

Divers brave ice to inspect fuel spill

by Pat O'Brien
Times Writer

When the Greek tanker Cepheus was run aground in Knik Arm on Jan. 21, at least three holes were ripped in its hull, causing a major fuel spill that was impossible to clean up because of icy conditions and heavy tidal action.

Phil Holt, a diver who has inspected the bottom of the 535-foot Cepheus, said Monday he found three narrow tears in the hull, of 10-, 4- and 1-foot lengths.

There may be other damage, Holt said, but it's difficult to tell in the icy and silty waters at Anchorage's docks. And until the crippled ship can be moved else-

where, Holt said he probably won't be diving beneath it again.

"We not only have the tide to deal with, but we have zero visibility. It's absolutely black water," said Holt, manager of Underwater Construction Co.'s commercial diving division.

The firm, which Holt said has conducted a number of similar operations in the past, has contracted with the owners of the Greek vessel to determine the extent of damage to its hull, to patch the holes and to help assess the Cepheus' seaworthiness.

Most similar accidents happen at other times of the year in this area. "We don't usually have

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much going in the winter," Holt said.

Diving into the waters even at dockside here is hazardous, Holt said, a task requiring extensive gear and several backup systems, including an extra diver waiting to plunge into the 29-degree waters if the submerged man gets into trouble.

Before a diver can even get to

the ship, he must plow downward through five feet of ice chunks and another four feet of slush. Once a diver gets below the frozen debris, there is nothing but darkness in the 30 to 40 feet of water at the port.

Holt, who said he's been diving professionally for 16 years, uses a number of "redundant" safety systems to prevent accidents and to boost his own efficiency while under the water. The dry suit he wears is much

like that worn by sports divers, but he uses a special diving hat to keep his head warm which also allows communications with those above.

Air is pumped down through a hose, but on his back is an emergency "bailout bottle" that can provide oxygen if his air line becomes tangled or severed.

The dockside dives were completed at 2 a.m. Monday and will be followed on Wednesday with plunges into the 10 or more feet of water that have collected in the Cepheus' ruptured cargo tanks. Holt won't be diving through ice inside the hull, but there are other potential hazards to consider.

Because the tanker was carrying petroleum products, Holt said the diving firm will employ a gas analyst to make sure those diving into the waters are getting a healthy supply of oxygen and no dangerous vapors.

At 7 a.m. on Jan. 21, the Cepheus was driven onto the shore at Cairn Point, across Knik Arm from Anchorage. No cause for the accident has been released yet by the Coast Guard.

The ship, carrying 8.5 million gallons of jet-A aviation fuel

bound for the Butler Aviation Co., was towed into the port here by a tug later that morning.

Coast Guard officials said at first they thought the leakage of fuel into the inlet was minimal, but as tanks were inspected it appeared far more had spilled.

At least 180,000 gallons of jet fuel sloshed through the underside of the vessel into the water, the Coast Guard said.

A Coast Guard spokesman said this morning the current plan is to finish removing the 5 million gallons of uncontaminated fuel left in the tanker and then move the 2 million gallons of water-contaminated fuel from the ruptured tanks to those still intact.

The Cepheus would then be towed to Nikiski where the remaining oil would be unloaded at the Chevron refinery, the spokesman said, adding that a decision would be made then where to take the ship for repairs.

Holt said it's likely the Cepheus would be towed to a clear-water spot somewhere in the lower Cook Inlet where ice and tides pose less of a problem during further inspection of the hull.

Barge line to expand state service

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By CHUCK KLEESCHULTE
Daily News business reporter

A Seattle barge line that began service to Southeast Alaska last fall will begin bi-weekly service to the Kenai Peninsula and Anchorage and expand to weekly service to Juneau starting next month.

Northland Services, Inc. said Tuesday it is increasing its service this year to provide 41 sailings to Southeast and Southcentral, Bristol Bay, the Kuskokwim Basin, the Yukon River, Norton Sound and Kotzebue Sound.

"This will be a banner year for Northland. It is the most ambitious schedule we have ever undertaken," said James

Haagen, president of the company.

He said Homer, Kenai, Anchorage and Juneau will gain weekly service, while new service is being provided to the Kobuk River towns of Selawik, Noorvik and Kiana; the coastal communities of Kipnuk, Toksook Bay, Tununak, Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay and Shevak.

The barge line also will sail directly to Dutch Harbor with stops at Sand Point, King Cove and Cold Bay, beside entering Bristol Bay.

The company, which owns the Hawaii Trader barge, is building a new 340-foot by 78-foot barge to be called the

Alaska Trader to be used on the Bristol Bay and northern routes. The new barge will enter service in April, Haagen said.

He said the company is revamping its rates so they will include wharfage, handling and delivery for loads heading to southcentral. His firm will provide pickup service in Seattle and delivery in Juneau.

Northland's expansion comes in the wake of announcements of the opening of a new barge line, SeaWay Express and the expansion of Crowley Maritime's rail-van barge service — both set to start next month.