945. While the threat from the enemy gradually lessened, the weather remained a deadly hazard for the Arctic Convoys. It was no surprise to any of the men who had sailed to Russia when Churchill acknowledged the difficulties they had faced, referring to the Arctic Convoys as “the worst journey in the world”.

Stuart Allen recalled his experiences on convoy JW60 which departed from Glasgow to Archangel on 15th September 1944.

“From Glasgow, we went round to Loch Ewe to join the convoy, which was made up of around 30 escorts and 30 merchant ships, mainly carrying military equipment, such as tanks, aircraft and munitions. Most were American vessels, with only a few British ships in the convoy. There was always a rescue ship at the rear end of the convoy, with the job of picking up survivors if a ship was torpedoed.

“We had an escort and also picked up HMS Rodney and two aircraft carriers: Campania and Striker. We finished up with an escort of 15 destroyers, several frigates, two corvettes, a sloop and the cruiser Diadem. We also had some motor torpedo boats (MTBs) accompany us as far as the Faroes. They were expecting the German battleship Tirpitz to come out. Although we had the upper hand by that time, ships were still getting torpedoed.

“We soon encountered a U-boat pack somewhere around the Faroes, but it was chased away by our escort. We went north, to around 76 degrees north, way above Bear Island, before coming back down towards Murmansk. Half the convoy left there and we left from Murmansk and went down

“I remember the really bad weather and how it was difficult maintaining your position in convoy. If the convoy wasn’t attacked, it could be uneventful. If it was attacked, it was more eventful, depending on how things developed.”

RALPH MAYBOURN
to the White Sea with a Russian escort. They spent all night dropping depth charges. It was difficult to pick up submarines because of the density of the water, so they tended to drop depth charges to deter them. In the White Sea, we discharged at Molotovsk. When we were discharging, we observed what I think was a political prison camp. The men had to build up the jetty to lay the pipeline across for us and they were dressed in brown Russian uniforms.

“Then, we went across to Archangel to wait for a convoy and we were there for about three weeks. We used to go into Archangel quite a lot. Later, the Russians stopped everyone from getting off, but we were there at a slack period, when they did let us off. Archangel was a northern Russian town. People were very welcoming. We used to go to the Intourist hotel to get a bit of entertainment. There were Russians in there and I sometimes wonder if they were spies because they were quite open with us. I remember that the Captain was told he could send a message back to the UK to say that we were alright, but it had to go through the Russian authorities. It never got there.

Just before we left, they put on a big do for us; I think it was the Moscow Ballet. At around 4 o’clock in the morning, one of the women from the hotel said to me that we could go back. Of course, there was a curfew on at the time, but she knew quite a few of the Russian police and we were not bothered once. I’m sure she was in the Russian secret service! By the time we left Archangel in October, it was starting to get pretty cold. The sea hadn’t iced up yet, but we were getting heavy frost. At Murmansk, we joined a convoy (RA61); there were around 15 German submarines waiting off the Kola Inlet and they got chased by one of our escort group. They did hit one of the frigates, HMS Mounsey, with a ‘gnat’ torpedo, but she managed to return to port.
life-saver on the 11th day and frequent showers enabled them to stay hydrated, but food supplies ran out on the 31st day. Sharks circled their boat as the desperately hungry men tried, with little success, to capture seagulls and fish. They somehow remained alive for 10 further days without food, until they were picked up by a destroyer and taken, in a skeletal state and suffering with salt-water boils, to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where they received urgent medical care.

Each man received a £20 ex-gratia payment from BTC, while seaman Griffiths was awarded the Lloyd’s War Medal for “courage and resource at sea”, as well as the British Empire Medal. Unfortunately, the remarkable Evan Griffiths died at sea later in the war, but the other three men made it through to peacetime.

One of the most shocking incidents involving a BTC vessel in WW2 relates to British Chivalry, sailing unescorted near the Maldives under the command of Captain Walter Hill, when it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine on 22nd February 1943. Most of the men were able to get away from the sinking vessel on two lifeboats, but their good fortune did not last for long. The Japanese submarine commander soon captured Captain Hill and took him on board the submarine and, as the other men pulled away in their lifeboats, the submarine gunners unleashed their fury on the tanker’s crew, spraying them with bullets for more than an hour. Chief Officer Peter Payne instructed the men to float in the water and feign death, but this did not prevent the killing of more than a dozen men.

Given the severity of the attack, it is miraculous that, in the aftermath, Payne was able to round up 39 survivors onto a single lifeboat. They had to plug around 20 holes in the boat before sailing west and for a full 37 days, the men survived on their stores, until they were picked up by a British ship near Durban, South Africa. Only one man was lost during their lengthy ordeal on the lifeboat.

Captain Hill, meanwhile, was twice placed blindfolded in front of Japanese firing squads.
before ending the war in the notorious Changi prison camp in Singapore. He survived terrible privations but returned to serve in the BTC fleet after the war. On Captain Hill’s death in 1988, his obituary appeared in BP News, stirring a fellow officer, Captain A.W. Richardson to record: “Forty-four years later really should be a time to forget the excesses of wartime. However, there are exceptions and, in my view, five months’ stubborn refusal (by an Irishman) to reveal even the relatively small amount of classified information that he held, deserves some mention. He was a great character, a fine man and he displayed qualities that would be the envy of most of us.”

