

The Shetland Times

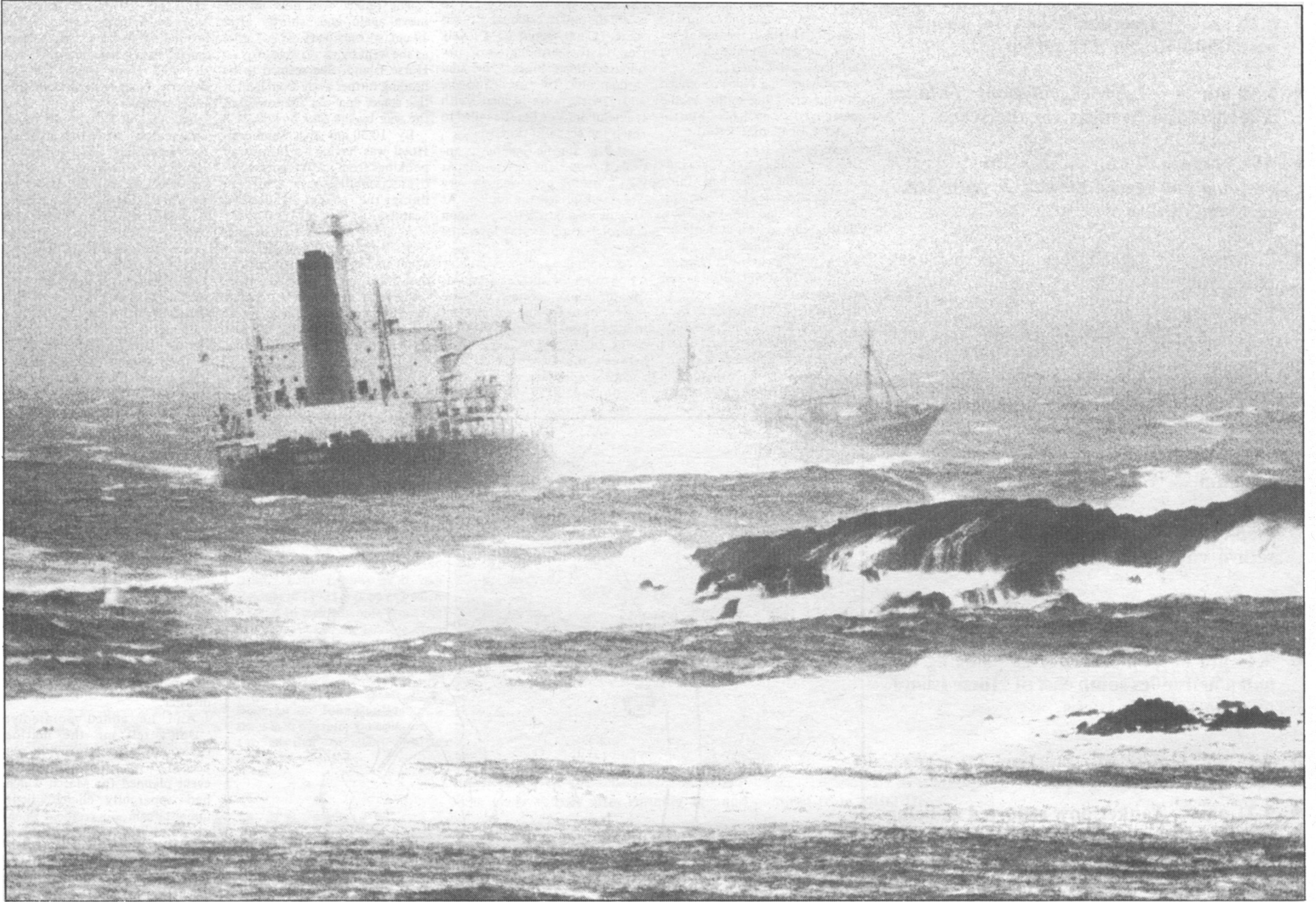
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Worst fears realised as tanker spills . . .

DEADLY CARGO



The appalling weather can clearly be seen in this picture taken only moments before the *Braer* grounded at Garths Ness.

Photo Graeme Storey

AT 11.27 am on Tuesday, 5th January, at Garths Ness near Quendale Bay, the first puddle of oil appeared off the starboard side of the 45,000 tonne *Braer*.

It was the first trickle of the millions of gallons of light crude that were to follow, signalling the fact that a dramatic six-hour battle against the elements had been lost and Shetland was on the verge of a massive environmental calamity.

It is a disaster so enormous that, while many have spoken of it as having been an accident waiting to happen, now that it has, its long-term impact is almost too horrific for the the imagination to grasp.

Commentators have been predicting severe damage to the salmon farming industry, fishing, crofting, farming, and the quality of life of everyone in the isles. The industries are anxiously monitor-

ing the situation, wary of any reports that might harm the image of their products.

The disaster has already taken its toll of the seabird, seal and otter populations. Within minutes of the leak, in an area renowned throughout the world for its wildlife, the first sightings of oiled birds were being reported. Not long after, the first seal was sighted in difficulties.

The entire area was sealed off by the police. The world's media

started booking their planes and hotels. Emergency pollution clean-ups teams were mobilised. The European Community promised help. The Government announced an inquiry. And the people of Shetland despaired.

The disaster began 10 miles south of Sumburgh Head at 5.30 am on Tuesday. The Greek skipper of the Liberian-registered *Braer* contacted Shetland Coastguard to report that his tanker had lost engine power and was drifting

helplessly in force 9 winds towards Shetland.

She had left the Mongstad oil terminal, Norway, on Sunday and was on her way to Quebec, Canada, with 85,000 tons of crude from the Norwegian Gullfaks field — almost twice that lost by the *Exxon Valdez* which ran aground in Alaska with such disastrous consequences nearly four years ago. She also had on board 500 tonnes of fuel oil, which is particularly heavy and difficult to clean up.

The Sumburgh-based rescue helicopter was airborne by 6.20 am and, after a tricky operation with some waves rising to 100 feet, had winched up the first group of 16 men by 8 am. The men were taken to Sumburgh Airport before being transported to Lerwick to the Fishermen's Mission.

Meanwhile, the oil supply boat *Star Sirius* left the Shell base at Lerwick at 7.15 am and began a battle through high seas to reach the area. A tug from Sullom Voe also set off for the scene.

Before 8.30 the remaining 18 crewmen were told to assemble on deck to await winching up by a rescue helicopter from RAF Lossiemouth which had arrived on the scene earlier.

From Sumburgh Head we —

auxiliary coastguards, an ornithologist, an environmentalist, and two *Shetland Times* reporters — could just dimly make out the drifting tanker as the first chinks of weak light penetrated the darkness.

She was now about a mile off. We watched in admiration as the Lossiemouth helicopter hovered over the tanker, which was periodically swamped by huge waves. The Sumburgh rescue helicopter circled overhead. A fishing boat could also be seen standing by.

By about 9 am the last of the Greek, Phillipino and Polish crew was winched up. At this stage the

(Continued on page two)

Weather is key to evacuation

THE South Mainland may have to be completely evacuated.

Council officials have prepared a strategy in the event of toxic fumes from the *Braer*'s spilt oil rising to dangerous levels.

Shetland Islands Council chief executive Malcolm Green told reporters yesterday that an evacuation plan had been prepared by the housing department.

The council's environmental services director Martin Hall said there was currently no health hazard to the locals "with the present weather conditions".

However, he said if the wind speeds and temperature both

dropped then the chances of a health hazard increased. "The present weather conditions are the best for keeping toxic levels down. The problem begins when it is colder and calmer."

Mr Hall explained that this type of weather would trap the gas from the crude oil. "Vapour can not evaporate if it is cold and it will build up, causing a risk to public health."

He added that the light crude oil was made up of a number of substances, some of which were toxic. "If people are evacuated it will very much depend on the temperature and wind."

Mr Hall said he had sought advice from medical experts from the mainland, including the Health and Safety Executive and the Scottish Office. The fumes, he said, would cause an irritant effect in the eyes and throat.

"There has been no reports yet," he said.

He added that a team from BP were on standby in case the weather dropped and measurements on toxic levels were urgently required.

Mr Hall said his department had already carried out experi-

ments for explosive levels. He said there was no risk of explosion.

David Bedburgh from the Department of Transport's marine pollution control unit said toxic fumes only came off fresh oil which had not been in the sea for a long period of time. "What we don't know is the amount of fresh oil that is leaking."

Mr Green said the housing department had been busy preparing an evacuation plan since the tanker ran aground. However, he would not release details of the plan except to say that they had "sufficient contingency plans if it came to an evacuation".

**Reports on
Braer disaster
on pages 2, 3,
4, 5, 6, 7 and 8**

**Two pages of our
review of the year
from individual
contributors have
been held over
until next week**



The Braer Tanker Disaster

Countdown to major oil spill

'As we watched we felt

- 5.30 am — *Braer* makes contact with Shetland Coastguard to say she has lost all power while in the Roost. Shetland Coastguard immediately appeal for tugs to assist.
- 6.00 am — Shetland Coastguard contacts RAF Lossiemouth and requested their assistance.
- 6.10 am — Tanker's position reported as being nine miles off Sumburgh Head.
- 6.20 am — Decision taken to abandon vessel and Rescue 117 airborne.
- 6.50 am — Lerwick lifeboat *Soldian* launched and heading for the scene.
- Also before 7 am — Sullom Voe tug *Swaabie* and rescue helicopter from RAF Lossiemouth on way to scene.
- 7.15 am — *Star Sirius* leaves Lerwick Harbour.
- 8 am — First lift-off of 16 crewmen completed. Tanker reported as being roughly four miles from shore, remaining crew told to get on deck and prepare for evacuation.
- 8.30 am — *Soldian* arrives on scene.
- 8.55 am — *Soldian* stood down and starts return voyage to Lerwick.
- 9 am — Last of crew winched to safety.
- 9.11 am — Tanker reported as being one and a half miles south east of Horse Island, drifting towards rocks.
- 9.15 am — *Star Sirius* arrives on scene.
- 9.21 am — Tanker now reported as being between half and three-quarters of a mile from shore.
- 9.30 am — Tanker still in area off Sumburgh Head
- 9.50 am — Vessel reported as being just eight cables off Horse Island
- 10 am — Tanker rounds tip of Horse Island.
- 11.15 am — Tanker grounds at Garths Ness.
- 11.27 am — First oil spotted leaking from stricken vessel.
- 11.35 am — Tanker seen to be leaking considerably.
- 11.50 am — Tanker now firmly aground. Oil already leaking ashore on west side of Garths Ness.
- 11.54 am — Oil heading westwards in direction of Fitful Head.
- 1.56 pm — Oil begins to enter Bay of Quendale.

