



Tug Tales #11 December 30, 2013
Two DeLand ST's Sail Around the World

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I've only seen this incredible story available in one place: it's in J. O. Bijl's book "*ST Tugs: design 257 and 327*", which as far as I know is still only available from Lekko, who may be reached at email info@lekko.org. The original story appeared in a Shell Oil article of 1969.

For many ships, a voyage like this would have been epic; for top-heavy tug boats prone to flip over designed for quiet harbor waters it was

simply miraculous. The year was 1948, and the Batavian Petroleum Company in Indonesia decided to purchase 4 surplus Army ST's in Antwerp, two of which were the DeLand built *ST 676*, which was renamed *Soekalila*; and the *ST 674*, also a DeLand boat, which would be known as *Oemar*. *ST 676* was in fact one of the boats that had already survived the incredible ordeal of *Convoy NY 119* in 1944: who knew the boat would be tested to the max once again.

These two DeLand boats along with the two other ST's would reach Indonesia after a trip of 23,000 miles...completely on their own power.

Things went bad from the start when several potential crew members said "no thanks!" in Antwerp. At least one bright sailor was in the loop as they went first to Rotterdam, where the tugboats were "renovated" to make the trip. No details exist of this work, but exactly what in the world might they have done? I have discovered recently that the fuel tanks were not even baffled on the ST's: just one more reason they tended to capsize! They left in late April, which means at least winter weather was not going to be an issue. Early in the trip, in the Bay of Biscay, *Oemar* lost her mast in rough weather, which undoubtedly left many other crewmembers wishing they had voted with their feet to stay in Europe. After repairs, they weaved and bobbed on to Gibraltar, where one of the brighter cooks bailed out after having way too much fun.

After more repairs they made it to Port Said, but the south west Monsoons had already attacked the Indian Ocean, and cooler heads prevailed. They turned around, and went back to Gibraltar. About 180 miles out from Gibraltar, the Clark diesel in *Soekalila* gave up the ghost. The other three tugs made for the Panama Canal.

The *ST 676* crew cooled their heels on the small island of Gibraltar for two months waiting for Clark engine parts, which were even by this time unobtainium. At that point, they chose to cross the Indian Ocean as the monsoon winds and rain had subsided; so it was back to Port Said for them. They accompanied an old torpedo vessel to Singapore, then to Columbo, and finally made it to Sorong, Indonesia.

The other three tugs made Curacao and Las Palmas, but engine troubles and the need for unique Clark engine parts prompted a stop. A call to New York had two men scouring the country searching for existing spare parts in warehouses or old discarded Clark engines. Eventually, they moved on with the needed spares into the Panama Canal, and then moved in four stages: Balboa to Manzanillo, then to Honolulu, to Suva, and then to Brisbane. That's easy to explain, but some of these legs were very lengthy voyages. They suffered from bad to very bad weather, where the crew were becoming increasingly skilled in "staying afloat". The three vessels finally made it to Sorong on November 26, 1948, over 7 months since they left Rotterdam.

By this time, the crews and their tugs were an international newsworthy event and were warmly greeted upon their arrival. In the words of one of the crew members, "It was a dreadful voyage which I would not have wanted to miss for the world."

The DeLand tugs, designed with war-time expediency, became world-wide voyagers after the war. Another unusual "ST" sea adventure in 1948 involved a 40-year old tug, the *Snohomish*, which towed a modified LST loaded with six ST's all the way to Argentina, a 10,000 mile tow which at that point was record-setting. But it's hard to top the bravery (!) of the crews of the 4 harbor tugs that made their way bobbing and leaning from side to side, always just a few degrees from disaster, from Antwerp to Indonesia; some 23,000 miles.....

ST 674 Oemar sank after a collision on the Siak River in Sumatra in 1960 but *ST 676 Soekalila* served a long life and was finally scrapped in 2000, a sad end for such an adventurous ship.