Bravery and courage are not words that are readily used by the men who served on the merchant convoys of World War 2, many of whom felt they were just doing their job. As George King relates in his memoir, they were: “ordinary men, plain men, competent men. Not heroes, not conscious heroes and probably not very heroic at all. Frightened sometimes; bored sometimes; angry sometimes; competent most of the time, very competent; but not heroes; part of a nation at war.”

Looking back, it is remarkable to imagine that men would voluntarily put themselves in the dangerous situations faced by the tanker crews during World War 2. Few can doubt the enormous risks taken by men who carried out their duties in the line of enemy fire on a tanker full of flammable liquid. In fact, at the time, other mariners even questioned their sanity. Alan Davies, was awarded an Arctic Star medal for his service in the Merchant Navy during the Second World War. Alan served on the oil tanker British Corporal, which was part of convoy PQ14, from Reykjavik, in Iceland, to Murmansk, in Russia, in April 1942. During the war, Alan also served on other BTC oil tankers that took part in various convoys across the Atlantic. At the time of convoy PQ14, he was a Third Officer. He subsequently went on to become Commodore of the BPTC fleet.

If the crews of the tankers who did so much were too modest to talk openly about the importance of their contribution to the war effort, perhaps the eloquent testimony delivered by the then Princess Elizabeth is worth remembering. She paid the following tribute to those who served in the war when she launched the tanker British Princess at Laing’s yard in Sunderland in 1946:

“No greater heroism has ever been shown than by the men who served in our tankers. Their achievements were of vital importance but seldom spectacular, and it was not often that they received the thanks they deserved. But in their own quiet, devoted way those men endured almost greater hardships than anyone. The men who sailed in those ships knew that from the moment they left port, they would be the ‘bull’s eye’ of every enemy attack. They had seen other tankers hit and blazing from stem to stern. They had no false illusions about the danger that lay ahead. Had they failed, our Navy might have been without fuel, our Army immobilised, and our Air Force might have been grounded.”

Spotlight: Arctic Medal

Alan Davies

Alan Davies, was awarded an Arctic Star medal for his service in the Merchant Navy during the Second World War. Alan served on the oil tanker British Corporal, which was part of convoy PQ14, from Reykjavik, in Iceland, to Murmansk, in Russia, in April 1942. During the war, Alan also served on other BTC oil tankers that took part in various convoys across the Atlantic. At the time of convoy PQ14, he was a Third Officer. He subsequently went on to become Commodore of the BPTC fleet.

He spent his entire working life of more than 40 years serving with BPTC. The last ship he commanded was the supertanker British Respect, the largest vessel to take part in the Review of the Fleet that was held at Spithead on 28th June 1977, to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of the Queen’s accession to the throne. (Chapter 2).
Left: Sailors use steam hoses to clear ice from anchor chains and winches on board HMS Scylla on convoy protection duty in the Atlantic in February 1943.

Right: An original BTC report to the UK Ministry of War Transport describing how British Fortitude was saved, by the courage of Chief Engineer T. McCuaig, after being struck by a torpedo.

Below: McCuaig in his merchant fleet uniform. The Chairman of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company later personally awarded him a gold pocket watch inscribed with the words: “in recognition of his courage and skill which enabled his ship – substantially damaged by submarine – to reach safety, 1943.” McCuaig was subsequently awarded an OBE for his actions.
View from a BPS River Class tanker supporting the British Royal Navy task force during the Falklands Campaign in the South Atlantic, 1982. Far left is the aircraft carrier HMS Hermes, and left is HMS Broadsword, a type 22 frigate.
While 1945 brought an end to hostilities between the world’s major powers, regional conflicts continued to create challenges for the safe movement of the company’s products across the oceans. The Middle East in particular became a highly unpredictable environment in which to operate and yet, it was from here that the bulk of the company’s oil continued to flow. The Suez Crisis interrupted supplies and necessitated a fundamental rethink in company strategy, while the Arab-Israeli wars created tensions, with threats of boycotts and blacklists that risked future business in the region.

On a particularly difficult voyage to the Algerian port of Oran in 1959, British Duke found itself in a potentially lethal situation. The Algerian War was raging and J. F. Brown, a junior engineer on British Duke at the time, recalls how a search of the hull by the French Navy revealed a number of limpet mines which, thankfully, they removed. The French Marines then posted a guard on the quayside but, sadly, he was murdered during the night. The crew was understandably pleased to be leaving Algeria the next day.