(Continued from front page)

Lerwick lifeboat *Soldian*, which was called out at 6.50, and which had been at the scene for half-an-hour, started its return trip to Lerwick.

There were two possible strategies at this stage: attempting to anchor the *Braer*, and getting a tow line from her to the *Star Sirius* when she arrived.

At this point the tanker appeared to be heading straight for West Voe of Sumburgh. But then she appeared to veer slightly westwards and Horse Island became the next possible target. However, the continuing shift to the west gave a little cause for hope that she might miss land.

Then for a while she seemed to be static, caught in the tide about three-quarters of a mile out, lying very low in the water.

As the howling winds competed with the crackling radios of the coastguard men, Mr Martin Huebeck of Shetland Bird Club was despondent.

"I am feeling sick. The winds are so strong. The best thing would be if she headed up the west coast and beyond. But I doubt it. The winds are so strong. But I take my hat off to these Coastguard helicopter boys out there. If we get away with this it will be the closest shave ever."

He added: "Plans have been laid for this sort of thing, for quite a while." BP, Shetland Islands Council, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Scottish

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and Soteag had all been discussing how best to respond, he said.

South Shetland coastguard sector officer Alex Wylie was matter-of-fact. "We will just have to wait and see whether she comes ashore now and deal with it then."

Mr Hugh Harrop of the Sullom Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group agreed: "We have just got to wait. If it went off west it would be better. We have got so many birds at the moment — divers, long tailed ducks, and shags. The amount of shags is phenomenal."

Mr Harrop's own house looked like being one of the closest to where the tanker could land at this stage. "That would be a lovely view in the morning — a few hundred dead birds," he said sardonically. Two tugs, *Swaabie* and *Tirrick*, were headed south from Sullom Voe but the failed to reach the scene in time.

At 9.15 am the *Star Sirius* appeared round the headland. At 9.25 a fishing boat went in very close and circled the tanker. At 9.30 the Sella Ness based pollution control helicopter flew over the scene.

At 9.40 the talk was still of trying to get the anchors dropped, with the help of crewmen from the tanker, or to try and get men on to her to hook her up to the *Star Sirius* by having a rope fired between the two vessels. The anchor strategy was subsequently discounted as it would be

impossible to get a man for'ard on the ship. At 9.50 she was reported as still being three-quarters of a mile off.

Meanwhile, Mr John Leach of the SIC's environmental services department joined us at Sumburgh Head, acting as an observer for the council's emergency centre which had been set up in room 16 of the Islesburgh Centre, Lerwick.

He praised the courage of the *Star Sirius* men and the helicopter crews, and it added: "It could be devastating. I am just praying." By this time the London-based Maritime Pollution Control Unit had been alerted and was preparing to send planes north.

The tanker was now on the move again and, shortly after 10 am, we breathed a sigh of relief as she went by — very close by — Horse Island. She seemed to be heading further away from land at this stage, and was shadowed all the way by the *Star Sirius*.

By 10.30 am the Sumburgh Hotel was having to turn away bookings from media representatives scrambling north. Cars were lining the roads all around Scatness.

At about 11.15 we arrived on foot — after walking a mile and a half through incredible winds — over the brow of North Ness to see the last man being winched up into the Sumburgh rescue helicopter. He was swinging in the air just seconds after the tanker had finally grounded.

He had been part of a team of four — the master of the *Braer*

and a crewman, helicopter winchman Freddie Manson, and the SIC's oil pollution control officer Jim Dickson — who had been making a heroic last-ditch attempt to get a line between the tanker and the *Star Sirius*.

However, time and the tide and 65-knot winds had been against them. They had eventually managed to get a rope fired across but at this point she hit the rocks, the rocket-fired rope flew out of the men's hands before they could get the tanker's main ropes to the *Star Sirius*, and they had to abandon the attempt.

As we approached the scene, we saw the tanker just about 10 to 15 yards off the shore. Six boats stood by, watching helplessly. The grounding had eventually been caused by a cruel, fateful change of wind from south west to westerly, blowing her straight into the shoreline.

At 11.27, from only yards away, along with the auxiliary coastguards and a small group of spectators and amateur photographers, we saw the very first signs of leaking oil, from the stern, starboard side. The oil appeared light at first, then got darker. By 11.35, she was leaking considerably from both bow and stern. The water all around her was starting to turn brown.

As we watched we frankly felt pathetic, as the advance guard of the slick started to slurp towards a group of gulls on the water — going about their business, as it were, unaware of the danger that was even then coming among them.

We could smell and taste the oil in the spray thrown up as the huge waves continued to pound the tanker, kicking it while it was down. The sound of metal grinding could be heard. There was talk of a human health threat at this stage and the coastguards shouted for everyone to gather in behind the shelter of their Land Rover.

Auxiliary coastguard and SIC councillor Magnus Flaws said: "It is the worst thing that could possibly happen. It is starting to get round the coast and up the west side. It is an ecological disaster."

And he added pointedly: "Don't tell me the marine environment conference is not needed," referring to the SIC event planned for March which had apparently elicited little interest from Government ministers and the oil industry.

Mr Harrop of Soteag said: "It is a total disaster, isn't it? It is early days but apparently the weather is going to stay like this till night."

Mr Huebeck said: "Our main concern at the moment is if it gets back into Quendale bay [where there is a seal colony]. A lot of long-tailed ducks, and divers. And eiders are very susceptible to it as well."

A message on the Coastguard radio asked if there were any signs of fire, and warned that spectators were making their way across the coastline. Somebody said they had seen their first oil-covered gull.

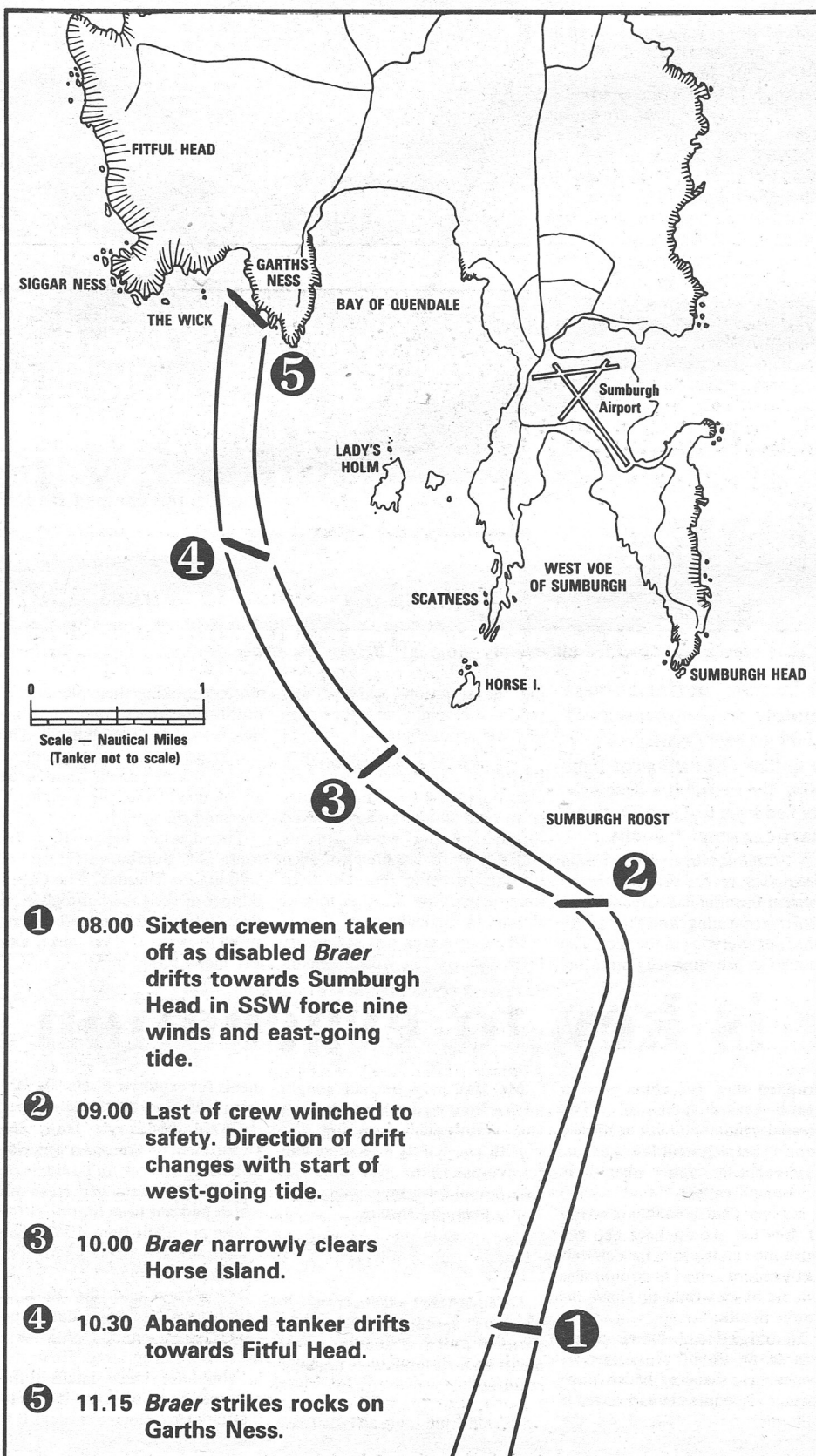
Mr Wylie said it was now the job of the auxiliaries to monitor the unfolding disaster, acting as the on-the-ground monitor for the helicopters overhead and Coastguard HQ.

At 12.40 the police arrived to clear the area of everyone except emergency personnel because, they said, of the danger of an explosion from the light crude.

The Quendale road was also closed off, but after 2pm the police arranged for a convoy of pressmen to approach the site. However, that offer was shortly withdrawn. There was still talk of the possibility of an explosion.

By mid-afternoon, darkness was falling, the winds were starting to reach hurricane force, and the six Dakota planes with the dispersant sprays were stranded in Inverness because of the horrendous conditions.

At 5.20 we passed a Sumburgh-



The Braer Tanker Disaster



pathetic'

bound convoy of lorries carrying pollution fighting equipment from Sullom Voe. Even with the car windows shut, the oil could be smelt on the main road, miles inland.

