

**I THOUGHT IT WAS AN EXPLOSION  
AT  
THE SHELL BARGE VANCOUVER HARBOUR**

By Capt. Don Rose

In the 1970s there were a number of wooden hulled barges used to transport cargo on the West Coast of Canada. It was common for these barges to take on water in their hulls which required pumping from time to time. Just about all tugs especially those that regularly towed barges had a means of pumping other vessels. Some of the tugs had a built-in pump and system of hoses for pumping out another vessel and just about all tugs had a portable pump that could be put on the vessel that needed pumping.

In 1973 I was master on the harbor tug "Dolphin Straits" which was equipped with a built-in pumping system as well as two portable pumps. The portable pumps were fueled with gasoline which we stored on deck in a five-gallon container. The purpose of this was that they could be put on a barge pumping the water out while it was being towed to destination or left on it at a tie up while we did other work. Approximately every four hours the portable pumps required refuelling.

The Dolphin Straits was a day boat where the crew spent their off watch hours ashore. Our shifts were the following: Days shift from 06:00 to 18:00, nights shift from 18:00 to 06:00 the next morning. The crew worked fourteen days on followed by fourteen days off. Eight crew members were assigned to the vessel. A tour of duty started 06:00 Monday morning with the crew working each day until 18:00 Sunday afternoon followed by 24 hours off after which they started their night shift starting at 18:00 Monday afternoon.

When I joined the tug for the night shift which was from 18:00 till 06:00 the next morning I was informed that the five-gallon container was missing. The deck hand that was working with me had only been working on the tugs for one week. We did a number of barge shifts in the harbor then proceeded to the Shell Oil Barge which was in Coal Harbour. (At that time there were five fuel barges in Coal Harbour.) While traveling to the fuel barge I advised the deck hand that there was a new five gallon container in the engine room. After which I told him that when we got to the Shell Oil Barge he was to take it out and onto the barge and fill it with gasoline.

After the fuel tanks were filled, I went to the engine room to do the daily checks. The deck hand proceeded to have the gasoline container filled. While I was in the engine room, the deck hand entered with the container of gasoline. I immediately informed him that once the container had gasoline in it, it was no longer stored in the engine room. He then proceeded to take it out of the engine room and while doing so he accidentally dropped it. When the container hit the deck, the impact caused the spout to come loose allowing gasoline to escape. It was only a very small amount which we wiped up as quickly as possible. The container was taken up on deck and stored. We opened up the engine room as much as possible to air it out and allow any gasoline fumes to escape. We had a coffee with the barge operator and after some time the three of us went into the engine room to check for the gasoline fumes. Neither one of us could smell

any gasoline fumes so the decision was made that it would be safe to start the main engine which had an electric starting system.

I went to the wheelhouse to start the engine. Although I was sure there were not any gasoline fumes in the engine room it was still on my mind. Just as I pushed the starter button and heard the starter motor engage I heard an extremely loud **BOOM** which I immediately thought was an explosion in the engine room. The deck hand and the barge operator looked as if they had seen a ghost. After a second or two I saw on the clock that it was 21:00. The loud boom was the nine o'clock gun which was only a few hundred feet away in Stanley Park.