While security of oil supply was a constant cause for concern during the 1960s and 1970s, thankfully, the company’s tankers themselves were not normally targeted by the warring parties. That was to change when war broke out between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s. In 1984, British Renown was struck by two rockets fired by an Iranian aircraft. Fire broke out, but was quickly extinguished. The following year, British Spey was targeted by an Iranian helicopter missile while sailing in neutral waters east of Qatar. The missile missed, thanks to evasive action taken by the crew. As the war escalated, BPTC tankers waited off Hormuz until a lull in fighting allowed them to proceed into the Persian Gulf. However, in December 1987, British Respect suffered a fire and damage after an attack by Iraqi aircraft near Larak Island in the Straits of Hormuz. Six former BP Shipping vessels that had been sold to the National Iranian Tanker Company were severely damaged, with three total losses.

The 1980s was also a decade in which BPS tankers would be once again called upon to serve the UK in a war zone. This time, the conflict developed with little warning and required the company’s leadership to demonstrate just how quickly it could respond to a call for help from the UK Government.

When Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on 2nd April 1982, the British Government made an almost immediate decision to send a task force to retake the islands. An essential element of this task force would be the capability of refuelling at sea and, since the BPS ‘River’ class fleet had already been used in NATO exercises involving refuelling at sea, the Ministry of Defence began negotiations to charter BP Shipping’s entire ‘River’ class fleet. By the 7th April, six vessels – British Esk, British Tamar, British Tay, British Dart, British Test and British Trent – were committed to charter to the MoD. By the following weekend, British Avon and British Wye completed the complement of BP Shipping tankers to be used in the task force. After 37 years, the fleet was once again providing a vital supply line to a military campaign.

British Esk and British Tamar had already been fitted with the necessary gear to facilitate refuelling at sea, and the modifications required to the other tankers were quickly made in the following days, as they arrived and were prepared for their South Atlantic mission.

All crew were fully briefed by a member of head office staff that the ship would be sailing into a war

Eight tankers of BP Shipping’s River Class were taken on charter by the UK Ministry of Defence for the Falklands Campaign.
zone. John Carrie, fleet manager for BP Shipping at the time, gave the briefing on British Trent when she came into Portsmouth Harbour. “The position was made quite clear that no wives could sail into the war zone, unless they were an Officer serving on the same ship as their husband, and that if anybody wanted to be replaced on the ship; no ‘black mark’ would go against their name.” Only a small number chose to come off the ships, mainly due to forthcoming weddings or impending fatherhood.

During the two months of conflict, refuelling at sea was executed successfully. The Atlantic served up its typically atrocious mix of conditions, with force 10 storms causing refuelling ships to run before the weather rather than heading into it, but never preventing operations from taking place.

While refuelling was the primary involvement of the BP Shipping tankers within the task force, British Esk took on a sad but important function, when Captain Gil Barber was asked to accommodate on his vessel the survivors of HMS Sheffield, which had been struck by an Exocet missile. Taking on an additional 271 men on a ship already holding its full allocation of 40 souls was no simple task, but the entire crew of British Esk accommodated the arriving seamen wherever there was space. Fourteen men slept in Captain Barber’s day room; 14 more in the Chief Engineer’s quarters; the Second Officer slept on the gyro room floor, and six Royal Navy ratings found a space to sleep on linen locker shelves. The catering staff of HMS Sheffield were put under orders of the BPS Catering Officer and together they organised a shift system that ensured that the 311 men on board received three meals a day in dining saloons that held barely 50. The bread ovens, normally used for a few hours each day, worked 24 hours a day for nine days, baking good-quality fresh bread. In fact, the main problem on board was the quick demise of the beer stocks. Even in these cramped conditions, some of the Royal Navy crew compared their accommodation on British Esk favourably to that on HMS Sheffield.

British Avon, meanwhile, returned to the UK with an unexpected extra passenger. Captain Alfredo Astiz was the Argentinian naval officer given charge of South Georgia during a temporary occupation of the island. Following his surrender, he was taken prisoner and passage to the UK was arranged on British Avon. In preparation for his period in custody, bars were welded to the windows of the owner’s cabin, which became his secure accommodation for the journey. Five provost guards joined British Avon and kept a close watch on Captain Astiz, passing him his regular meals and staying with him while he was allowed out on the deck to exercise twice a day. He was removed from British Avon and taken onshore to a prison cell shortly before the ship docked in Portsmouth on 5th June. Attempts by French and Italian authorities to interrogate him for crimes involving the disappearance of their nationals during the 1970s military dictatorship in Argentina were unsuccessful and he was released after the conflict finished. However, in 2011, Astiz was finally tried and convicted by an Argentinian court and sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity.

The crew of British Wye narrowly escaped a direct hit when a bomb from an Argentinian Hercules landed on the deck of the ship, bounced and rolled off into the ocean. It had been dropped from a low height and the propeller attached to the bomb had not made enough turns to prime the explosive charge. The Second Officer and Watchman, who observed the whole episode from the bridge of the tanker, must have been terrified as the device hit the deck, knowing the certain result of an explosion. They were alert enough to note the markings on the bomb – information that proved valuable for the authorities. The Master of British Wye, Captain David Rundle, was awarded an OBE for his services during the Falklands Campaign.