All the predictions on that first dreadful night were that the *Braer* would break up in the hurricane force winds. But she did not, though she was shifted further towards the shore.

And after all the frustrations and the nauseous realisation of the scale of the disaster, it was now time for the questions — lots of

them. And for the recriminations. Within 24 hours there was claim and counter-claim about how the tragedy could have been prevented.

The tanker master alleged the Coastguard did not get help to his ship quick enough, while the master of the *Star Sirius* said some crewmen should have been left aboard the tanker to organise a tow. The Coastguard has dismissed both claims as nonsense. The arguments and the oil will run for some time yet.

Last-ditch bid to save ship from the rocks

TWO men who made a last-ditch attempt to save the *Braer* from grounding spoke of their horrific experience on board the tanker as she hit the rocks at Garths Ness.

Sullom Voe's pollution control officer Jim Dickson and the winchman from Shetland Coastguard's rescue helicopter, Friedie Manson, were on board the vessel with two of *Braer's* crew as they attempted to connect a tow line from the supply boat *Star Sirius*.

The four men were winched down onto the tanker at around 11 am as the *Braer* was approaching Garths Ness. Mr Manson said a line was fired across to the tanker but failed to land on the deck. A second line was then fired from the supply vessel which landed successfully.

"We got the towline to the stern of the tanker but the line was dragging through the water and was too heavy to drag in," said Mr Manson. The conditions were so rough that "we had the rope pulled out of our hands", said Mr Dickson.

As the men were giving up the ghost the tanker struck ground. I have never been so scared in my life," said Mr Dickson.

"A big swell came up and we fell upon a rock with a tremendous thud. It was just a huge judder."

The thought which went through his head at that time, he said, was "Oh, oh! Time to leave".

Mr Manson admitted the grounding was "quite bumpy", and said: "It was going through your mind 'what's going to happen? Is the tanker going to break and blow up'."

"I have never done anything similar to that before and I hope I never do it again."

The Coastguard helicopter soon arrived on scene at Garths Ness and Mr Manson winched the tanker's two crew off the *Braer*. Mr Manson then winched down to pick up Mr Dickson, the last person on board. "I was very thankful to get off," he said.

The call-out to airlift crew from the tanker is just one of Mr Manson's long list of eventful incidents. "Last year I had to jump into the water from the fishing boat *Taranis* as it was sinking; in 1990 I was on call when we had to airlift people from the *Maersk Tackler* in terrible conditions; and the year before that it was the fishing boat *Premier*."

Mr Manson commended the helicopter crew — pilots Tony Brewster and John Rawlings, and the winch operator Bob Taylor — for another excellent job in difficult conditions.



The *Braer* shortly after running aground pictured from Fitful Head.

Photo: John Coutts

Questions on anchors

A BIG question mark remains over whether it could have been possible to lower the *Braer's* anchors before she got far up the coast towards Garths Ness.

The strategy appears to have been part of the Coastguard plan, involving putting men who had just been taken off back on board, as the tanker lay off Sumburgh Head. But it was deemed impossible to get forward across the sea-covered decks to the bow of the vessel.

During his account of events at Tuesday's press conference, SIC pollution officer Jim Dickson said: "Why the crew didn't drop the anchor I couldn't tell you. But large anchors like that require power."

Asked to clarify this, he said that putting a man on the deck would have killed him and that, without power, it would have been impossible to drop the 15-tonne anchors.

And Shetland Coastguard district controller Ken Lowe said: "It was a possibility but it would be very difficult to do."

On Wednesday one master mariner told *The Shetland Times* that, under normal circumstances, anchors would be held by three

means. They would be controlled by the hand wheel on the windlass, by a bar across the anchor chain — a bar which he said could be lifted by two men — and by an additional holding chain across the anchor chain.

When a ship approaches port the holding chain is taken off, the bar lifted, and the anchor is then ready to be let out. This is done manually.

While the *Braer* was off Sumburgh Head it would not have been possible to get anyone onto the bow because the decks were awash as she rolled on the high seas.

However, according to some observers, after she had passed Horse Island and was heading up the coast, the rolling was considerably less and it may — and it remains a big "may" — have been possible to get men forward.

Even if the anchors had been dropped it also remains debatable how much good it would have done. They would not have held her in the deep waters off Sumburgh Head. However, they could possibly have delayed or even held her in the shallower waters off Horse Island or Lady's Holm.

Reports by *Shetland Times* staff Rob Fogg, Rab McNeil, John-Brian Setrice, Alistair Munro and Mike Grundon.

Costs quiz for the PM

YESTERDAY morning MP Jim Wallace sent a letter to Prime Minister John Major seeking an immediate assurance that the Government would meet the costs incurred by the council as a result of the cleaning-up operation.

"I would expect that in the fullness of time, the Government will be able to recover these costs from insurers of those held to be liable for the accident, but surely it must be simpler for the Government to deal with these bodies than for there to be a host of individual claimants who might have to wait some considerable time for claims to be settled," he wrote.

Mr Wallace also asked Mr Major whether or not Ministers would now consider more seriously the council's marine conference scheduled for March which prior to the disaster had received scant ministerial interest.

'Stay away' warning

THE police have asked all members of the public to stay away from Quendale, Fitful Head, and Garths Ness areas.

could hinder the clean-up operation and could be at risk themselves in the dangerous cliff area, he said.

Chief Inspector Farquhar MacGregor said on Tuesday this request would still apply if the weather improved. Sightseers

On Wednesday, the police issued a warning to drivers to take extra special care on the roads in the area, which could be slippery as wind-blown oil settled on them.



Coastguard district controller Ken Lowe answers questions at the first press conference at Sumburgh on Tuesday afternoon. With him is Capt. George Sutherland (centre) and Jim Dickson.

Photo: Malcolm Younger



The Braer Tanker Disaster

Scale of problems widens day by day as oil spreads

DAY two of the disaster dawned with news that the oil had spread four miles north of Garths Ness and three miles south, past Horse Island and Scatness.

At a press conference that morning, Capt George Sutherland said the seven-mile slick was also relatively narrow. He added, though, that there were sheens of the light crude appearing one mile east of Sumburgh Head.

Mr Sutherland said the tanker had settled on the seabed with the bow sticking up and the stern under water. "It had not broken in half," he said, despite the storm force winds the night before.

In fact, the high winds had a "beneficiary effect" on the spreading of the oil, according to David Bedburgh of the Department of Transport's marine pollution control unit. He said:

"The agitation of the sea has dispersed the oil in a natural action."

Mr Bedburgh added that six Dakota aircraft, plus Sullom Voe's pollution control helicopter, had started carrying out low-flying spray tests with dispersants over Quendale Bay.

However, the use of dispersants raised safety questions over whether these would be harmful

to the public and sealife. Mr Bedburgh said: "There could be a danger to people, but not if the spraying of the dispersants is carried out correctly."

But, he added: "There is a toxic effect on fish, which we will have to watch."

By Wednesday night oil had begun to spread up the east coast of the island and was nearing the

salmon farming area of Clift Sound.

Two booms had been placed at the Pool of Virkie and further back-up services were put on standby at Spiggie, if they were required. Further pollution control equipment, including booms, were on the way from Aberdeen, and clean-up teams were expected to begin work early yesterday morning.

The *Braer*, however, was still in one piece, despite claims in some quarters, according to Sullom Voe's pollution control officer, Jim Dickson.

Mr Dickson said a very scaled and experienced team had gathered — including the marine pollution accidents team, the International Tankers Oil Pollution Federation and a salvage team from Smit Lloyd.

Mr Dickson said the salvage team was looking at the possibility of removing the remaining cargo before the whole ship breaks up.

Oil started approaching one of the largest salmon farming areas in Shetland yesterday.

Sheens of the light Norwegian crude were spotted at the entrance of Clift Sound, 15 miles north of where the Liberian tanker *Braer* is grounded at Sumburgh. Fish farmers yesterday started surrounding their cages with absorbant booms in order to protect their fish.

David Bedburgh of the marine pollution control unit said the special booms were sufficient to control light sheen, but he warned they would not be able to withstand any gross oil pollution.

The weather was still too rough yesterday to deploy ordinary booms in the area. The forecast as

we went to press was still for continuous south-westerly gales.

SIC chief executive Malcolm Green said that efforts to disperse the oil before it reached the proportions of a major disaster was now "a race against time".

At a press conference yesterday, the council's marine operation director Capt George Sutherland said oil sheens were also being spotted around the Boddam area, four miles up the east coast of Shetland.

Reports by
Shetland Times
staff Rob Fogg,
Rab McNeil,
John-Brian
Setrice, Alistair
Munro and
Mike Grundon

Capt Sutherland said the serious slick was around six miles in length and 50 metres in width, with the wind pushing the oil against the coastline.

