

MV Pasha Bulker Grounded in Newcastle

The MV *Pasha Bulker* is a Panamax bulk carrier of 76,741 metric tons deadweight (DWT) operated by the Lauritzen Bulkers Shipping company and owned by Japanese Disponent Owners. While waiting in the open ocean outside the harbour to load coal the *Pasha Bulker* ran aground during a major storm on 8 June 2007 on Nobbys Beach in Newcastle. It was refloated and moved to a safe location offshore on 2 July 2007 at 9:48 pm before being towed to Japan for major repairs on 26 July 2007.

The *Pasha Bulker* was built in 2006 by Sasebo Heavy Industries Co., and sails under the flag of Panama as a flag of convenience. It is 225 m in length with a beam of 32.2 m and a cargo hold capacity of 90,911 cubic metres.

A Massive Storm Strikes

Early on the morning of 8 June 2007, Newcastle Port Corporation radioed the 56 moored ships waiting off the coast to load coal to warn them to move out to sea to escape the approaching storm. The *Pasha Bulker*, along with 10 other ships, did not heed the warning. As the storm hit, the *Pasha Bulker* could not clear the coast and it became beached at 9:15am. The ship never called for tug assistance, ran aground with a fully operational engine room and still had both anchors raised, leading some maritime experts to believe that proper precautions were not taken by the ship's captain.



A rescue helicopter operating above the beached ship

After the *Pasha Bulker* ran aground the 22 Filipino and Korean crew members aboard were successfully rescued by the Westpac Rescue helicopter service from the vessel, however it remained grounded about 30 m from the shore at the popular Nobbys Beach. The ship was empty of any cargo at the time, awaiting to load 58,000 tonnes of coal from Newcastle Port. However, it contained around 700 tonnes of fuel oil, 38 tonnes of diesel and 40 tonnes of lube oil, which if released could have caused a major ecological disaster.



NBN News Reporter Paul Lobb covers the events as the Bulker beaches in the back ground

During further stormy weather, the ship was pushed onto the beach so that it was parallel to the beach, and both bow and stern were stuck on or in the sand. The whole ship was then completely trapped between the beach and a rocky reef. In the first week the salvage crew loaded the ship with ballast water, which sunk it lower, so that its hull was firmly on or in the seabed.

Its location on a popular beach and close proximity to the Newcastle CBD made the *Pasha Bulker* a popular tourist destination and precipitated a minor economic boom. One radio station promoted a song called "Blame it on the Pasha Bulker", a rewrite of the song, "Blame it on the Bossa Nova" by Louis Calhoun. The *Pasha Bulker* was even advertised on eBay for a short time, with bids reaching \$16,000,000 before eBay closed the auction.

While beached the *Pasha Bulker* was used as a billboard for slogans by Greenpeace on 27 June 2007. Lasers beamed messages such as "Coal causes climate change chaos" and "This is what climate change looks like" in red on the side of the ship. Greenpeace stated that the protest was motivated by unnamed "scientists telling us that storm surges of the type that we saw earlier this month are something that we can expect more of as a result of climate change."

The salvage operation

Planning

Svitzer, a Danish company, was awarded the contract to salvage the bulk carrier.

On 9 June 2007 a salvage team, led by Drew Shannon, boarded the ship to assess the condition of the hull. Salvage investigators confirmed on 11 June 2007 that the outer shell of the ship's double hull had been breached and was taking on water on the starboard side.

It was decided that the refloating attempt would proceed despite concerns that the ship was too badly damaged to be refloated. Any attempt at moving the ship was to occur at high tide, when the ship's own buoyancy would reduce the towing force required and the chance of it breaking into two. The salvage attempt was not to involve removing any of the fuel or oil off the vessel.

The plan to salvage the *Pasha Bulker* used anchors laid out at sea, which the ship was to use to then winch itself seawards, and three tug boats towing it with the aim of dragging the bow over a rock reef. The carrier would then be pulled seaward in a path between two rocky reefs. A hydrographic survey was conducted to survey and map the bottom of the ocean through the surf zone using a surf ski single beam echo sounder and GPS. This gave the salvage team more insight into the direction for refloating the ship.

An emergency response team was to remain on standby should the vessel begin leaking fuel and an exclusion zone was set up around the location of the ship with marker buoys to stop all ships and surfers from entering the area. In addition on 25 June 2007 an air exclusion zone was created around the ship. Once the ship was free from the beach, the carrier would be towed to Japan for repairs.