In his gratitude for the merchant services’ contribution to the task force, Britain’s First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Henry Leach, gave the following tribute: “I should like to thank the Merchant Navy on behalf of the Royal Navy for their magnificent performance in the Falkland Islands Campaign. I doubt that at any time in history an operation of this magnitude has been conducted in the onset of an Antarctic winter, from a base 8,000 miles away, without warning. The cooperation between our two navies was quite outstanding, unequalled even in the two World Wars; many feats were achieved of which the Merchant Navy may be rightly proud and Royal Navy deeply grateful.

“The operation has emphasised once again the dependence of our island nation on the sea and the overriding importance of maintaining strong and effective maritime forces, both Merchant and Royal Navy. We must continue to build on this in the future so as to ensure a balanced range of capabilities to meet any threat – which again may well be unforeseen.”

This appreciation was echoed by Sir John Fieldhouse, Commander of the Falkland Islands task force, who added: “I cannot say too often or too clearly how important has been the Merchant Navy’s contribution to our efforts. Without the ships taken up from trade, the operation could not have been undertaken, and I hope this message is clearly understood by the British nation.”
Ship-to-ship refuelling on a relatively calm day in the South Atlantic.
The involvement of BP’s shipping arm during the conflicts of the 20th century led to moments of tragedy, acts of heroism and remarkable escapes. It would be wrong, however, to consider that the intervening years were absent of incidents that required the crew’s experience, skill and courage to protect both themselves and others from the perils of the sea. From the early days of the British Tanker Company right through to today’s complex global operations, BP Shipping crews have encountered other seafarers, from professional mariners to desperate refugees, in need of their assistance. Time and time again they have used their resourcefulness to save the lives of others, often putting themselves in great danger to do so.

*British Strength* was heading to Australia from Abadan in 1933 with a cargo of crude oil, when she picked up an SOS signal from *Lindenbank* — a 5,000 dwt British cargo steamer. *Lindenbank* had lost her propeller off the Carpenter Rocks on the South Australia coast and was being driven ashore in a raging gale. Captain Atkins headed at full steam for 75 miles to provide assistance in a rescue operation that posed extreme danger to both his own crew on *British Strength* and the crew of *Lindenbank*. By manoeuvring *British Strength* to within 200 metres of *Lindenbank*, the rescuers were able to get a rocket line across and then tow her for 280 miles to safe harbour in Melbourne. Much of the success of this delicate rescue operation is credited to the early use of wireless telegraphy, allowing a swift two-way exchange of information and instructions between *British Strength* and *Lindenbank*.

On the 7th April 1961, *MV Dara* — a British India motorship with more than 700 passengers and crew on board, exploded and caught fire after...
leaving the port of Dubai in the Persian Gulf. The majority of passengers were without life jackets and, for many, reaching a rescue craft meant a leap of faith. According to one eye witness: “Women and children were caught on deck with a choice between the waves or the flames.” One of the first ships to arrive was British Energy, under the command of Captain R. O. Cash. Malcolm Thomas was the Second Engineer on that fateful day and he recalled how lifeboats were launched and a total of 145 people were taken on board British Energy. Other vessels managed to rescue hundreds more. However, the incident left 238 people dead – the worst loss of life at sea since Titanic.

Dealing with calls for help from other vessels is a routine element of a Master’s duties, but on occasion these assistance activities can pose a risk to rescuer and rescued. On the 20th November 1994, the Captain of British Esk, Paul Anderson, was made aware of a vessel in trouble in Greek waters. Monitoring the stricken Maged-H at first, the Rescue Control Centre at Piraeus soon appointed Captain Anderson as the on scene commander, British Esk being the nearest vessel on hand to offer support. Communication with the crew of Maged-H was difficult due to language differences, but it was clear that the ship was sinking and the extreme gravity of the situation was made apparent when men were seen jumping overboard.

Captain Anderson managed to manoeuvre British Esk close enough to one of the two men in the water who hadn’t been able to get into a lifeboat, so that he could be thrown a life buoy, but by this time, he was getting increasingly exhausted. It was at this point that Chief Officer Mike Johnston volunteered to descend the pilot ladder to help the man. He soon discovered that he would not be able to help just by dangling a lifting strop to put around the man in the water. According to Captain Anderson: “Johnston then leapt into the water, grabbed the now exhausted man by the lifejacket and pulled him back to the bottom of the ladder, from where he could be hauled to safety.” Attempts to save the last man remaining in the water were sadly to no avail. Thanks to the prompt action of those on British Esk and with the involvement of helicopter support, nine of the 10 crew of Maged-H were saved.

From time to time, a stricken ship is discovered by visual sighting and a rescue operation must be mounted regardless of operational schedule. In July 1970, British Ambassador, under the command of Captain Stuart Allen, was en route from Kharg Island to Little Aden, when an upturned vessel was spotted by the crew, with 14 survivors clinging desperately to the keel. By manoeuvring one of British Ambassador’s lifeboats into position near the visible keel despite swirling waves, and throwing a line to the survivors, they were able to pick up all 14 and bring them to the ship, where they were provided with food, warmth and clothing until doctors were able to board at the Aden Outer Anchorage.