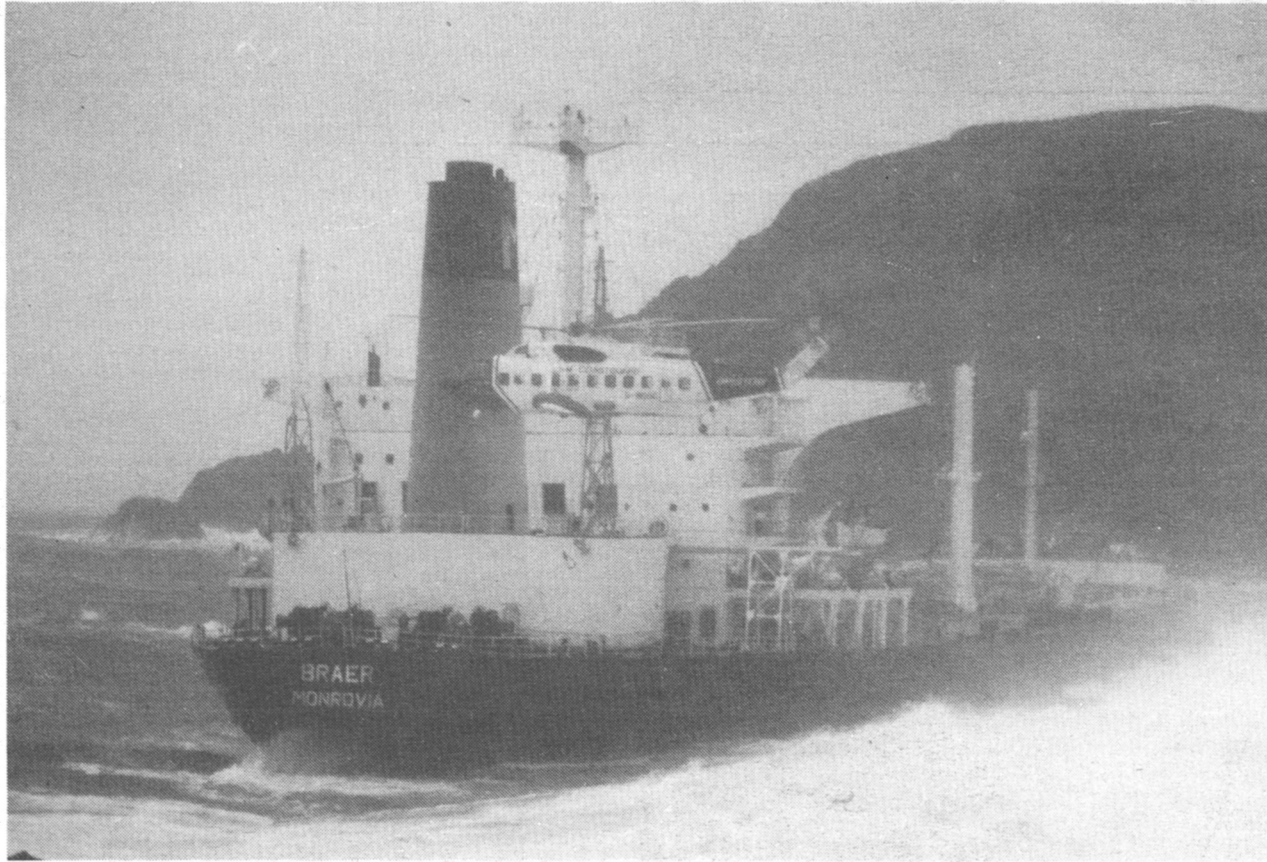
He added that despite worsening weather conditions the *Braer* remained firmly wedged on the rocks and showed no sign of breaking up. "There is no further information on the amount of oil which had escaped from the ship."

The weather also prevented the use of the six pollution control aircraft. However, it was thought spraying dispersants from helicopter was possible some time yesterday.

A careful watch, though, is being kept on the relative toxicity of airborne oil spray on the local population, although officials stressed that no adverse effects on humans have yet been identified.

Spraying operations will be stopped, however, if any person is in the area when the spraying is due to start.

The weather was also preventing salvage experts from boarding the tanker to assess the amount of oil left. "This task will be given a high level of priority once weather conditions improve," said Mr Green.



The Bristow helicopter prepares to airlift the last men from the *Braer* just after she grounded.

Photo: Bob Logan

Convener praises emergency team

ON Wednesday evening Shetland Islands Council Convener Edward Thomason paid tribute to those who had reacted so quickly to the tanker disaster.

Mr Thomason said the emergency control team's initial response had been excellent with a headquarters set up in Islesburgh Community Centre, which is in the throes of a major refurbishment, by 11am. He said that those

present had worked with both commitment and a sense of purpose in ensuring that things ran as smoothly as possible as quickly as possible.

He said the arrangements at Sumburgh also seemed to be working well with the various groups and organisations based there co-ordinating and integrating efficiently.

Mr Thomason said he was extremely proud of all the staff

involved and that morale seemed high.

On Wednesday Mr Thomason met Scottish Office Minister Sir Hector Munro to discuss the disaster and what the Government's response would be. Mr Thomason said the smaller crofters were as much at risk as anyone and he said he shared MP Jim Wallace's view that the Government should meet the bills of those directly affected by the oil

spill and pursue those responsible.

It was still early days, said Mr Thomason, adding that the full extent of the spill and its consequences would really only be known next week. Once this was known, he and his fellow councillors would have to assess the situation and respond accordingly.

Yesterday Mr Thomason called on Shetland's young generation not to be disheartened by this week's events.

At a press conference he said: "Our economy and our society could be at risk. A younger person might begin to wonder if there is a future in Shetland."

"There is a future in Shetland," he said, adding that it was still "a vigorous and enterprising community". "My message is that Shetland is still a good place to be and we can approach life with confidence."

Crew members tell of escape in 65 mph winds

THE crew of the Liberian tanker counted themselves very lucky to survive the drama.

Crewmember Bismarck Mizrahi said the waves were reaching over 50 feet when he was airlifted by Shetland Coastguard's rescue helicopter at around 8 am.

Speaking to *The Shetland Times* less than an hour after being rescued, Mr Mizrahi said he was very thankful for the help of the helicopter crew. "The rescue operation was good and very quick, especially considering the bad weather."

Mr Mizrahi, who was one of 16 men airlifted by the Coastguard helicopter, said that as well as the high seas, the helicopter crew had to combat windspeeds which were exceeding 65 miles an hour.

"It was a lucky escape for us," said Armando Gonzales. "Thankfully nobody was injured."

The *Braer*'s master, Alexandros Gelis (45) of Greece, said the heavy seas had broken the ship's ventilator pipes. "Water escaped into the tank ventilators and mixed with the oil. This caused the engines to shut down."

The generator and boiler were also damaged.

Visibly shaken by the incident, Capt. Gelis said he called Shetland Coastguard at around 5.30 am. "At this point we were 10 miles from land."

When the *Braer* was within four miles of land it was decided 16 of the 34 crew should be airlifted by the Coastguard helicopter for safety. As the ship moved closer to the shore the remaining crew were airlifted by RAF Sea King helicopter.

"I wanted to stay on board but that was impossible. It was just too dangerous."

"We had no power, no radars, no steering. We had to abandon ship because of the vicious cliffs and deep water."

Capt. Gelis said it had taken them almost two days to reach the area between Fair Isle and Sumburgh from the port of Mongstad in Norway.

Mr Mizrahi said all the crew were very calm during the rescue operation, although some were "slightly scared" earlier on when they thought they were heading for the coastline. "Some were scared the tanker might explode," he said.



Members of the crew at Wilsness after being airlifted from the tanker.

Photo: Malcolm Younger

The Braer Tanker Disaster



Greek master claims help came too late

THE Greek master of the stricken tanker claims the emergency services did not initially acknowledge the seriousness of his ship's dilemma on Tuesday morning — and as a result did not act quickly enough to save the tanker from grounding.

Captain Alexandros Gelis (45) said that if Shetland Coastguard's response to his call for assistance had been faster a major ecological disaster could have been prevented.

Minutes after being airlifted from the tanker to Sumburgh by the RAF Sea King helicopter, Capt. Gelis told *The Shetland Times* about his dismay concerning the Coastguard's delay in organising help to take the tanker under tow. He also spoke to Greek Radio later in the evening.

Capt. Gelis told the radio station that the local authorities "were late in intervening" after they had received the message from his tanker. He said this was a decisive factor in the ship approaching land and running aground.

He told *The Shetland Times* that he had contacted Shetland Coastguard immediately after the *Braer's* engines had cut out, "at around 5.30 am".

"We were told a rescue boat would come about 11.30 am." However, Capt. Gelis said he told Shetland Coastguard that the tanker was "heading for the rocks".

He said he was afraid of the prospect of a major pollution disaster and told Shetland Coastguard "to come and get the ship".

After around an hour-and-a-half, said Capt. Gelis, the Coastguard decided to send assistance.

At a press conference on Wednesday morning Shetland Coastguards district controller Ken Lowe strenuously denied the Greek captain's allegations. Asked why there had been a delay in organising assistance for the tanker Mr Lowe said: "That is not so. I can not accept that at all."

He said that it was "absolute nonsense".

Mr Lowe said he could not divulge the exact times of when each event happened because of the pending inquiry to be carried out by the marine accidents investigation branch of the Department of Transport.

Mr Lowe said the *Braer* contacted Shetland Coastguard at 5.30 am. "I don't know when the tanker broke down. She only got in touch with us when she was 10 miles from the shore."

Mr Lowe added that it was the Coastguard station which first decided the vessel was in danger.

Mr Lowe said it was the master's decision to abandon ship, but with the advice from Shetland Coastguard. Asked if the master was reluctant to leave his tanker, Mr Lowe said: "No."

Plea for tanker ban in channel

A BITTER councillor has questioned whether the 22-mile channel between Sumburgh Head and Fair Isle, which the 45,000-tonne tanker *Braer* sailed through in atrocious conditions, should ever be used by oil tankers.

At a press conference on Wednesday morning, Councillor Willie Tait called for all tankers to be banned from using the channel in the future.

"I feel very, very bitter that this incident actually happened," he said. "The tanker should never have travelled through that narrow sound between Fair Isle and Sumburgh Head in force 10 to force 12 winds."

"This area should be an

exclusion zone," said Mr Tait, adding: "There should be an exclusion zone of 20 miles all round Shetland."

Mr Tait, councillor for the area where the tanker grounded, added that he was angry the *Braer* was only a single-hulled tanker. "That's what I don't like about the whole thing."

Mr Tait said he hoped these issues would be raised in the Government's inquiry.

Asked who he blamed for the accident, Mr Tait said: "I blame the crew for this disaster. I don't think they acted quick enough. If it was a British ship with a British crew I don't think they would have done what they did," he said.



The disaster scene looking towards Fitful Head with the *Braer* languishing in the sea.

Photo: Malcolm Younger

Contingency plans swiftly in operation

Supply boat captain frustrated by events

EMERGENCY contingency plans were quickly put into operation by Shetland Islands Council and a co-ordination centre was set up in the Islesburgh Community Centre, Lerwick, by 11 am on Tuesday.

Staff were drawn from several SIC departments and volunteers brought in from elsewhere to deal with the many media inquiries, plan possible clean-up operations and deal with all the problems the wreck would throw up.

The plans had already been made for this kind of incident but it was the first time they had been put into operation.

The first duty controller was director of leisure and recreation John Nicolson. He said the centre would be staffed for as long as the situation continued.

"There will be three shifts a day," he said, "each of eight hours. So far it's all gone very smoothly given it's never been done before."

Desks were put out with telephones and maps of the area and the system was put to the test.

Chief executive Malcolm Green said the emergency teams were ready to go but the bad and deteriorating weather made it impossible to do anything. The position of the wreck, miles from the nearest road, accessible only by an old army track and near some of the biggest cliffs in Shetland, would make any operation extremely difficult. "We can't even see it properly," he said.

