

The Adriatic's strong ships

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On May 28, 2014 the Qatari port of Doha witnessed a humble maritime ceremony. The Croatian flag was lowered from the stern post of the 'Atlant Trina' and Panamanian ensign raised high. With a little help from paint and brushes the 'Atlant Trina' became the 'BSLE Nina'. In the hectic life of world shipping events like these are just a matter of everyday routine. But this particular event deserves a special, even historic place in the chronicles of Croatian shipping. You may be wondering if this is exaggeration. By no means, since 'Atlant Trina' was the very last Croatian-owned and operated heavy lift ship.

So a chapter on Adriatic's strong ships was closed after 35 years. A period long enough to be remembered. In all these

years heavy lift shipping was an exclusive of Atlantska Plovidba from Dubrovnik. It was one of the leading shipping companies in the Adriatic for decades, dating back to the late 19th century. And a quite traditional one, firmly holding on to general cargo ships and bulk carriers. Therefore, the 1978 announcement of Atlantska Plovidba that it intended to purchase a heavy lift vessel the 'Super Scan' took everyone by surprise.

Over the years the company maintained a regular fortnightly line between the Adriatic and the UK's West Coast, with Rijeka, Šibenik, Salerno, Glasgow, Swansea, Newport, Lisbon, Venice and Trieste as regular ports of call. The heydays of the service, based on classic general cargo ships, passed a long time ago. In the summer of 1978 a new, promising cargo appeared: equipment for the huge new fertiliser plant planned to be constructed in the central Croatian town of Kutina. Enormous quantities of industrial equipment manufactured by British, and



Figure 1.
'Gruž' sailing by the ancient walls of Dubrovnik.
Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.

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Figure 2.
'Gruž' at the open sea.
Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.



Figure 3.

'Kutina'.

Source: Atlanska plovdba, Dubrovnik.

to a lesser extent, Dutch companies, had to be transported by ships to the port of Rijeka. Being a heavy oversized load, these cargoes required heavy lifters. So Atlantska Plovdba purchased the 'Super Scan', a six-year old ship.

In today's terms she was a small ship, only 80 meters in length but equipped with a 125 ton derrick. Built by the German shipyard Büsumer Werft G.m.b.H. she was owned and operated by Danish company Bjaesbjerg & Co. from Aarhus. Dubrovnik's crew took over the ship and christened it 'Kutina', in the port of Swansea on March 13, 1979. Several days later, the first of many shipments of equipment for the Kutina fertilising plant left Britain.

Being a pioneer among the strong ships of the Adriatic, she proved her worth by carrying heavy loads and sailed under the ensign of Atlantska Plovdba until 1990. And, believe it or not, a quarter of a century later she is still sailing! After being sold to a Lebanese owner, the ship was an active participant of commerce

in the Mediterranean, sailing under various names and flags. She is currently sailing as the 'General' under the ensign of Palau, a tiny state in the Pacific.

The results of the 'Kutina's' operation, both technical and financial, were so satisfactory that Atlantska Plovdba decided to buy a second heavy lifter. In the summer of 1980 the 'Jahorina' joined the fleet. Likewise purchased from Danish company Bjaesbjerg, she was quite an unusual ship. She was built in 1969 by German shipyard Schlichting Werft of Travemünde, but as a pure container ship the 'Tipperary'! Ordered by a very old and renowned company, British & Irish Steam Packet Co. Ltd., better known as B+I Line, she was tailor-made for Dublin-Liverpool container services.

But, one of the first genuine box ships was only 78 meters long and with container capacity of scarce 74 TEU. And the boom of container trade across the Irish Sea was so tremendous that

the 'Tipperary' became obsolete in only four years. She was sold to the Danish company and rebuilt into a really strong ship, equipped with two 350-ton derricks and named the 'Thor Scan'.

In a short time the 'Jahorina' proved very successful on the international market and prompted Atlantska Plovidba to expand her heavy lift fleet, soon to be known as the Atlant Heavy Lift. In late 1981 two further ships were purchased from Bjaesbjerg. The 'Titan Scan' was handed over in April 1982 and became the 'Molunat'. She was the smallest heavy lifter in the history of Dubrovnik's fleet, only 69 meters in length. And an oldie: built by Danish shipyard Sonderborg Skibsvaerft back in 1970. Nevertheless she proved useful. The so called Bjaesberg phase in the history of Atlant Heavy Lift ended in January 1983 when the vessel the 'Heavy Scan' joined the fleet as the 'Ston'. She was a sister ship of the 'Kutina'.