Attracting the attention of a passing tanker at night can prove difficult for a stricken vessel with no lights. This was the challenge faced by the crew of a tiny fibreglass skiff that was drifting helplessly in the Torres Strait off the northern coast of Australia in October 2006. With no navigational lights, one of the crew held up a cigarette lighter, while another wrapped his clothes around an oar and set them on fire in an attempt to attract the attention of British Curlew, which was passing nearby.

Thankfully their distress signals were spotted and although British Curlew was unable to initiate a rescue alone due to the hazardous reefs, it was able to summon assistance from Titan, a smaller freighter that had recently passed the scene. The crew of British Curlew were able to guide the rescuers to the exact location of the skiff using their radar, located high up on the ship’s monkey island. While the crew of the skiff were extremely relieved to be rescued and avoid a disastrous collision with
a tanker, the police were less than impressed and issued the sailors with a penalty fine for putting themselves in such a dangerous situation.

Sometimes, a tanker may encounter refugees, crossing the seas at great risk in ill-equipped boats to get away from their home countries. **British Ranger** was involved in an incident in 1985, when a motor-driven sampan was spotted off the coast of Brunei, with a board bearing the letters SOS on it. It was established that the occupants, who included a pregnant woman, were Vietnamese refugees. Captain Phillip Johnson’s first priority was to ensure that the occupants of the heavily overcrowded boat had adequate water and food. One girl from the boat sent up a piece of paper to the crew that read: “We are Vietnamese, we run away VC. We want to go to freedom your country (London) thank you very much.”

The ability of watchmen to spot the smallest details at sea can quite literally be life-saving. One evening in 2009, during a Caribbean voyage by **British Innovator**, Second Officer Simon Page was alerted by watchman Edwin Hitalia about a faint light in the distance. It had to be something very small as it did not present itself on the radar, but the light had sent alarm bells ringing – it was not flashing rhythmically like a buoy and not coinciding with the swell as a small boat bobbing in the water would.

On a hunch that something wasn’t right, Page called the Master, who immediately manoeuvred the vessel for a closer look. In the limited moonlight, they made out the dim outline of a small boat and a man waving his arms frantically, trying to get their attention. What followed was a well-ordered rescue operation, where the Master, Chris Durman, brought the ship into position alongside the small boat and a line and lifebuoy were thrown into the sea to bring two exhausted men to safety.

The rescued men were from Trinidad and Tobago and were suffering from exposure, malnourishment and dehydration, having been drifting for 10 days and surviving on raw fish. They were extremely relieved to get a hot meal and a change of clothes. Fellow officer Steve Williams reported, “It was a job well done. From the initial sighting to the rescue and recovery of the fishing boat, the whole operation took a little more than 90 minutes. The professionalism shown by all on board, from Messman to Master, is a credit to both the company and to the Merchant Navy. We can all take great pride in knowing that we played a part in saving two lives.”
Dealing with major incidents

During the past century, BP’s shipping arm has had to deal with situations that have threatened, or resulted in, major safety or environmental incidents. The repercussions of some of these incidents have changed the industry. They often featured acts of great courage or initiative by BP seafarers.

When *British Crown* exploded while completing loading at Umm Said in August 1966 (Chapter 2) with the tragic loss of 19 lives, an Indian ‘donkeyman’ (petty officer), Abdul Karim Dawood, 44, went up on deck from the boiler room, and saw fire everywhere and his crewmates jumping over the side. With great courage, he went back to the boiler room where he systematically shut down the machinery to prevent another explosion, which might have destroyed the boilers, and killed men already in the sea. He stood by the engines until they were safe, then he cut a path with a fire extinguisher to get back on deck where he met seaman, Abbass Nooroodeen, 55, who could not swim. Dawood helped him down a rope and supported him until Jack Easton, a Junior Engineer, swam up to help. The young Easton – a strong swimmer – had been on watch in the engine room. He encouraged the Indian crew members to jump into the sea, following them into the water and assisting four men to reach a mooring buoy. At one stage, a blazing launch was drifting onto the buoy, threatening the survivors clinging to it. Easton swam to the launch and managed to divert it away from the buoy. According to the official record, 22 year old Easton “swam anything from 1200 yards to a mile or more. Oil was burning on the water, there was possibility of explosions and sharks”. Dawood later received awards from the UK Board of Trade, the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire and the Narottam Morarjee Award for Gallantry. Easton was awarded both the Gold Stanhope Medal of the Royal Humane Society – its highest honour – as well as the Royal Life Saving Society’s Mountbatten Medal. Fourth engineer Ray Bartley received the Royal Humane Society’s Testimonial. In the aftermath of the tragedy, Captain Frank Broad of *British Loyalty* played a major role in devising a way in which to safely transfer 12,000 tons of cargo from the damaged tanker, once the fire from the explosion had been extinguished.