THE captain of the oil supply boat *Star Sirius* says he could have saved the *Braer* if someone had been left aboard.

Dave Theobald is convinced that if just a handful of men had been left aboard the stricken tanker to take a line from his boat, he could have towed her clear of the rocks, even in the fierce weather conditions at the time.

His record of events begins at 6.15 in the morning when Lerwick harbour officials informed him of the situation.

"We prepared the boat ready to give assistance. We had to get the heavy gates at the back open and call up the crew."

By 7.00 am the boat was slipping clear of her moorings and heading for the area.

Steaming into the wind, he arrived at the scene and found the

Braer south of Sumburgh Head but completely abandoned.

"We took up station abreast of the tanker, at the stern, ready to send a rocket line across, but there was no one there to take our line. The Coastguard [helicopter] got the [tanker] captain and three others on the *Braer* at about 11 o'clock."

By then it had been drifting for one hour and 20 minutes, covering 4.5 miles across the mouth of the Bay of Quendale, shadowed all the way by the *Star Sirius*.

Within the next 15 minutes the oil boat's crew had managed to send a rocket out, getting a line to her. The men aboard *Braer* were in the process of drawing in the floating "messenger" line, a strong rope some 1.5 inches thick, when she struck and they had to

abandon back into the helicopter.

Capt Theobald said some men could have been left aboard to take the line, and even if they had been evacuated, there was plenty of time to get someone back aboard as the supply boat steamed south or while she was shadowing the tanker.

"It was a combined decision by the Coastguard and the master of the vessel but the master has the final responsibility," he said.

He admitted that the tanker did pass close to other points of rock but said that with a helicopter standing by the crew would have been safe even if they were aboard when she grounded. "Even if a tanker does ground, there's no immediate danger," he said.

He had 9000 bhp at his disposal and with a secure line on the tanker he could have coped.

Another option open to the crew would have been to trail a line on the ocean surface so that he could have picked it up even with no one on board the stricken ship.

"It is so frustrating that we weren't able to do anything and when we were it was too late," he said.

"In hindsight you can say I may not have managed it but it would have been nice to have a go. We were the only boat on the scene."

Yesterday morning Shetland area district controller Ken Lowe rejected the *Star Sirius* skipper's allegations as nonsense.

Mr Lowe said that Mr Theobald and his vessel had not even arrived in the area till after everyone had been lifted from the *Braer* and added that the decision to evacuate the vessel had been taken by the ship's master.



The Braer Tanker Disaster

Cancelled orders rumour denied

RUMOURS that big multiple-shop stores are already cancelling orders of Shetland salmon were denied by Shetland's largest salmon marketing company Framgard yesterday afternoon.

Framgard director Frank Odie said his company had in fact been heartened by the attitude of its customers, "some of whom had volunteered to take additional quantities should it be necessary to instigate a programme of emergency harvesting".

He went on: "What can be positively confirmed is that one major multiple, after ascertaining the facts, has decided to continue to support Shetland salmon — confident that we will not sacrifice standards even in the face of this adversity."

Mr Odie said sales were broadly as anticipated for the traditionally quiet month of January — "with no customer refusing to order on the grounds of the Braer incident".

Framgard's present harvesting is from farms on the East and North-west of Shetland, he said, with the nearest farm to the slick at that time 20 miles away.

The firm had received many

inquiries since the incident began, but he stressed: "Framgard categorically states that no fish will be sold from any farm which has been contaminated." They would still be subject to the Shetland Salmon Quality Control mark.

Mr Odie said future sales prospects were unclear and it would be a week before the extent of any damage to Shetland salmon's reputation could be assessed. "But media coverage over the past two days has not been positive for the industry," he added.

Shetland Co-op assistant manager Andrew Rennie said yesterday there was no substance to rumours that the Co-op had cancelled orders.

He said: "No, that is not the case, to my knowledge. But obviously we will probably have to review the case if it gets as far as the farms."

Meanwhile, the Shetland seafood associations yesterday played down the risks to their industries.

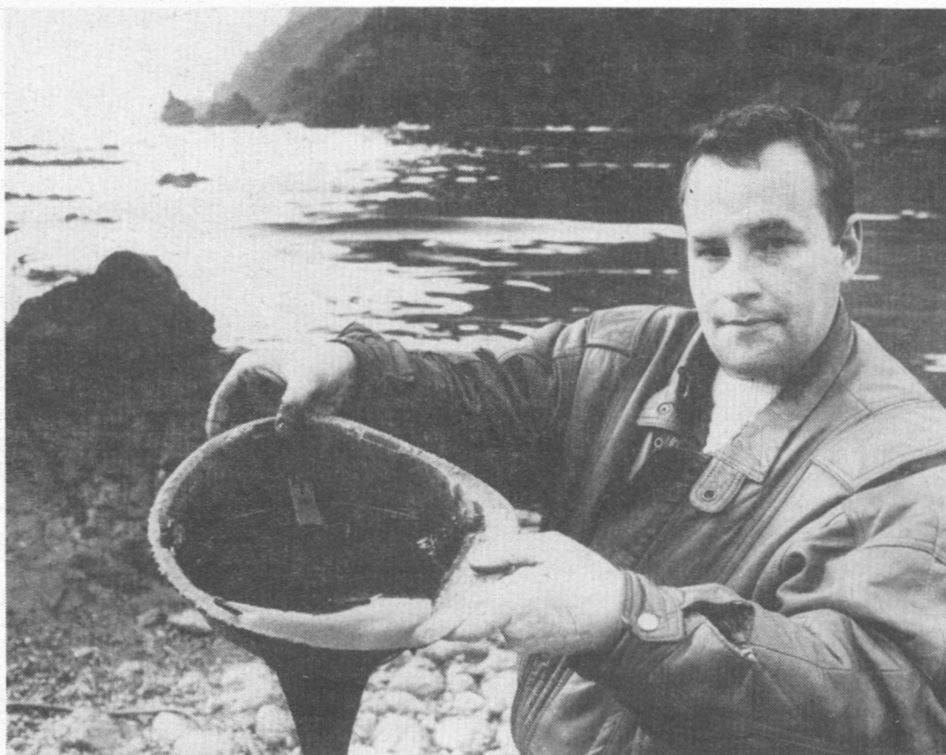
In a joint statement issued at lunchtime after their latest meeting, the Shetland Fishermen's Association, Shetland Salmon

Farmers' Association, and Shetland Fish Processors' Association, said: "It is important to emphasise that the vast majority of Shetland fishing grounds and Shetland fish farm sites are not in any danger of contamination from the oil spill."

"Even if the oil spreads northwards (and it is important to emphasise that this has not yet happened) only a small proportion of the Shetland fishing grounds and farmed salmon production will be at risk."

The associations said they were pleased with the progress of the clean-up operation, adding: "The fact that the oil industry remains concentrated around the area where the tanker ran ashore is obviously extremely important for the seafood industry. The adverse weather conditions, which actually accelerate the natural process of bio-degradation, are also helping the situation."

The associations pointed to the industry's "thorough and well-established" procedure for testing products through the independent seafood quality control organisation at the North Atlantic Fisheries College, Scalloway.



Keith Morrison, Lerwick, pours oil from a safety helmet which was washed ashore at the bottom of Fitful Head.
Photo: Malcolm Younger

Ewing demands action on tankers

HIGHLANDS and Islands Euro-MP Winnie Ewing has sent a message of sympathy to Shetland and is to table a resolution at the European Parliament demanding action on tanker standards.

"My sympathy goes out to the people of Shetland. The destruction of their coastal environment and the potential death of so many birds, animals and fish is exactly what they were promised would never happen when the oil industry arrived," said Mrs Ewing.

Mrs Ewing called on the British Government to pay for the emergency clean-up operation and to underwrite any compensation claims from those whose livelihoods will be affected.

"The coastal shellfish and the fish farming industries are both at risk and oil blown in from the slick is badly affecting farmers' and crofters' fields. The pollution is distressing enough, without facing a lengthy wait for compensation from insurance and the people of Shetland must be assured immediately that the Government will compensate them in the meantime."

The reaction of the Government was described as woeful by Mrs Ewing who attacked Shipping Minister Lord Caithness for describing the chances of such a disaster happening as miniscule.

"To be complacent before the event is bad enough, but continued complacency afterwards is ludicrous. It will not inspire the Shetlanders with confidence that Ministers are so obviously failing to grasp the gravity of the situation."

"We must now make sure that a catastrophe on this scale never happens again. I will be tabling a resolution at the European Parliament as soon as it reopens to demand more stringent regulations on the transport of oil and other chemicals."

SNP leader Alex Salmond also called on the Government to underwrite the clean-up costs and make sure there would be no limit on the resources made available to tackle the spill.

"We cannot afford to skimp on efforts to prevent the potential destruction of Shetland's coast and sea."

Oil in Loch of Spiggie bird reserve

By Rob Fogg

ON Wednesday morning oil was ashore at Spiggie in the Peerie Voe and with high tide coming around the same time as first light I could see waves running up the Spiggie Loch outlet channel carrying some of the oil into the waters of the RSPB bird reserve.

From there the westerly wind was carrying it out into the loch. Fifty yards from the channel I saw an otter enter the water near greasy, rainbow-coloured patches of oil.

Later in the morning after my wife, Gail, had reported the oil entering the loch a two-foot high plastic boom was put in place at the seaward end of the loch's outlet channel.