Boosted by the market success of her Danish quartet, Dubrovnik's shipping company made a big step forward in the summer of 1984 by purchasing a British-owned vessel the

'Starman Anglia'. She was launched at Wallsend-on-Tyne yard of Swan Hunter Shipbuilders in June 1977 and towed to Haverton Hill-on-Tees for a completion by Smith's Dock Co. Ltd. Delivered in early 1978, the vessel was 94 meters long and 16 meters wide, capable of carrying 1000 tons of cargo on the deck. She was equipped with a 300 ton German made Stülcken heavy derrick.

The most interesting feature of the 'Starman Anglia' was the possibility to have her port side funnel housing hinge outward or dismantled. The normal width of access to stern ramp with fixed funnel housing was 11 meters and the dismantlable funnel gave her the additional flexibility of operation. Her owner, Blue Star Line of London, used the 'Starman Anglia' to carry large storage tanks from the Scottish port of Grangemouth to the massive Sullom Voe Oil Terminal in the North Sea.

Renamed the 'Lapad', she remained the most advanced heavy lift vessel in the fleet of Atlantska Plovidba for a long time. She served for 22 years and was finally broken up at Turkish Aliaga scrapyard in 2006.



Figure 4.

'Jahorina'.

Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.

Just a year after the 'Lapad' joined the fleet, two additional heavy lifters raised the flag of Atlantska Plovidba! The six year old Dutch sister ships the 'Elger' and the 'Enak' became the 'Plitvice' and the 'Kupari'. Both vessels were built by Scheepswerf 'De Waal' at Zaltbommel and delivered in the summer of 1979 to Linde Lloyd B.V. of Scheveningen. They were equipped with two heavy load derricks: with the capacity of 100 and 150 tons respectively.

So, in only six years, the fleet of Atlant Heavy Lift grew in size to the respectable seven ships. But that was only a prelude to the most important moment in our story: construction of the 'Gruž'! No other vessel in the Croatian shipping history attracted such attention in the world maritime community. In a short

period of time, The Lloyd's List, the leading maritime publication in the world, published four articles on the 'Gruž'. Dutch naval architects, who designed her, and shipbuilders, who made her, were very proud of Dubrovnik's flagship. The world's leading classification society, Lloyd's Register of Shipping, was also proud. For the first time, the new term 'heavy lift, ro-ro, lo-lo, flo-flo' was used to describe this ship.

The story of the 'Gruž' begins in the late spring of 1985 when Atlantska Plovidba ordered her at Dutch shipyard Scheepwerf en Machinefabriek IJsselwerf B.V. situated at Kapelle, a small town on the bank of the IJssel River. The ship greatly differed from the heavy lifters of the time. Her dimensions were not so impressive:



Figure 5.

'Molunat'.

Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.

104 meters in length overall and 20.5 meters in breadth. But her possibilities were!

As a heavy lift ship she was equipped with twin electro hydraulic cranes mounted on the starboard side, each with a 200 ton main hoist (400 tons can be handled at 26 meters outreach) and a 25 ton auxiliary hoist. All were manufactured by

specialized Dutch company Huisman Itrec of Schiedam. Owing to the sophisticated system of ballasting, 400 tons of cargo could be loaded/unloaded with only three degree inclination.

The main deck was built to support loads of 10 tons per square meter. Ship's hold, measuring 87.8 x 15.2 meters, had a double shell and was provided with a 15.52 meters wide stern