From the moment that BP was made aware of the tanker *Torrey Canyon* foundering off the Scilly Isles on its way to Swansea from the Middle East in March 1967, it was clear that they were dealing with a major incident. The ship was registered in Panama and, having been chartered to an American company Phillips Petroleum, it was rechartered for a single voyage to BP. While the company was not legally liable for the vessel and its operation, it’s resources were quickly put behind the efforts to manage the spill. Detergents and pollution control materials were supplied from company stores in Falmouth, while technical advice was given as needed to the response coordinators in Plymouth. George King was operations manager at the time and was at the heart of the response, joining the naval authorities in charge of the situation. King was lowered by helicopter onto the deck of the tanker to make an assessment of the damage, but the challenging conditions for the helicopter pilot meant that he had only 40 minutes on board to gain a rapid understanding of the situation. He reported back to the Royal Navy and Ministry of Defence, drawing a diagram to help the commander understand the situation and the next day attending the Cabinet Office to explain his findings.

Despite extensive efforts to stem the leak of its cargo, *Torrey Canyon* suffered an explosion in the engine room, leading to the tragic death of a salvage master, while the vessel broke her back and gushed

The Royal Humane Society is a charity founded in 1774 that grants awards for acts of bravery in the saving of human life. The Stanhope Gold Medal is the highest honour that the Society can bestow. It has been awarded to people who have put themselves in extreme personal danger, carried out a very long and arduous rescue or returned repeatedly to a highly dangerous situation. Junior Engineer Jack Easton received the award in 1966.
SS Torrey Canyon
out her cargo, soon oiling the Cornish and French coastlines. Efforts at burning the oil on the sea surface proved largely futile and the incident had major repercussions for maritime regulations.

At the end of 1978, Andros Patria, a Greek vessel on charter to BPTC travelling off the Spanish coast with a full cargo of more than 200,000 tons of crude oil, suffered an explosion in a ballast tank. Fearing further explosions, the Captain and crew launched a lifeboat, while the Chief Engineer and a crew member managed to set the ship to avoid drifting onto the coastline. In a terrible tragedy, the lifeboat capsized in rough seas, with the loss of 34 lives.

The risk of another Torrey Canyon disaster was all too clear and perhaps with this in mind, no country wanted to take the vessel into its ports and risk a major spillage on its doorstep. British Dragoon was called into service and lightered the cargo, 35,000 tonnes at a time, transferring it to the larger VLCC British Promise, which was unable to go alongside Andros Patria and take the oil directly, as she was not fitted with the necessary pneumatic fendering. The transfer of the oil took four weeks and much technical skill and extraordinary diligence to complete.

1978 brought another reminder of the company’s experience with Torrey Canyon. On 12th October, the oil tanker Christos Bitas was sailing from Rotterdam to Belfast, with a load of 35,000 tons of Iranian heavy crude oil, when she ran aground some eight nautical miles off the Pembrokeshire coast. Four thousand tons of oil were spilled in the incident. The commanding officer managed to refloat the vessel without external help and decided to continue his journey, as he thought there was no longer any significant leak. He nevertheless warned the coastguards of the oil spill. As the risks of environmental pollution were high, the owner of the ship (Adriatic Transports Ltd) and the owner of the cargo (BP) were immediately contacted by the coastguard. BP Shipping offered its services at once.

It soon became obvious that Christos Bitas was, in fact, seriously damaged and that she was still losing oil. Consequently, BPTC ordered the vessel to stop in order to avoid spreading the pollution. Response operations were rapidly organised. Three distinct operations were simultaneously set up addressing the problem of dealing with Christos Bitas, offshore response, and onshore cleaning operations.

Stuart Speed, BP Shipping’s chief engineering superintendent, flew out in poor weather to take charge on board the vessel as she listed with her bow under water.

“As the RAF helicopter approached her, we could smell the crude oil through the open doors. It couldn’t land because of the dangers of escaped gases and the position of the stricken vessel, so the crew dropped me down on a winch. She was ‘down by the head’, her main deck flooded and she was listing 14 degrees to starboard. Once I’d done an initial assessment, we pulled together a team from the North Sea and began ordering the equipment needed to right the vessel, modify the ship, and pump out her tanks into support vessels alongside, as well as stop further leakage. It was the greatest logistics exercise I’ve experienced in my long career with BP,” Speed recalled.

“Remarkably, we managed to locate and quickly transfer a low-pressure, diesel pump from an oil rig off Blackpool with which to pressurise the tanks and get the ship back on an even keel as she was continuing to list farther. It had an electric starter in an uncontrolled environment, so I got the fire hoses rigged and pointed at the pump and at me and then pressed the button. Fortunately, she coughed into life without incident and continued to work for the next seven days and nights without a break. It saved the ship at that critical point.”

Three tankers, British Hazel, British Dragoon and Esso York, sailed towards Christos Bitas in order to lighter her, and the Third Engineer of British Hazel went aboard to get power on – 26,000 tons of oil were successfully removed over the next few days. She was subsequently towed out into the Atlantic Ocean, to a very deepwater area, 270 nautical miles west of Fastnet Rocks, where she
would not interfere with navigation, fisheries or submarine telephone cables, and was scuttled. A major exercise was undertaken to tackle the spill with a fleet of 40 vessels, which deployed booms to contain the oil and spray dispersants on it. They also used skimmers to recover the oil. Oil reached local islands with sensitive habitats and manual cleaning was deployed.