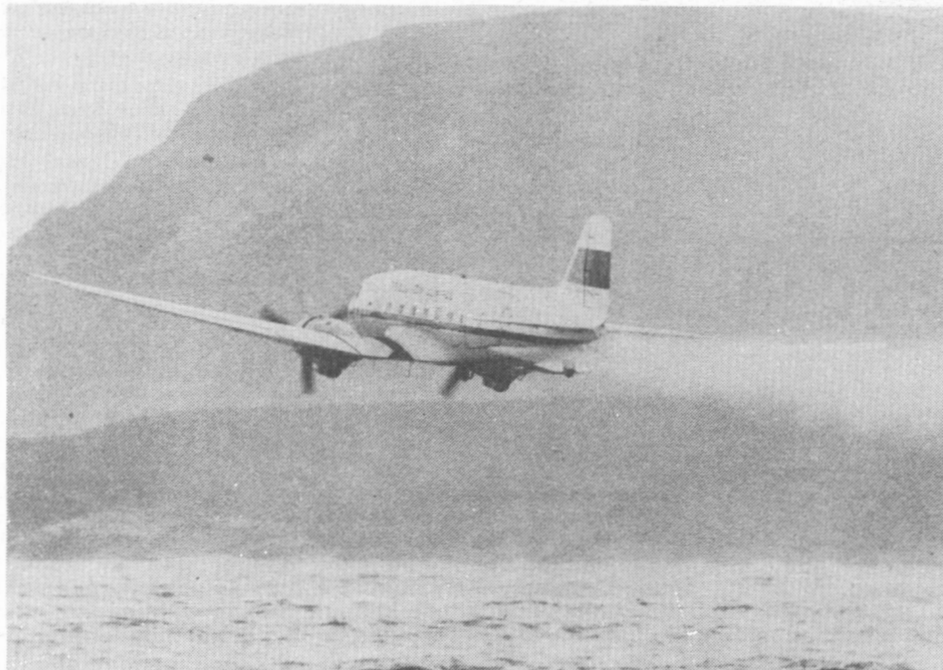
A brownish sheen of oil was also visible in Scousburgh Bay between Colsay and Lerwick beach and looked likely later in the day to reach the Spiggie sands at the south end of the bay.

Although not highly visible like heavy crude the light oil had coated the stony beach of the Peerie Voe with a transparent film. The beach looked as though somebody had poured diesel oil over it from end to end and it smelled like a filling station forecourt.

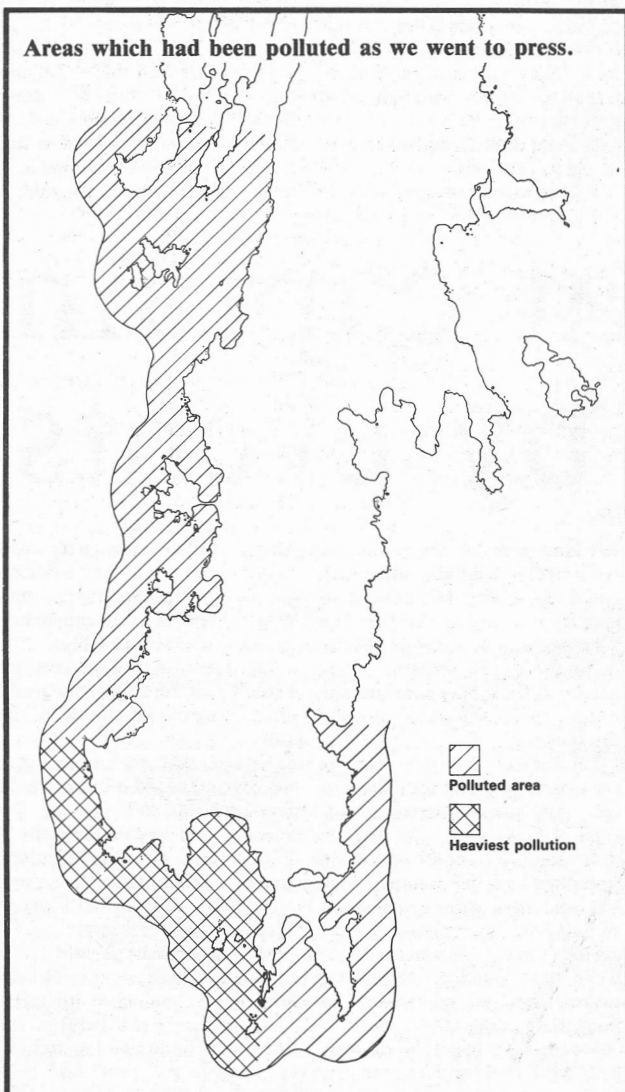
In many places where pollution occurs at a distance from the wreck of the Braer it will probably be similar. It won't make spectacular pictures for television like the thick, brown concentrated oil at Quendale Bay, but it will be unpleasant to be in the vicinity and its long-term effect on wild birds and sea mammals which become covered in it, thus losing their natural insulation, will probably be just as deadly as thicker crude.

People in many parts of the Ness were able to smell the oil on Wednesday morning and farmer Jim Budge, whose home at Bigton looks out to St Ninian's Isle, was among them. He gave an indication of how far the oil had progressed up the coast overnight from Garths Ness.

"We can see it here coming in among the holms at the south end of St Ninian's Isle," he said. "You can see a sheen on the whole sea between here and Colsay and smell it too."



A DC3 Dakota sprays dispersants over the Bay of Quendale in an attempt to break up the slick.
Photo: Courtesy of Reuters



Braer US-owned

THE Braer was built in 1975 in Japan. The ship is owned by the American company Bergvald Hoedner (B&H), operated by Norwegians Arvid Bergvald and Mikal Høedner. The company base is at Stamford, Connecticut.

Bergvald Hoedner operate a total of 14 tankers, most of them elderly. Statoil's (state owned oil company) information director

Berit Øyen said the Braer left Mongstad oil terminal on Sunday with 607,000 barrels of oil aboard.

The owner's responsibility for the oil was taken over by the buyer, the Canadian oil company Ultramar, at Mongstad. The ship's destination was Quebec, Canada. It was also Ultramar who chartered the Braer to carry the oil.

The Braer is classified by Det

Norske Veritas, who were aboard her in Wilhelmshavn, Germany in October last year. No faults were found, according to Norwegian press reports. No faults were found during the main survey in May 1992 either.

She is 241.51 metres long, 40.06 metres wide, and has a draught of 18.8 metres. Her net weight is 33,976 tonnes and her gross weight 44,989 tonnes.



A forlorn seal comes to surface eyes pleading for assistance, for many help will have come too late.
Photo: Courtesy of Reuters

The Braer Tanker Disaster



Full effects on wildlife not yet clear

THE cost of the wreck in terms of suffering to the wildlife of the area is already very high but the full effect will take some time to realise.

Within a few hours of the tanker springing the first leak, there were reports of ducks and divers coming ashore badly oiled up.

By Wednesday morning wildlife losses were higher than environmentalists were expecting, probably due to the combination of the rough weather, violent winds and the thickness of the oil.

There were unconfirmed reports that seals and otters were among the casualties, as well as a great many birds and fish. Particularly weak birds were being humanely killed and others were being brought in.

Shetland officer with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Pete Ellis said the extent of the environmental impact would not be known for weeks but there was major concern that as many as 10,000 birds may die.

Mr Ellis said the event was a major environmental disaster but added it was "very lucky" that it did not happen in the summer when most of Shetland's birds were living on the isles and breeding. "It would have been a much bigger disaster than this one," he said.

Volunteers from the emergency wildlife co-ordination centre at Boddam have been searching the coastline since the wrecking and Mr Ellis said that besides the birds, "quite a lot of fish are being washed ashore, including many sandeels".

The centre was doing two things — collecting all the dead birds and putting the strong survivors in boxes for flying out to the SSPCA centre at Middlebank in Fife for cleaning and treating.

A freezer truck was to be delivered yesterday in which the dead birds and animals would be stored for scientific analysis later.

Martin Heubeck of the Shetland Bird Group was in charge of Boddam yesterday, and by first thing in the morning some 126 oiled birds had been collected and only 18 were thought capable of survival. Many birds had to be humanely killed.

He had not seen any seals or otters affected badly enough to come ashore but had heard rumours that they had.

Ron Patterson, the Shetland SSPCA officer, was also involved at Boddam and confirmed Mr Heubeck's reports of the extent of the damage and added that he was impressed at the work being done.

"It's fascinating the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes," he said, "the administration and the way the various groups have worked so well together."

He admitted that he had no clue what to expect in the future but he was fairly pleased with the efforts made so far.

Ruth Briggs of Shetland Natural Heritage was acting as environmental adviser on all aspects of the spill and clean up effort and as such was contributing to the general co-ordination of the operation.

The Greenpeace research boat *Solo* had been carrying out a fisheries campaign nearby when the tanker struck and immediately turned for Shetland, arriving on Tuesday.

The environmental campaign group was not here to carry out research as such, more to draw media attention to their long-running campaign for safer transportation regulations concerning dangerous substances such as oil.

Skipper of the *Solo* Dave Enever said his vessel would be hosting a top level meeting today with politicians Jim Wallace and Simon Hughes, joined by ranking Greenpeace representatives and people from the RSPB. The meeting would decide on how best to co-ordinate action on how best to use the wreck to force home the need for tough regulation and to make representation on the issue to the Prime Minister John Major.

His boat was, however, equipped with a small animal hospital and its facilities would be put at the disposal of anyone who could make use of them.

Mate on the boat Peter Sandison is a former Unst man who now lives in Edinburgh. He described how on Wednesday the *Solo* sailed to within 0.8 miles of the wreck and found there were "concentrations of oil at a mile from shore," and the tide seemed to be taking oil up both the west and east of the island.

By yesterday lunchtime animal rescue workers had collected a further 70 dead birds and rescued seven that may recover.



Royal Society for the Protection of Birds warden Keith Fairclough, Orkney, with a dead eider duck. Over the next few days hundreds more seabirds are expected to die as a result of the oil pouring from the *Braer*.

Photo: Malcolm Younger

Council launches scheme to compensate Ness crofters

YESTERDAY morning the council announced details of a scheme designed to help the crofters and farmers in the Ness worst hit by the oil spill.

Chief executive Malcolm Green said the council decided to issue a compensation scheme which will give farmers and crofters the chance to process their claims quickly.

He said that this would allow them to carry on with their livelihood rather than worry about compensation.

He said many farmers have already had their crops contaminated and condemned for human consumption. "If they are suffering and can identify their hardship then we will pay them."

"We will either borrow or take the money from our own resources," he said. However, he emphasised: "The council is not picking up the bill. Shetland

Islands Council will claim back from the polluter."

Mr Green said it would be up to the Government's inquiry to establish who the polluter is, "but the polluter will pay in the end".

Mr Green said payments would probably begin at the start of next week. "Farmers and crofters will have to sign their rights to us so we can sue on their behalf," he said.

Jim Irvine of Sumburgh Farm said on Wednesday the main problem was the oil spray which was covering grazings all over the area and that vegetable crops had already been contaminated.

He said that land three miles from the stricken tanker was being covered in sea spray contaminated with oil and that it was still early days with the possibility of much worse pollution to come. He said that he himself had 16 acres of first year grass sown and he was concerned that it might not be able

to cope with the pollution and that elsewhere barley crops were threatened.

