

SAENTIS - Loss of forward Mast 1959

On the home bound voyage from West Africa to Italy in March 1959, the SAENTIS had to discharge peanuts and palm kernels at the vegetable oil plant of "Astra" in Caronte, near Marseille.

This factory is located at the canal, leading from Port de Bouc on the Golfe de Fos to the Etang de Berre, a lagoon northwest of Marseille (on the Golfe de Fos opposite of Port de Bouc is the small port of St. Louis du Rhone and in between is the oil port of Fos). At the end of the canal towards the Etang de Berre one finds the small town of Martigues. A railway line crosses the canal on a swing bridge and the oil plant is located on the left side just after the bridge.

The SAENTIS steamed up this canal and moored with her portside on the pier of the plant. After the discharge was completed, the freighter was moved with the aid of two tugs astern through the bridge opening for turning further down in the canal. As usual, the pilot arranged with the railway company the opening of the bridge and the passage of the vessel. When the vessel was towed through the bridge opening, the bridge keeper commenced to close the bridge far too early, although no train was expected. The bridge touched and broke the forward mast of the SAENTIS, which fell over the starboard side of the forecastle. Later it was rumoured that the bridge keeper had drunk a few glasses too much.



The closed railway bridge. In the back the oil plant with the HELVETIA (1965)



The bridge is swinging to the closed position. The vessel is towed astern from the oil plant in the back through the bridge opening. From this photo it should be clear, why the mast fell over the starboard side of the forecastle.

As the mast commenced to crunch, the sailors on the forecastle jumped either to the portside or ran to safety under the forecastle. Nobody, neither on the SAENTIS nor on the tug boat was injured or came to any harm. The bow tug slipped the line, but the stern tug kept the ship in the deep water and towed it to the turning position, where the bow tug was reconnected again and the turning manoeuvre was completed.

After some cleaning up was done, the SAENTIS continued her short voyage to Marseille. In Marseille the ship remained idle for one month to rebuild the mast. First the shipyard had to construct a new mast, then it had to be installed on the ship and to be tested and approved by the class surveyor. During this extended lay time in Marseille the company vessels MONTANA and HELVETIA called at the same time in the port and a great "mast breakage" party was celebrated. Probably the owners also rejoiced, because the French railway company had to pay the costs for a new mast.

Sometimes later, in the port of Venice, Italy some heavy logs had to be discharged from the aft deck by the ship's own cargo gear. One particular heavy log was put on the hook, the runner was heaved in onto the winch, but the log did not move an inch on the deck. Probably a very amazed look to the top of the mast revealed, that the old and weak mast commenced to bend downwards. Again, the SAENTIS had to stay in harbour for about one month until the shipyard Arsenale, Venice had installed a new mast. However, it must be assumed, that this time owners had to pay the bill themselves, as normally the insurance does not pay for this sort of damages.

SwissShips-HPS, Capt. P. Accola, April 2012



Without forward mast.
The SAENTIS after the incident in the port of Marseille



After the accident in March 1959 in Marseille



The full extent of the damage



The new mast is installed with a floating crane



The mast and the heavy lift derrick are tested, using a graduated water tank. The tank is filled with water to the required level, giving the exact test weight.



The SAENTIS arrives 1959 in Venice with a cargo of logs from West Africa



Photographs H-P Schwab & Capt. P. Accola