



Nella Dan's last days, December 1987

By Benny Strøm – 'Båds' (Bos')

Bosun on Nella Dan from 1975 to 1987

Captain Arne Sørensen, chief mate Gustav B. Henriksen, first mate Magnus Olafsson, chief engineer Erling Helslev, cook Ole Handorf and yours truly, bosun Benny Strøm, had remained on board after the grounding in early December.

The rest of the crew were picked up a few days later by the German ship Icebird. It was bloody sad to see them sail off with the competition.

Together with the skeleton crew I stayed on board throughout the incident. Never went ashore a single time. I'll never forget the first night after the grounding. Clanging, booming noises rang through Nella with every crashing wave that pressed her harder and harder on to the rocks on the shore. It was awful.

We did not dare go out onto the bridge wings, because the masts, antenna and radar were swinging and swaying so hard we were afraid they might snap off and break our bones. On top of that, diesel fuel was still spewing out of the tanks. That was almost the worst part. I spent four days with impaired eyesight and diesel in my eyes.

I still have a visible bruise on my back from the first night when I fell off the ladder to the engine room. Erling and I were going down to assess the damage while the incident was still unfolding. We had to check how high the water had reached in the engine room. The power was out, so the place was darker than a coalminer's backside, and when a particularly heavy sea pounded Nella into the rocks, I was thrown off the ladder and landed on my back on one of the top bolts on the engine.

That slammed the wind right out of me, but I managed to roll over and grab hold of the ladder again. I can still feel the bolt.



About the storyteller:

I first went to sea back in 1959 as a mess boy at MV Spigerborg for CK Hansen, where I stayed till I was a jungman, before I returned home and enrolled in at nautical training college in the city of Frederikshavn.

During the 1960s I was on the deck of Swedish ships until late 1966, when I discharged in Napier, New Zealand.

That same day I signed on with MV Rikke Skou. After that followed a few years with Mærsk on board Arild Mærsk, Gjertrud Mærsk and, finally, Dagmar Mærsk.

From 1973 it was Nella Dan.

She became my home and my life at sea until I was finally kicked off board at Christmas 1987. Thus ended my life as a sailor.

As I always say, 'There's no shame in going ashore when you're dismissed.'

I never went to sea again.



Already the day after the grounding we were able to inspect the damage. Nella was listing slightly to port, and there was about 60 centimetres of standing water in the cabins in the 'sump' (the section below deck with accommodations for the general crew members, ed.).

Later, we found that the damage was not as bad as it appeared in the initial inspection, but still, it was disheartening to see all that water in the sump. It just did not belong there.

The crew returned to the ship, arriving on LARCs from the station. Going on board in teams, everybody was given just over half an hour to collect their private gear and supplies. We knew that we would likely be stuck there for a few days before we were relieved, so we formed a line down to the cold store and put a pallet of beer on the LARC – and a bottle of Gammel Dansk bitter dram.

We set up a pump to clear out the water, but we only had a single submersible pump, so that process lasted several days. I remember dragging the pump around and setting it up wherever there was standing water.

The worst part was not the pump itself, really, but the fact that my palms were still raw from the evacuation, when we had been holding the pilot ladder that everyone had to climb down. To hold it in place and deal with the sea and the LARCs coming out, we had to haul hard on the ladder, with people on it. That left its mark on the palms of our hands.

Eventually, we were able to drain the sump and the engine room, and the small amount of standing water in cargo hold no. 3 was also pumped out. In cargo hold no. 3, the deck had a 20-centimetre crack, so water was leaking into the hold from a tank below. Erling managed to weld the crack, which put a stop to the leak. Later, divers inspected the damage from the outside. There was a crack in the hull underneath hold no. 3 in the stern, so sea water had leaked into the water tank and then on to hold no. 3 through the crack in the floor of the hold.

When we were told that Icebird could accommodate the crew, some crew members came on board to pack up their personal belongings into suitcases, bags and sea bags. Most people only took their most essential belongings. The rest was placed on the bunks. At that point, we all expected that Nella would return to Australia.

We spent the days inspecting and fixing damages from the inside. Erling and I formed a good working team. Erling was able to start up the auxiliary engine to provide power for tools, boom winches and so on. We were also



able to get the light working in the engine room, so that we could work there. I put up an upside-down bucket with a socket and light bulb inside.

About two weeks later, the supply ship Lady Lorraine came down from Melbourne. They immediately set to work hauling pumps on board. They had been in hurry to depart. The gear they brought was not exactly the newest I have seen, but that was probably what they had been able to get together at short notice before departing Melbourne.