Mr Irvine was one of those attending an emergency meeting of crofters and farmers on Wednesday where he said the general feeling was one of total shock at what had happened.

He said that the council agricultural officer Andrew Harmsworth had told them then that if anyone had to buy in hay or feed as a result of the grass being polluted then they would be reimbursed by the council. He said that those present had also been told that if necessary the council would look at shipping sheep to Aberdeenshire if nowhere in the isles could be found for them but he said that he hoped it would not come to that.

By first light on Wednesday, Mr Irvine said he could see oil in West Voe and patches of sea that were "like chocolate" and by nightfall there were clear signs of oil pollution around the east side and that he had seen oiled long-tailed duck in the area.

Dunrossness South councillor Magnus Flaws said that many farmers had nowhere to move their sheep to and that if they were shipped out of Shetland they might not ever be able to return as the isles were an Enzootic Abortion Free Zone and he warned that if sheep grazed on polluted land there was always the threat that their lambs would be born deformed.

Local National Union of Farmers president Wilbert Burgess said on Wednesday before flying to Edinburgh for high-level NFU discussions that the spill was extremely serious for the agricultural industry.

He said that it seemed as though the oil would spread right up the west side of the isles and had already reached parts of St Ninians Isle. He said that because the oil was so light it was catching on the seaspray and blowing for miles inland, preventing animals from grazing. Mr Burgess said that it was likely that feed would have to be brought in for livestock unable to eat the grass sprayed with oil.

Already, said Mr Burgess, local vegetable producers had been told to stop selling their produce by local environmental officers.

Maurice Anderson is a shepherd on the 1500 acre Quendale Farm which surrounds the wreck site and covers much of Fitful Head.

He described to *The Shetland Times* how the spray of light oil that was being borne by the wind has covered the grazing and crops on the mixed farm and so threatens the future of the livestock's feed.

"You just have to rub your foot on the ground two or three times and it slicks over," he said. "There is a glaze of oil on the whole ground. The rain cannot wash it away, it just runs off."

The farm's 900 sheep have been moved away from the area and taken up onto the steep land of Fitful Head where there is not so much oil, but as Mr Anderson points out, the oil means the sheep cannot eat the grass and it could kill the grazing in time.

With the lambing season on its way and the time approaching to let out the hill and dairy cattle the stress on what good land there is left will be too much.

"It's a big problem because they'll all have to be fed," he said.

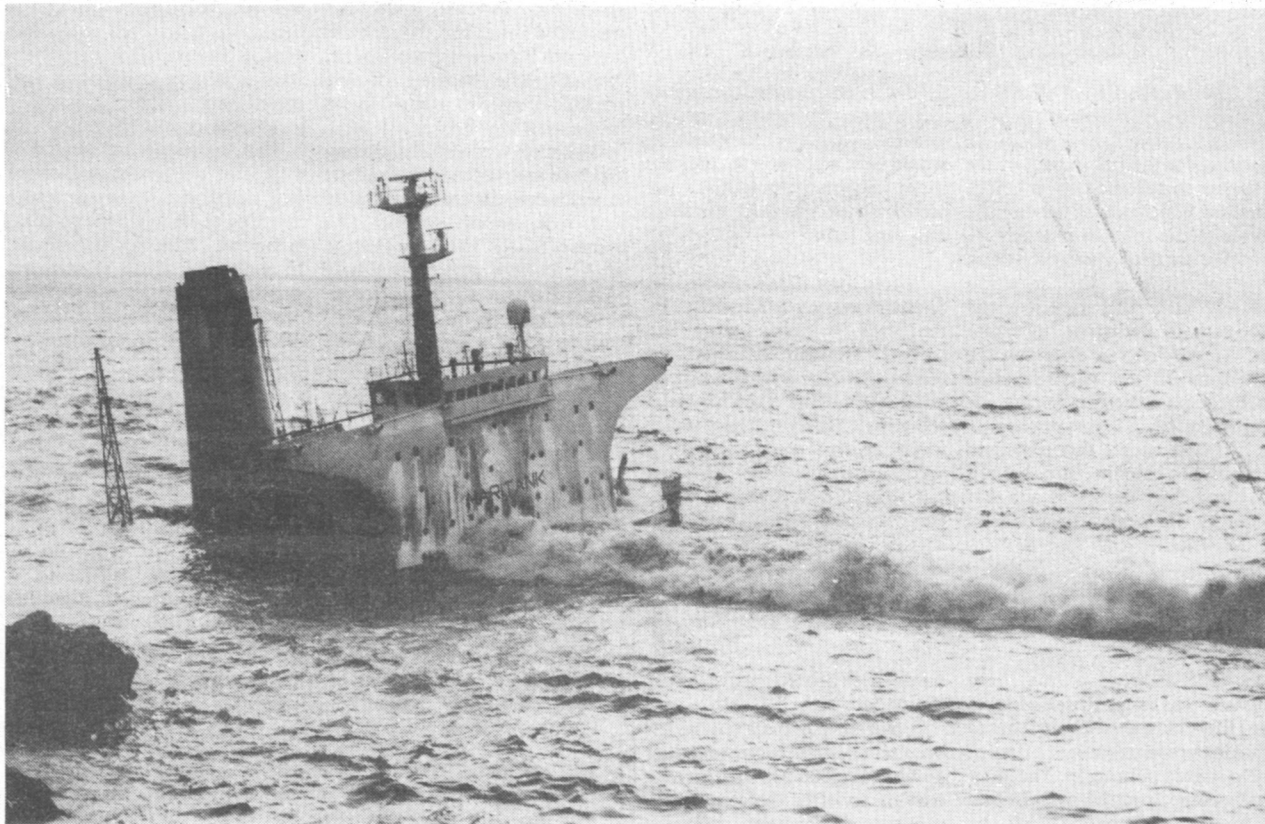
Hay would have to be brought to Shetland and it is both expensive and, according to Mr Anderson, not of very high quality this winter.

Veterinary surgeon Edwin Moar has been down to the area taking samples of grass for analysis. He is sending them to the veterinary research centre in Thurso.

"The contaminated ground is unsafe, there's no question of that," he said, "so sheep have to be removed from the scene. There's one saving thing, that they won't readily eat the contaminated grass so you can provide alternative feed like hay."

He said there were three alternatives open to farmers — provide hay for animals to eat, put them in sheds, or move them to sheltered, less contaminated areas.

The response to the problem would have to be worked out as they went along.



The waves batter the stricken *Braer* spreading oil further and further afield.

Photo: Malcolm Younger



The Shetland Times

"The Old Rock"

Lerwick, Friday, 8th January, 1993

Unheeded warnings

SO it's finally happened. No one who lives here is surprised by this disaster. Probably the only surprise is that the tanker was not coming in or out of Sullom Voe, but was a passer-by — one of many — and that the spill happened in the Ness rather than further north. While not particularly surprised, there is certainly a growing feeling of shock and dismay, especially when we get a first-hand view of the destruction which has been wrought so far.

While his reports on our inter-island ferries do not good reading make, Shetland is fortunate in having a mariner of Capt. George Sutherland's calibre and experience in charge of our ports and harbours. He it was, with the full backing of our councillors, who pressed for and got the tanker no-go areas to the north and west of Shetland (possibly saving us for so long from this scenario) and he it was who sought, and got without quibble, the backing of the council to take his concerns about shipping safety to a wider arena. Over a year ago Capt Sutherland was reported in a front page story in this newspaper as saying that "regulating and further regulating the shape, structure and outfit of the hardware after every mishap" was not the way forward. "The problem cannot be engineered out", he said. "Even the oldest rustbucket of a ship can be operated safely if there's a competent crew on board and a competent management ashore." On the issue of single watchkeeping, regulations being promoted at that time by the British government sought to reduce the number of British nationals required to be on board in senior positions on British flag ships from two to one. "The reason for that is alleged to be that it allows the owners maximum flexibility to operate in the current market conditions," he said. "I don't like it."

None of us liked it. Market forces have been allowed to dominate and one should not expect owners to use tankers with well-trained crews of whatever nationality when they are allowed to use something cheaper. Legislation is the only way to ensure high safety standards.

But how confident can we be in a Department of Transport which spends thousands of pounds taking an experienced mariner and skipper of a small boat to court because his ship's bell is a little too small and his fire buckets don't have enough sand in them, but which allows flag of convenience tankers to charge up and down the coast of Britain, sometimes with little more than an atlas to guide them?

While we have had politicians (like Jim Wallace and Brian Wilson) who have understood what is needed and called for better safety legislation, we have had successive governments in power which have failed to appreciate the problem. And let us make this quite clear: this is an accident which could have happened anywhere around the coast of Britain. While it is always easy to be wise after the event, in this case the council, its officials, and the people of Shetland were wise before it.

An indication of the importance in which marine safety is held is clearly seen in the way Government ministers (and oil industry bosses) chose to ignore the invitation to participate in the forthcoming conference organised by the SIC on managing the marine environment. If the attitude before Tuesday was one of indifference: "The Shetland Standard? Who cares?" then how can anyone believe that what they are saying now is anything more than platitudes after the event.

We do not know what price we will have to pay for all this. The oil is spreading rapidly north and around the east coast. You can smell the oil in Lerwick today — 25 miles away from the spill. We have already seen what is happening to crofters and farmers in the Ness: now we must wait and see what is going to happen elsewhere in Shetland and to whom. Let there be no mistake. Even if our waters are not completely polluted, our fishing and fish farming industries face ruin. And despite all the speculation from all the instant "experts", who have appeared from all corners of the earth, we do not know what further damage is yet to be done.

This week we have concentrated on the facts as we can ascertain them. A lot of what has been reported elsewhere has been riddled with error: the tanker in distress a "supertanker"; the boat grounding in Quendale Bay; the tanker breaking up and disappearing on Tuesday night. We have found it difficult even to get agreement on what should be straightforward matters such as the times at which each event occurred, but we have tried to keep inaccuracies out of our account.

The recriminations have already started. The tanker master has accused the Coastguard of not taking his problem seriously; the supply boat master said he could have done something if men had stayed aboard. The Coastguard has called all this nonsense. All this is for some future inquiry to determine, but speculation will continue. The only hope, in the last hours of the tanker's life, seems to have been to drop anchor: it may have held her for a few valuable hours, it may not. One thing we do know for sure: Shetland Islands Council acted promptly and in an organised manner. The emergency control room was set up and operating before the tanker was even aground, although the frustration they must have felt since then at their inability to do much because of the weather must be very strong. The council has also come forward with a compensation scheme for the crofters. They are acting now, leaving the decisions about who will pay and how until later. They cannot be praised highly enough.

