



Canada

# Salvaging the past to save the future



In 1946, the US Army transport ship, the Zalinski, was on its final journey. The vessel had served for almost three decades and all throughout the dark days of World War 2. However, it ran aground off western Canada and sank without a trace. The Zalinski was heard of no more for decades, until it started leaking fuel. The Canadian Coast Guard, with Roger Girouard at the helm, mounted a salvage operation with Mammoet.



*Top: Grenville channel.*



*Left: The USAT Brigadier General M.G. Zalinski.*

**I**n September 1946, the Zalinski was ploughing through the waters of the Grenville Channel, on its way to Alaska. It was carrying a cargo of army supplies, including 700 tons of bunker fuel. A sudden storm dashed the sturdy vessel against the rocks of Pitt Island, 55 miles south of Prince Rupert. Its hull was ruptured and the ship quickly sank. Fortunately the 48 crew members all survived, but the ship disappeared beneath the waves, another casualty of the treacherous coastline known as ‘the graveyard of the Pacific’.

### **Choppy waters, hidden depths**

The exact location of the wreck remained unknown, but for half a century local fishermen reported mysterious oil slicks in the area. The ship was finally located in 2003 after an upwelling of fuel. It was perched on a ledge 30 meters down. The Zalinski was eventually identified and the manifest showed the approximate amount of fuel onboard. This posed a potential threat to the coastline so it was decided to extract the fuel and a large-scale salvage operation was mounted.

The Canadian Coast Guard had had good experiences with Mammoet when they performed



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a delicate salvage operation in Robson Bight in 2009. In this environmentally highly sensitive project, Mammoet successfully salvaged a metal cube containing 1,400 liters of hydraulic oil and a fully loaded fuel truck. Therefore, Mammoet was assigned to remove the fuel, which presented a number of challenges. Stormy weather and strong tidal currents restricted divers to working short shifts. The salvors also had to deal with monsters from the depths. During the operation, a Remote Operated Vehicle was grappled by an inquisitive giant octopus. Fortunately neither the roV nor the behemoth was harmed. Eventually all went well. Pumps and hoses were connected to valves mounted on the exterior of the hull. The fuel was then extracted through the gate valves and pumped into tanks on a barge on the surface.

#### **The incident commander**

The incident commander for the 10-week operation was Canadian Coast Guard Assistant Commissioner for the Western Region, Roger

*The ROV and divers were met by a 2 1/2 meter Giant Pacific Octopus residing at the wreck.*



Girouard (57). A twenty year Navy veteran, the experienced sailor had only joined the Coast Guard the year before. If he thought he was going to be able to lean back and enjoy the scenery, he had another think coming. Roger was tasked with coordinating with the Coast Guard Response Team, Mammoet, the Federal Environment and Defense departments, the provincial government and representatives of the First Nations. Roger says: “An eclectic group of people was involved, all united in our determination to preserve the environment. It was a fairly unique operation for the Canadian Coast Guard and the insights we have taken away and the relationships we have forged are worth their weight in gold.”

There was a lot at stake in the operation, but the gravel-voiced mariner took it in his stride. When asked to describe his work, he grins: “It’s very salty!”

There’s a lot more to it than that though: “I am responsible for coordinating the work of some 1,100 personnel in an area approximately the size of Europe. Our role is basically safety on the water; we’re the cops on the sea. It involves overseeing local shipping, environmental response, and search and rescue missions. Besides all that, I have to balance the budgets, which is the worst part of my job.”

“Any sailor will tell you that a bad day at sea is better than a good day at the office.”



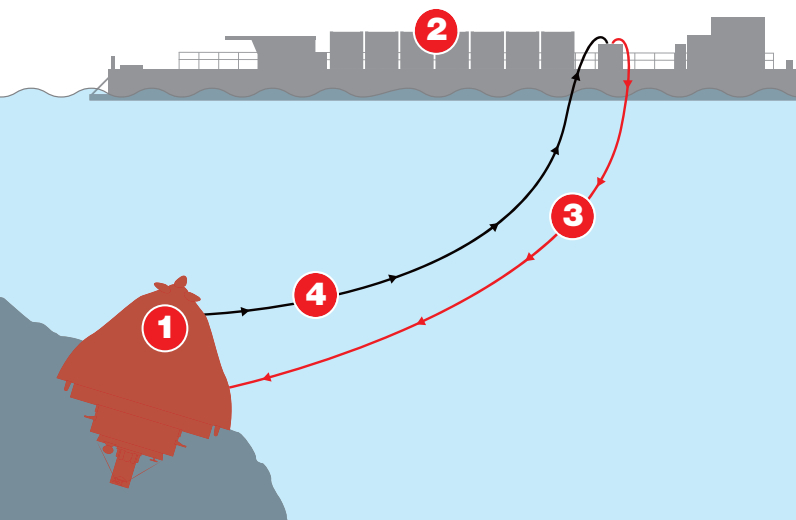
### Not for the faint of heart

Roger’s love of the countryside is obvious: “The coastline around here is as pristine as it gets. It’s steep and rugged, definitely not for the faint of heart. There is an abundance of wildlife, everything from deer to grizzly bears. The rivers that run through it are filled with salmon, herring and shellfish, which are an important source of food and income for the local Gitga’at and Gitxa’ala communities, who describe the sea as their ‘refrigerator’. Out on the water, you can see anything from sea eagles to whales. The region is awesome and it would be terrible if anything happened to it.”

Canadian Coast Guard at work.

It’s not all just clear sailing, however, there are also drawbacks: “The biggest challenge I face is allo-





## Hot tap system: removing oil from a wreck

- 1 Oil is located in the wreck. The hot tap system is installed on the hull of the wreck.
- 2 A barge with the pump system is moved into place above the wreck.
- 3 Hot water is used to warm the heavy oil, making it easier to remove.
- 4 The warmed up oil is pumped up to the barge into containers.

cating our finite resources as effectively as possible to cover the enormous territory so that we are able to respond smoothly when the need arises.”

The veteran mariner stoically accepts his deskbound duties: “Any sailor will tell you that a bad day at sea is better than a good day at the office. I still love being out on a boat or up in a plane inspecting the area or my troops, but I don’t get to do that as much as I would like nowadays. But during my Navy days, I spent plenty of time on the water. The way I look at it, is that I’m paying back for all that fun by supporting those who get to do it now.”

### Man with a Mission

Roger is a man with a mission: “I’m a nature nut and I love bird watching and seal and whale sighting. I’m not just a sailor, I’m a mariner, and that means being concerned about the environment. We at the Coast Guard have a clear mandate to look out for the environment for future generations.”

He and his colleagues take their custodianship of the area seriously. It’s something that gives him a great sense of pride and satisfaction: “The Coast Guard is a national gem. The folks who come to the job have a real passion for it. Even though we have limited resources, I’m always amazed by how my people manage to do just a little bit more with

their devotion and ingenuity. They constantly inspire me and working with them is the best part of my job.”

More challenges lie ahead for Roger and his men: “Because of rising fuel demands, shipping will increase drastically throughout the area. This poses all kinds of logistical, safety and environmental challenges. However, thanks to what we learnt from the Zalinski operation and the contacts we made, we are definitely better equipped to deal with potential disasters in the future.” ■

