

Saturday 27th
December
2025

A Salty Story

By Roy Gerstner.



SS London Pioneer.

At the beginning of December 1975, 3rd Engineer John Ireland was asked to join the London Pioneer – as a favour prior to Christmas, along with some other Officers in San Francisco USA. The vessel loaded with grain left the West Coast on the 04th December bound for Nakhodka, on the Russian far east coast.

During the morning 12-4 watch of Tuesday 9th December 1975, an Engine explosion and fire occurred at 01:50 (ships time) probably due to a HP turbine coupling shearing, causing oil in the gearbox to ignite. The 3rd Engineer John Ireland (36 years of age) and Indian Donkeyman Sumat Desai (46 years of age) were both severely injured.

The fire was extinguished by the ships staff. A SOS (see below) message was authorised by the Master, Captain Peter Wright and sent by Radio Officer Phil Barber, the vessel was in a known area of poor communications, it took some 9 attempts from using only the battery powered emergency radio equipment from 11:20 GMT to 14:06 GMT before the Distress signal was acknowledged by the US Coast Guard station in Honolulu/Hawaii (NMO) as did the vessel *'Kristin Bakke'*, a Norwegian cargo/passenger ship.



Roy Gerstner researched and found the 'Pioneer' ships bell at a school in Shropshire in 2006

The two injured men were fortunate that onboard was the 3rd Officers wife, Susan Webber, (23 years of age) it was her first trip at sea, she was qualified as a State Registered Nurse, that had worked in Southmead Hospital Bristol. Her firsthand knowledge and trauma treatment played very much a large asset in the eventual recovery of both men.

Just after the fire, John Ireland managed to exit the engine room via the boiler room, the crew and other officers were within the engine room area and it is presumed the Donkeyman Sumat Desai was escorted by the crew. John actually walked along the flying bridge with Bob Pople (Quote *John looked like a chimney sweep*) and Eric Evans to the mid-ship accommodation, where John found the ships hospital, Chief Steward Dick Drummond and Susan Webber. Sue had to cut off Johns overalls, his eye glasses had melted on his face and at this stage he went into severe shock and dehydration.

The *'Kristin Bakke'* carried a doctor onboard, but the wind and squally weather made a transfer impossible. It was sometime around 17:00 GMT on the 9th December that power was restored on the *'Pioneer'* and the ships main transmitter a Marconi *Crusader* could be used.

The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *'Mellon'* was stationed off Hawaii and was dispatched at full speed towards the scene approximately 33:57N 150:24W. The USCG sent a reconnaissance aircraft which was overhead at 17:00 GMT a very quick 5 hours and 40 minutes after the accident occurred and 3 hours after the coastguard became aware of the incident!. The U.S. Coast Guard deployed a C130P aircraft which dropped the 4 man Medical Team. Note there is a difference in position that the vessel had given to that the Coast Guard supplied.



Paramedics being dropped by parachute, 'Kristin Bakke' Standing off.

The weather on the 10th December was still poor with gusting winds, and it was decided the use the *Kristin Bakke* lifeboat to pick up the Para-medics and transfer them to the *'Pioneer'*.

The Four U.S. Air force boarded and assessed the situation, fortunately and with some hindsight both men were in a stable enough condition (probably thanks to Susan Webber, Chief Steward Drummond and Capt. Peter Wright). The decision was to carry out a Heli-evacuation.

The *'Mellon'* had arrived on scene and utilised its own helicopter. By 18:30 on the 10th December, the two injured men had been transferred back to the USCG vessel *'Mellon'* and at full speed headed towards Honolulu.

In 1975 in-air refueling of helicopters was not very advanced, however the U.S. Navy sent a second helicopter out from Pearl Harbour, this and the *'Mellon's'* they carried out a mid-air refuel, by a C130 tanker thus getting the two injured men to the land based *'Queens Medical Centre'* some 12 hours quicker arriving on the 12th December.

John remained in Honolulu for approximately 6 weeks, fortunately at that time they were starting a new method of skin grafts and pressure garments which ensured he did not end up badly scarred on his face and hands. He had to be discharged from hospital as the nurses were about to go on strike?. He flew back to the UK to be met at Heathrow airport by Norie Jackson who took him to a hotel near the airport and had to undress him and put him to bed as John had no use of his arms at that time. He returned the next morning at 6am and got him ready to fly up to Liverpool. Noris Jackson had arranged with Johns own doctor to send him to the burns unit at his own local hospital. The burns unit at Whiston Hospital would not be the first class facility that it is now, probably because he had all the new pressure garments which they could not afford on the NHS and therefore they could use them and learn more about treating burns much earlier than they would have. John was used as a training module for the burns staff!! John Ireland returned to sea with LOF joining the *'London Confidence'* on the 12th July 1977. In 1985 he was informed by Noris Jackson that they had arranged for him to be retired from the Merchant Navy as his medical condition no longer satisfied the new medical criteria.



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RADIOTELEGRAM - RADIOTELEGRAMME

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|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|-------|
| Prefix - Préfixe SOS | Station LONDON PIONEER/GBLA | N° 1 | Ship SOS | Coast GBLA | Land or cable SOS | Special SOS | Overcharge SOS | TOTAL |
| Words - Mots nok | Date filed Date de dépôt 9.12.75 | Time filed Heure de dépôt 1120 | Service indications Indications de service | | TAXES | | | |
| Sent to Transmis à CQ | Via | Date sent Date transmission 9.12.75 | Time sent Heure transmission 1120 | Br - Par P.B. | | | | |

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 Prière de lire au verso les conditions d'acceptation des radiotélégrammes.

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On instructions from the Master at 091120 gmt sent out Automatic Alarm Signal and Distress using the Automatic Keying device. Emergency Transmitter, Marconi Reliance on Main Aerial. Battery Bank "A" on discharge.
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On leaving John got involved with local politics and that is how he met Pat. They were good friends for several years before they started 'courting' properly and married in November 1991. No children together, but he has inherited Pat's two daughters from a previous marriage and 3 grandchildren!!

He has been agent to 2 local MPs, current one being Shaun Woodward MP who is a Minister with the Department of Culture, Media and Sports. He has never aspired to be a politician. John & Pat live near St. Helens Merseyside. John is 67 both he and Pat are attending the LOF 2007 Reunion at Leicester and are very much looking forward to meeting and seeing old friends and shipmates.

Acknowledgements:

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- Campbell Dobie 2nd Engineer London Pioneer.
- Bob Pople 4th Engineer London Pioneer.
- Mr. Michael Mann.
- USCG archives

Note by the Web Editor Roy Gerstner: The version given is only a short historical extract and if any further information or correspondence comes available this extract will be modified and updated. If any reader can correct any mistake or add details please feel free to contact me via the LOF Website. The article is subject to copyright and permission should be obtained before any part is used, copied, or transmitted in any format.

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The Pioneer Incident 1975

John Ireland 3rd/Eng.
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The 'London Pioneer', was built originally as a tanker launched by Furness Shipbuilding Co Haverto Overseas Pioneer 24,900 grt for London & Overseas Tankers Ltd. The vessel was converted to a B callsign was GBLA.