We are now at the mercy of the elements. One thing is sure, though. When the Government ministers who have allowed this to happen, and the media pack have long departed, Shetlanders will be left alone again to pick up the pieces as best they can. We do not despair because we have always been resilient. The anger will probably come later. But now there is only pain and a terrible aching sadness that it had to happen.

The Braer Tanker Disaster

Litigation lawyers urge 'don't rush'

A FIRM of experienced Scottish litigation lawyers which was involved in the aftermath of the Piper Alpha and Lockerbie disasters today warned Shetlanders affected by the wreck of the *Braer* not to "rush to settle" any legal claim they may have without consulting a solicitor. Glasgow-based solicitors Levy & McRae tell islanders in a full page advertisement in today's *Shetland Times* that skilled, professional advice is "vital" for people affected by such disasters.

Head of litigation with the firm Peter Watson, who has handled international claims in this country and the USA, is in Lerwick today and tomorrow morning to meet people affected by the disaster and discuss their claims at the Shetland Hotel.

"Shetlanders who believe they may have a claim must not rush to settle without consulting a solicitor," he said. "Bearing in

mind the operating country of origin of the tanker *Braer* is the USA these claims may be best pursued in the American courts."

In its advertisement Levy & McRae suggests that claims could relate to "agriculture, fishing, crofting, tourism, retail or personal" for such matters as loss of profits; loss of or damage to stock; dereliction of land; and property damage. The move by the solicitors is the first sign by legal firms from outwith Shetland of interest in handling the many compensation claims likely to result in view of the number and probable value of such claims it is unlikely to be the only one.

With the disaster still in progress as the oil continues to spread along the coast and sprayborne oil droplets are whipped inland on the strong wind international insurers were this week attempting to estimate the magnitude of claims likely to arise.

Rules of road

THE rules of the road for tankers and merchant ships over 5000 gross tonnes off Shetland take the form of a 10-mile avoidance zone around the north and western side of the isles.

However, on the eastern side from Lerwick south it does not apply until 10 miles south of Sumburgh.

The avoidance zone was pressed for by Shetland Islands Council director of marine operations Captain George Sutherland who, with the backing of the council, campaigned long and hard for it. As a result the zone became an International Maritime Organisation regulation in November 1991. In addition the marine operations department has its own 10-mile area of avoidance all round Shetland for tankers bound to and from Sullom Voe — a system started in the late 1970s.

The breaches of the IMO rule can be reported to the country under which an offending vessel is flagged, according to deputy director of marine operations Captain Keith Radley. "The only action that can be taken is by the national flag state," he added. "So if it's a Greek ship that does it, all we can do is report it to the Greek government for them to take action."

Capt Radley said the marine operations department's own avoidance zone had no statutory backing but had been enforced

economically. "If a ship bound for here contravened the area of avoidance then they were told never to darken our doorstep again," he said. "But that would have no effect on passing trade."

That passing trade from Norway — like the *Braer* — and other countries round the North Sea does not have too many options in terms of making its exit into the Atlantic. There are also economic considerations as far as the operators of ships are concerned.

Vessels leaving the North Sea must at some point pass near land. They can go south, passing through the congested English Channel, or round the north end of Britain. On such a northerly route they must somewhere pass through one of the gaps between the islands extending between the British mainland and Greenland — Orkney, Shetland, Faroe, Iceland.

Obviously, tankers carrying cargoes from more northerly ports intending to cross the Atlantic to North America will tend to take the most direct routes feasible, exiting from the North Sea through one of the gaps between the islands. To do otherwise and go via the English Channel would also cost "big bucks", as one source in the business of providing weather forecasting services for tankers pointed out this week.

Tourism fears

CHIEF Executive of Shetland Islands Tourism Maurice Mullay said his organisation would be waiting for the full impact of the disaster to become known before making plans to limit the damage done to the tourism industry.

"We are deeply concerned and are monitoring the situation closely but at this stage it is still too early to predict the full extent of the damage, its effect on the environment and wildlife and its subsequent effect on the islands economy."

"It is fortunate that our main colonies of breeding birds are not in this locality until May and that light oil was being transported."

Mr Mullay said that SIT in-

tended to host a press conference next week, by which time the situation would be clearer and he would be in a position to comment more fully on the potential harm to the industry in both the short and long term.

"More than 50,000 people visit Shetland every year, attracted by the birds, wildlife, nature and scenery. Tourism contributes an estimated £21.5 million in travel and income to the Shetland economy. The potential damage which the *Braer* could have on our local marine environment could significantly affect tourist numbers, income to Shetland and local employment."

Sanctuary ready

AS soon as word of the *Braer* disaster was released, Jan Morgan at Hillswick seal sanctuary started making preparations and offers of help started pouring in. The latter have come from all over Britain "At least 60 phone calls by Tuesday evening," she said. "I've

hardly been able to get away from the phone."

A marine mammals hotline has been set up at the centre and their number is 0806 233 48. Anyone wishing to offer the centre help can contact them on the same number.

Ministers visit scene

TWO Scottish Office Ministers visited Shetland on Wednesday, 24 hours after the *Braer* grounded on rocks at Sumburgh.

Scottish Environment Minister Sir Hector Monro arrived on Wednesday morning and immediately visited the site of the grounded tanker.

He said that although it was probably a "thousand-to-one" chance the engines failed it still showed the risk of sailing between Fair Isle and Sumburgh Head.

He added the captain of the tanker probably now regretted taking that route, saying it was a hazardous thing to do.

Later in the day shipping minister Lord Caithness arrived and said no expense or effort was being spared. He also said that no stone would be left unturned during the inquiry, which he said should report back as soon as possible.

He also said the Government would help Shetland to recover from the disaster as much as they could.

Firm faces ruin following storms

A BURRA salmon company was this morning facing ruin after the high winds broke up almost all its cages causing well over £500,000 worth of damage.

Yesterday lunchtime 12 out of West Banks Salmon's 14 cages had been broken up with the remaining two expected to follow.

A stunned company manager John Pottinger said he was devastated by what had happened to the cages which were anchored in Stromness Voe, north of Binna Ness.

Mr Pottinger said that 150,000 salmon had been lost in the break-up which had taken place over three days. He said the salmon weighed only a kilo each and were valued at £3.50 a fish, with the total stock valued at £525,000. The company, which has just received a £200,000 loan from Shetland Islands Council, was ruined, he said.

"I suppose the weather got them before the oil did," he added.

Air attack on oil

OVER 100 tonnes of dispersant was sprayed from the air during the first day of the battle against the oil from the stranded tanker on Wednesday.

The spraying was carried out by three Dakota aircraft with the possibility of more spray flights yesterday, weather permitting. It has been concentrated in the area south of Quendale Bay and West of Pitful Head.

Heavy bunker oil from the wreck has been trapped at the head of Garth Wick in an area too dangerous for the Dakotas to deal with it and an attempt to spray it from a helicopter was due yesterday.

By 11 pm on Wednesday the oil slick had spread north as far as the island of South Havra, about six miles from the scene of the stranding. However, a decision was taken not to spray dispersant any further from just north of St. Ninian's Isle because of the possible danger to salmon farms in the area beyond.

Earlier on Wednesday a meeting was held at the Meadowvale Hotel in Virkie between crofters, farmers and representatives from the council, SOAFD and the College of Agriculture where vet Edwin Moar offered to advise crofters as to their options on how to deal with livestock depending on the

degree of contamination of grazing land from wind blown oil. Cabbage, turnips and other crops still in the fields have also been contaminated and the council is looking at ways to provide effective and immediate assistance including advice on insurance claims.

Yesterday morning the weather prevented teams from going ahead with an attempt to deploy deflector booms at the south end of Burra to route the oil to a collecting point on the shore, thus protecting Clift Sound and the West Voe.

The big oil supply boat *Normand Borg* was in Scalloway to act as the mother ship for the operation which was being co-ordinated by the council's marine operations department. Booms were also being made available to the most threatened individual salmon farms and some of the smaller salmon tenders and their crews were planning to try to localise work in Clift Sound.

The *Jan Viking* has landed 60 tonnes of dispersant at Lerwick and sailed at 5.00 am yesterday morning to be available to spray in the area of the slick at first light. In addition a squad of men was standing by to start the clean up onshore and emergency feeding has been arranged for them.

WEATHER FORECAST

From the Met. Office, Sella Ness

General situation: A deep low east of Iceland with a cold westerly airstream over Shetland. Further lows are expected to track towards Shetland and the Faroes over the weekend.

Forecast for today: A few clear intervals between squally showers. Some of these heavy with sleet and hail giving some slushy deposits. Maximum temperatures a chilly 4°C (39°F) falling to 1°C (34°F) tonight. Gale or severe gale force west-south-west wind gradually moderating to fresh to strong by evening.

Outlook for the weekend: Very unsettled with showers or longer periods of rain. Strong west to south-west wind backing south, gale or severe gale again on Sunday.

THE TANKER BRAER

- When faced with a disaster like this it is vital to be able to rely on professional, skilled advice.
- This is what solicitors LEVY & McRAE can offer.
- LEVY & McRAE have a considerable breadth of expertise having been directly involved in the legal aftermath of the Piper Alpha and Lockerbie disasters.
- Our Head of Litigation, Mr Peter Watson, handled international claims both in this country and the U.S.A.
- In a statement Mr Watson said: "Shetlanders who believe they may have a claim must not rush to settle without consulting a solicitor. Bearing in mind the operating country of origin of the tanker *Braer* is the USA these claims may be best pursued in the American courts."
- Whether you have suffered loss directly or indirectly as a result of this tragedy or are simply unsure of your position contact us for our expert advice.
- LEVY & McRAE can assist you by handling all your claims whether relating to agriculture, fishing, crofting, tourism, retail or personal. These claims may include:—

① LOSS OF PROFITS

② LOSS OF OR DAMAGE TO STOCK

③ DERELICTION OF LAND

④ PROPERTY DAMAGE

- If you are interested please contact us by telephone, letter or fax. Alternatively why not meet Peter Watson free of charge at The Shetland Hotel, Lerwick any time today (Friday) January 8 or tomorrow Saturday before 12 noon.

LEVY & McRAE
266 St Vincent St
Glasgow
G2 5RL

Phone: 041 307 2311
Fax: 041 307 6857/6858