As Lady Lorraine did not have cranes or derricks for unloading, we had to use our own gear. I had to do this on my own – and that with only one useful derrick and a bit of a list to boot. The bow was still stuck on the rocks, so we had to secure every single item with lashings to prevent it from sliding off. It was backbreaking work.

The efforts to pull Nella off the rocks proved futile. For several days, the crew struggled to get us clear. No joy. We were thoroughly stuck. Of course, we had run aground at high tide and a full moon, so we had to wait for several days until the tide was high enough for any hope of a successful outcome.

It took about three or four days before the moon was in our favour.

When we came afloat we drifted a little before we were tethered to Lorraine and pulled alongside while they sent divers down to inspect the damage.

They discovered a leak in starboard tank no. 2 by hatch no. 2. This was the leak that had caused the spray of diesel fuel that had hit us during the evacuation. They also found a crack under cargo hold no. 3. That explained the water in the hold. There was other damage too, but nothing that I thought would prevent our return to Australia. Nella was afloat, even if she had a little bit of a list. We had been through worse.

They began to tow us out of Buckles Bay. But suddenly, one of the tow ropes snapped, and all hell broke loose among the inspectors and rescue team. It looked like panic. We were ordered to leave the ship immediately: 'Abandon ship; and that means NOW!'

Steady on ... we were only listing by about 15 degrees. That was nothing. Normally, in a heavy sea, we could easily roll some 40 degrees for days on end. Why, hell, one time we took water down our smokestack, causing the whole ship to shut down when we were hit by a tsunami wall of water. When that happened I did say my final goodbye to the mate I was on watch with, before she slowly righted herself again.



Nella was no push-over.

I was not going to leave without my suitcase and passport. Arne and Gustav continued to salvage logbooks and papers. We were bringing the crew's suitcases up to the helicopter deck. We had already assembled quite a few when Erling and yours truly were barred from the accommodations. That led to a somewhat heated exchange with the inspectors. I managed to get my own bag and essentials from my cabin.

We came on board Lady Lorraine, where we were assigned a cabin. I shared a room with a sailor who was on watch.

I had arranged to join the divers the following morning at 04:00, when they were scheduled to go over to Nella. I was ready at 04:00. Word came down: 'We're holding off till 06:00.' OK. I'll wait. Word came down at 06:00: 'Not yet; not till after lunch.'

At 08:00 I was looking at Nella slightly astern of us. A wisp of white smoke was curling out of the smokestack, and I thought to myself, 'Bastards, they're going without me!' Soon, nasty black smoke was pouring out of the ship. 'Crap! There's a fire on board ...' I thought and rushed into the mess room to alert the others. Of course, the news had already spread.

Around 10 in the morning, hoses and a water cannon were put to use to douse Nella in water from bow to stern. Cargo hold no. 1 was used in the effort to put out the fire. From here, the water could flow via a door between holds no. 1 and 2 that had sprung open during the grounding; from hold no. 2, the water could flow freely into the accommodations.

During the morning, several explosions rang out. The fire ravaged the ship. For hours, the accommodations and hold no. 2 remained completely enveloped by flames.

Throughout the day, we sailed around on Lady Lorraine, watching as tons of water was being pumped on board. At one point, she began to drift back towards Buckles Bay, so a tow rope was attached in the stern, beneath the helicopter deck, dragging her out by her tail, like an old cat being tormented. It was a damn sorry sight to behold.

The sea was calm, and it was a quiet day, so we could simply sit alongside the burnt-out Nella, pumping, for hours on end. She still was not going down. But it was all over. The fire had razed the accommodations, and the fire was still raging as the stern began to slip under. Nella was a pretty lass



with a low freeboard astern, so the helicopter deck was the first section to go under.

At 17:42, Nella's bow disappeared from view, and she was gone for good.

But she remains forever in my heart and thoughts.

I revisited Macca (Macquarie Island, ed.) one more time, some three weeks after our return to Hobart. With Nella out of the game, ANARE received assistance from the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force, ed.) to supply the stations by air drop.

I was lucky enough to get on one of these supply rides with the RAAF to Macca. It was quite a ride, and I still chuckle when I think of the people in the cargo compartment of the plane who got seasick from that little bit of bouncing and jostling. Sheesh. That was nothing.

We had to push these crates over the open rear ramp as we flew along the beach by the station on Macquarie. It is only a narrow strip of gravel, so you have to get it right in the first attempt.

Just as the crates are sliding out, and I am snapping some photos to take some memories with me, the tin can we are flying in begins to bounce and shake. I am on my belly, bouncing along the deck towards the rear ramp, holding on for dear life, as I see my bag and camera throwing themselves to the wind.

There go my memories.

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