As it did with Torrey Canyon and later Andros Patria, BP Shipping devoted its best resources and expertise to help to bring under control a leaking and foundering tanker that it did not own or operate, and to effect a clean-up without recourse to a debate on where responsibility lay.

When the Thunder Horse platform in the Gulf of Mexico was found to be listing by 20 to 30 degrees in July 2005, BP Shipping was called in to assist. It had a reputation within the group as marine experts and Adrian Howard, technical director for BP Shipping, worked with the emergency response team in Houston and with a colleague visited the platform to help work out what had caused the problem.

With the lifts on the Thunder Horse platform not working, Howard had to descend 160 feet via a spiral staircase into the bowels of the vessel. He performed a forensic inspection of the subsea structure, testing the initial assumptions made and eventually concluding that a design and construction fault rather than the effects of a recent hurricane had led to a chain of events that had resulted in the platform listing. Howard briefed the response and engineering teams in Houston and a remedial plan was rapidly put into place. When summoned to a briefing with BP Exploration’s global chief executive, Andy Inglis, Howard noticed how much oily grime was still under his fingernails from his inspection deep inside Thunder Horse. Inglis was later to remark: “What I like most about BP Shipping people is that they have real dirt under their fingernails.”

Inglis would again call upon BP Shipping’s marine knowledge and practical expertise to assist on other major projects in his business. The Thunder Horse incident confirmed once and for all the role of BPS as an expert in marine matters across BP.
Opposite: 26,000 tonnes of oil are successfully transferred from the stricken Christos Bitas to BP Tanker Company’s own vessel – the 53,000 dwt tanker, British Dragoon, October 1978.

Left: Stanley Clinton Davies, a junior government minister is winched on to BP Tanker Company’s British Dragoon to be briefed on progress with oil recovery from Torrey Canyon. Clinton Davies later became European Commissioner for Environment, Transport and Consumer Protection.

Below: Cargo hoses are secured in place as a major ship-to-ship pumping operation commences between Christos Bitas and British Dragoon.
A doctor on board *SS Uganda* performed life-saving surgery at sea on a young BP Tanker Company steward in 1965. *Uganda* had an illustrious career, starting out as a cargo/passenger liner, before converting to an educational cruise ship. The Falklands Campaign saw her perform the role of troop carrier and hospital ship in concert with the logistics support provided by BPS tankers.
Occasionally, vessels are joined by passengers who have no connection with the company or its operations, but who, for various reasons, require safe passage on board. In the pre-war years before air travel became established, an arrangement was in place to carry the Sultan of Muscat and his entourage (including servants and cooks) on board a BTC vessel for passage to his palace at Salala on the Arabian Sea coast, where he spent the summer months. During the two-day passage, the Captain would vacate his accommodation on the lower bridge for the use of the Sultan. His inconvenience was handsomely compensated by the gift of a Persian carpet from the Sultan at the end of the voyage.

In 1950, as BTC expanded its operations beyond the Abadan-UK route and into the South Atlantic, the crew of the T2 tanker Red Bank was asked to make an unscheduled stop on its way east from Argentina. The radio operator at Tristan da Cunha had contacted the ship asking if they would make a stop at the island to pick up a mother and her two children, one of whom required urgent medical attention, and take them to Cape Town in South Africa. The operation was complicated by the lack of a harbour at Tristan da Cunha, meaning that the party had to board via a small boat on the ocean swell. The mother’s agility in hopping between boats made light of a potentially hazardous transfer – something that caused one of the crew of Red Bank to quite rightly deduce that she had once been a Wren.

Of course, medical emergencies at sea bring dramas of their own for seafarers who fall ill and, on these occasions, the support of other vessels can be crucial. In 1965, Richard Low was serving as Third Engineer on British Diplomat, a 60,000 dwt tanker. Outward bound from the UK to Kuwait, to load a cargo of crude oil, the vessel was in the Indian Ocean, about two days past Aden and heading for the Persian Gulf. A young steward was taken ill with severe stomach pains, which appeared to be appendicitis and a ‘Mayday’ was broadcast for help from any ships carrying a doctor. Fortunately, the B-I passenger liner SS Uganda responded. Both ships altered course to rendezvous at daylight the next morning at a distance of about one mile. Low was one of 12 volunteers to man a lifeboat to attempt the transfer of the stricken steward down the steep sides of the tanker and across swells of a shark-infested Indian Ocean. “The waves looked a lot bigger from down there than they had from the deck 40 feet above,” he recalled. “We careered down into the troughs and up over the crests of wave with the lifeboat’s bluff bow flinging spray in our faces as we headed towards Uganda.”

