

Ocean towage of new building hull

Introduction

Gard has seen an increasing number of incidents occurring during ocean towage of hulls from construction yard to outfitting site. The incidents are mainly caused by the loss of towage connection,¹ followed by an inability to re-establish the tow before perilous situations arise and consequential stranding occurs. We have occasionally seen that a lack of experience, combined with incomplete risk assessments and planning, together with pressure to transport the hull to the outfitting site as quickly as possible, have resulted in decisions being made which have led to the necessary precautions not being taken. Winter tow may involve additional problems and delay, e.g. winter tows in ice conditions. The warranty towage survey with regards to weather and ensuring safe towage are also at times disregarded to hasten delivery.

Responsibilities and command

Who is in control of contracting the tug; the owner, sub-contractor or insurer?

The party contractually obliged to transport the vessel will most likely be responsible for contracting the tug and will be responsible for any liabilities arising out of the tow. A shipbuilder's all inclusive price for a vessel implies that it carries the contractual liability for delivery to the fitting out site.²

Even though the tow may be considered a "dead ship", the Master of the tug is always in command and has the final word in respect of the safety of the tug and tow. Owners' representatives cannot override the decisions of the tug master. Lines of communication should be established with contractors/insurers and any information regarding the tow, communicated to them.

Contractors and yard issues

In our experience there are differing practices among tug operators, and these should be considered when selecting a candidate for the towage operation. The type of contract³ entered into could also affect the outcome of any incident arising during the towage operation. The tug master's and crew's previous experience of ocean towing is essential.

Gard has also seen that yards frequently place additional equipment and sections onboard vessels, hence additional time must be used on repeat surveys, fastening and recalculation of stability. Due considerations should also be given to any possible sub-contractors that may be involved in the way of steerage tugs, harbor tugs, etc. in order to conduct the voyage in a safe manner.

¹ Reasons for wire damage could be (1) wires were not handled with care, (2) wires snapped due to chafing on the stern of the tugs, (3) the wires and wire-protectors were not well-monitored, (4) the crew was too late refreshing the touch point of the wire on the stern, (5) lack of knowledge of slacking of the wire in relation to the water depth, (6) the wires were touching the seabed which was covered with obstructions, (7) the crew failed to haul in the wires on time, so contact with the seabed could not be avoided, and (8) crews were too late paying out the towing wire or reducing speed when excessive forces came on the wire (weather, tug).

² Class is not concerned with the towing process unless specifically instructed to undertake a "Warranty survey". Members should therefore be aware of the different roles and responsibilities of the class surveyor and the warranty towage surveyor. Even though the hull is fully approved by Class, water tightness, leaking valves, hatches, tanks etc is may not inspected by Class.

³ BIMCO Tow Hire or Towcon and similar.

For more information please contact Loss Prevention Manager Terje R. Paulsen, email terje.paulsen@gard.no or Loss Prevention Executive Marius Schønberg, email marius.schonberg@gard.no

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Warranty survey⁴

A Warranty Clause should be inserted in the contract with the tug operator with preferably one or several named surveyors who should be entrusted to undertake the warranty survey for the intended towage, a survey which should include the tug, the tow and the equipment. The warranty surveyor is appointed by the insurer but the costs thereof are covered by the assured.

The warranty survey must be completed prior to departure, and any recommendations given by the surveyor must be carried out before the convoy is allowed to depart. If anything happens to the convoy en route and a port of refuge is requested, the warranty surveyor should revisit the convoy in order to reconfirm the condition of the tug and tow. Any deviation from or shortcomings from the observations made by the warranty surveyor may influence insurance cover to the extent that insurance is void.

Risk assessment and planning considerations

When conducting towage during adverse weather tug power, endurance (bunker capacity), the need for sufficient bollard pull and power, weather routing, reporting and passage planning – including a port of refuge plan – should be considered. It is important to select a tug based on size (length and displacement), especially during winter towing. Bollard pull is not the only criteria.

Consideration should also be given as to whether the equipment onboard the tug is old, whether all certificates are within date, that the towing wire and shackles etc. are in good condition and that the emergency towing wire is in an acceptable condition and correctly installed.

For the unmanned tow, safe access to the object is important and maintaining the same and, when possible, inspect the tow for her structural integrity (no accumulation of water). In order not to lose the object when a tow is parted from the tug a transponder could be considered put on board the tow. In addition, the tow should be well lit and when passing areas with heavy navigation it is advisable to broadcast navigation warnings with information about the length between tug and tow.

The tow should be trimmed by stern to improve course stability, and the rudder should be secured amidships. Among the shaft problems which may arise are shaft not connected to main engine, bracket fastening, lubrication of the stern tube, shaft alignment and securing of propeller. The tow to be equipped with emergency towing gear/bridle for use if main towing gear breaks.

Recommendations

When a dead ship is towed there is no-one present to represent the owner, thus if any mishap occurs there is an urgent necessity to dispatch a member from the management to look after the owners' interests. Those involved should also ensure that the warranty surveyor's recommendations are met and that any recommended weather conditions/window is adhered to.

The choice of tug operator and tug may have a future impact on the bottom line, and owners/builders (contractors) should ensure that prudent choice is made as far as manning, past record, and presence in the market is considered, to name a few of the issues. Compliance with recommendations made by the warranty surveyor should be adhered to forthwith, including use of external assistance such as additional tugs, pilot, or riding crew.

⁴ Warranty towage survey is a survey to ascertain that tug and tow are equipped and manned for the intended voyage and shortcomings have to be attended to before departure is granted.

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