Various attempts for re-floating the ship were suggested. University of Sydney Honorary Associate Professor Rob Whelan suggested liquefying the sand under the ship by pumping seawater into it. This liquefaction should reduce the friction between grains of sand and in turn, friction between the ship and sand. Whether this would have been effective in this case is unknown as the *Pasha Bulker* was lying on rock as well as sand and the ship would have had to be pulled up and over the rocks.

First attempt

Final preparations to refloat the ship began on 28 June 2007 when the ballast water, added earlier to stabilise the vessel, was pumped out to aid buoyancy. At around 5.30pm the tug boats began pulling on the lines attached to the bow on the port side and the ship appeared to move for the first time. An ocean swell up to 4 m pounded the ship and caused the bow to move back and forth even when tethered to the tug boats. Soon after the attempt started to shift the ship, one of the cables connecting the ship to the tug boat *Keera* snapped dashing the attempt. This resulted in the decision to make another attempt after the salvage crews could regroup.



"Supertug" Pacific Responder

Salvage efforts on the morning of 29 June 2007 were hampered by more cables snapping, this time it was cables attached to the "Supertug" *Pacific Responder* and a sea anchor. Ballast water was reloaded to help preserve the initial gains that were made and the next attempt to move the ship was deferred to the evening of 1 July 2007 to allow salvage engineers more time to secure new cables to the tugs and between the winches and sea anchors.

Second attempt

Three salvage tugs managed to rotate the *Pasha Bulker* so that it was now facing deep water and was only a few degrees short of being able to clear the reef. At its new position, the bulker was only 50 m from water deep enough to re-float the vessel and get it away. However, two separate oil slicks were detected in the vicinity of the *Pasha Bulker*, prompting concerns about a potential oil spill. The oil spill ship *Shirley Smith* was dispatched to assess the threat of an oil leak while the salvage operations were suspended. It was later determined that the liquid was simply lubricating oil expelled from the suspended propeller and snapped rudder and has since washed into the ocean with westerly winds.

Third attempt and successful re-flotation

The ship was successfully towed off the reef on the third attempt at approximately 9:37pm on 2 July 2007. By 9:41pm it was 500 m offshore. It was then held 11 nautical miles (20 km) from the Newcastle shoreline and inspected by divers for oil spills and to determine the extent of the hull damage.

Damage assessment and repairs



The damaged Pasha Bulker in Newcastle Harbour

In addition to large creases that were visible on both sides of the outer hull while the ship was beached, propeller and rudder damage became evident during the operation to remove the ship from the beach. Assessment by divers while the ship was being held offshore determined that one of the ballast tanks was flooded. Minor repairs to the *Pasha Bulker* were conducted in Newcastle harbour before the ship was towed by the Japanese supertug *Kyo Maru* for major repairs in Japan.

Post re-flotation events

After the ship was refloated, questions as to who would pay for the recovery of the ship were raised. On 4 July 2007 it was announced that the Japanese owners had promised to pay for the total cost of the salvage in accordance with international conventions. The ship was towed into Newcastle harbour where minor repairs were carried out while a decision on where major repairs would be completed was made. Salvage costs of AU\$1.8 million were finally paid in July 2008.

The New South Wales government did not press charges against the master because negligence could not be proved "beyond reasonable doubt". A NSW Maritime report found

horrendous weather conditions combined with poor seamanship by the master of the vessel were to blame. At the height of the incident the ship's master had left the bridge to have breakfast. The report said the master failed to realise the impact of the forecast weather in the anchorage even though wind warnings were received as early as 3 June 2007. The master also didn't ballast the ship for heavy weather.

Departure



NBN News reports as the Pasha Bulker leaves Newcastle Harbour

The *Pasha Bulker* left the port of Newcastle on 26 July 2007. Four kilometres out to sea the Japanese salvage tug *Koyo Maru* connected lines to the *Pasha Bulker* for it to be towed back to Japan. Metal beams could be seen reinforcing the buckled hull, as these were part of the temporary repair solution affixed at Newcastle.

History Repeats

Nobby's Breakwater was originally built in the first half of the 19th century to protect ships entering Newcastle Harbour. After the breakwater was completed Nobby's Beach formed against it and over the reefs around Nobby's headland. It is on these reefs where the *Pasha Bulker* came to grief.



1940 – Maianbar runs aground on Nobby's Beach

However, it is not the first ship to run aground in the area. In 1940 the TSS *Maianbar*, a 493 ton steamship, broke its towline while en route to Sydney and drifted ashore near where the *Pasha Bulker* was beached. It was unable to be re-floated and was dismantled on-site. The *Pasha Bulker* beaching has also drawn parallels to the 1974 beaching of the *Sygn* on Stockton beach, some eight kilometres further north,.



1974 – Sygn at Stockton Beach

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