As the lifeboat approached, Uganda’s Master, Captain Benson, ordered it to “heave to and keep clear”. To the astonishment of Low and his fellow volunteers, Uganda’s engineroom telegraphs clanged and water boiled under her stern. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the big ship began to pirouette as it went full ahead on the port engine and full astern on the starboard. In a superb display of seamanship, the manoeuvre flattened out the waves as the ship’s hull pivoted. With another clang of the telegraphs, she came to rest in the original position, and the Captain reappeared on the bridge-wing. “Diplomat lifeboat! Quickly now! Come alongside our port accommodation ladder.” The comatose steward was soon on Uganda’s operating table for emergency life-saving surgery – but Low and his colleagues faced the difficult journey back to British Diplomat and the long haul back up the tanker’s side, swinging and crashing terrifyingly in the process.

Several years later, Low’s parents were in conversation at a party in the UK where a surgeon related to them a story of how he was travelling back from India on a passenger liner and was called upon to perform an emergency operation. The ship was the SS Uganda – and the patient a desperately ill merchant sailor from an oil tanker called British Diplomat. He was happy to relate that the patient made a good recovery.

“...The waves looked a lot bigger from down there than they had from the deck 40 feet above. We careered down into the troughs and up over the crests, with the lifeboat’s bluff bow flinging spray in our faces as we headed towards Uganda.”

**RICHARD LOW**
Generations of service

Seafarers often hail from a long line of maritime antecedents and BP Shipping is no exception, with families containing several generations who went to sea and worked for BP ashore.

James Hay was born in Tough in Aberdeenshire on 16th September 1881 and left school barely 12 years old “to join the Navy”. He achieved his Certificate of Competency as second mate of a foreign-going steamship in the merchant service in 1912, then, as first mate in 1914, and finally as Master in 1917. He subsequently became Master of the British Tanker Company’s (BTC) very first ordered ship – British Emperor – until he was tragically killed while in Abadan in 1925, reportedly from a slip off the gangplank. He is buried at Abadan Cemetery.

James’ son – George – was only six years old when his father died, but 10 years later, in 1935, he too signed up to BTC as an indentured apprentice. George finished his apprenticeship in 1939 and on 23rd June, he wrote to his mother from on board British Grenadier while in Port Said, Egypt: “After I’ve got my ticket, I have to join the Royal Naval Special Reserve. All boys in the merchant service between the ages of 20-21 have to be in this. I go up for a period of training each year and get paid for it, but in time of war I am to be kept in the merchant service”. Two months later, Britain was at war and George began his second shore leave on 6th March 1942. Eight days into his shore leave, British Resource was attacked and sunk by a torpedo in the Atlantic, with 46 of the 52 crew killed. George Hay continued to serve on BTC ships throughout the war, rising to the rank of Master like his father before him. He came ashore in 1948 to become mooring master in Bandar Mashur, near Abadan, where members of his wife’s family were engineers at BP’s refinery. His daughter, Elizabeth Hay, later worked for Britoil and BP. In the spirit of the Hay family, she was among the very first women to successfully complete the North Sea safety and survival course started by the Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology in 1977.

The Rutherford family can trace a connection back to marine engineers of the early 19th century who worked on steam-powered vessels, which transformed the world of shipping. In 2014, Jean Rutherford recalled how her late husband, David, and his brother, Nicholas, had long careers with the BP Tanker Company (BPTC) fleet and both achieved the rank of Master in the 1960s. It was little surprise. Their father, Leslie, had served as an engineer for the Glen Line and their uncle, Nicholas, was a Chief Engineer with BTC in the 1920s and 1930s. Nicholas (Sr) had died in Port Said, Egypt, while serving on board British Motorist.

The story doesn’t end there. The father of Leslie and Nicholas (Sr) was Lesslie John Rutherford – born in 1873 and a Chief Engineer on tankers involved with the very first shipments of Anglo-Iranian oil from Abadan. Lesslie (whose name was misspelt in the Birth Register) achieved fame in 1901, when a ship he was on was officially declared ‘lost at sea’ after going missing for three weeks. SS Allegheny had been crippled by a hurricane and blown far from shipping lanes without radio while en route to Buenos Aires. The young Lesslie – a Chief Engineer by the age of 25 – showed the remarkable ‘make do and mend’ of maritime tradition by effecting a temporary repair of the thrust shaft of the single-screw steamer, such that she could limp into Trinidad more than three weeks later to general acclaim and surprise. Lesslie received the Mercantile Marine Medal and War Medal for his service on tankers in WW1 and the Defence Medal in WW2. But the Rutherford seafaring tradition didn’t begin with him. It was no surprise to find that both his grandfathers had been engineers in the earliest days of steamships during the 1800s. The engineering skills and seamanship had passed down through two centuries of the Rutherford family and contributed to the evolution of the shipping company known today as BP Shipping.
Above: George Hay, who, in 1935, followed his father in joining BTC and also rising to the rank of Master.

Right: The 23-year-old George’s reference from the Master on taking leave from British Resource in March 1942. Eight days later, British Resource was attacked and sunk.

Below: George Hay (back right) on board British Destiny 1937.