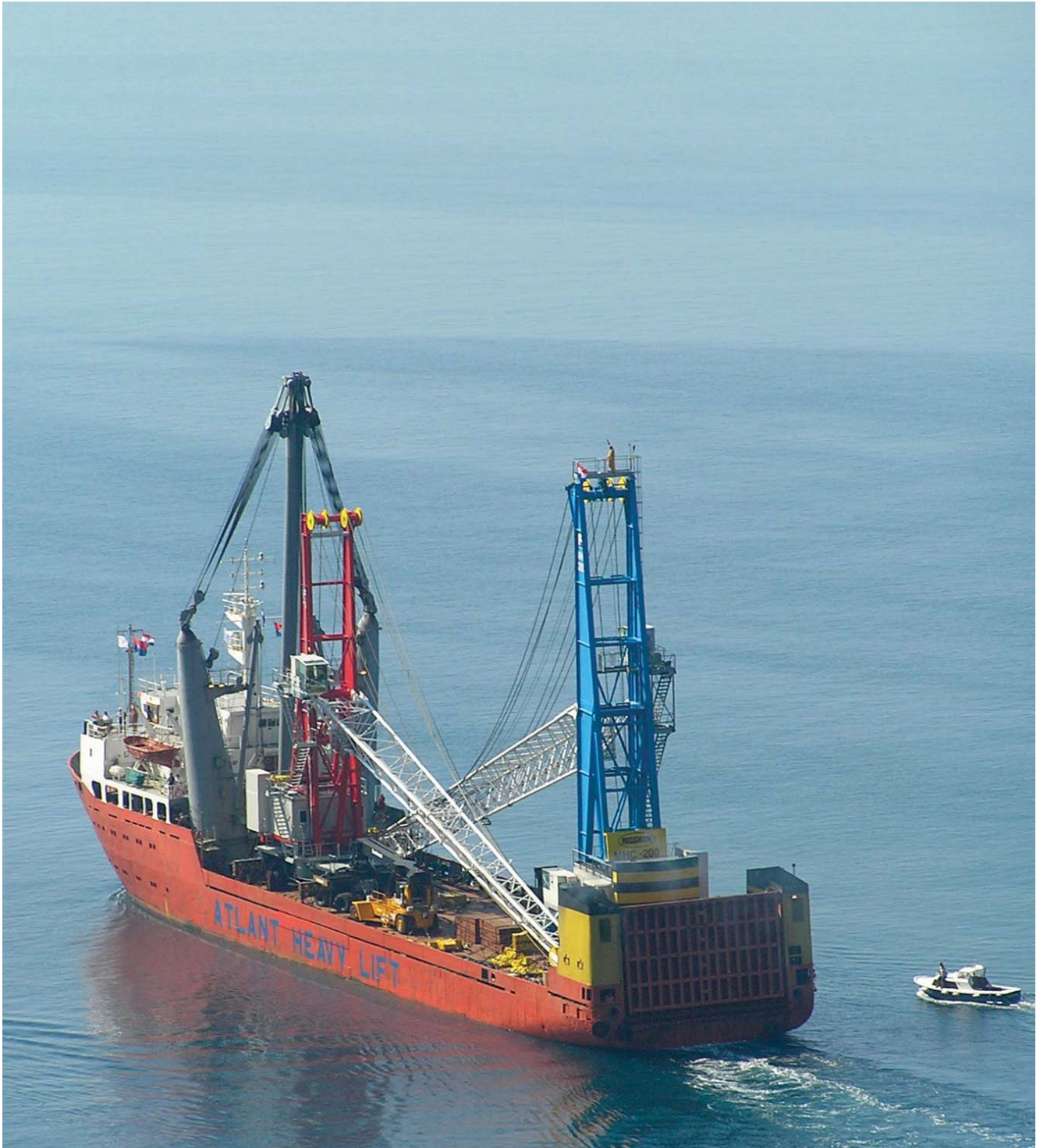


Figure 6.

'Lapad'.

Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.

ramp for ro-ro cargoes. And the same hold could be used as a floating dock! After opening 13 hatch covers the 'Gruž' could be submerged to the water depth of 3.5 meters above the hold floor and vessels weighting up to 2500 tons could be loaded in. Furthermore, containers could be carried on the main deck and hatches. We needn't list other technical details to understand that in 1985 she was a state-of-the-art ship.

The 'Gruž' was launched at Kapelle aan den IJssel on November 28, 1985 and delivered to Atlantska Plovidba on March 27, 1986. Several days later, at Rotterdam, she loaded her first cargo, a heavy floating dredger for Morocco, and sailed as a dock ship on her maiden voyage.

A year after the entry of the acclaimed 'Gruž' into the fleet, yet another Dutch vessel came to the Adriatic. She was the 'Valkanier', built in 1978 by Gebroeder van Diepen's shipyard at Waterhuizen for specialized heavy lift shipping company Marlot of Rotterdam. Equipped with two derricks, each having the capacity of 180 tons, she was immediately chartered by Jumbo



Figure 7.
'Ston'.

Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.



Figure 8.

'Slano'.

Source: Atlantska plovidba, Dubrovnik.



Figure 9.

'Plitvice'.

Source: Atlanska plovdba, Dubrovnik.



Figure 10.

'Love Letter'.

Source: Atlanska plovidba, Dubrovnik.

Shipping to carry heavy equipment from Houston, Texas to the oil terminal on Arzanah Island in the Persian Gulf. In November 1987 the 'Valkenier' became the 'Slano' and continued world-wide trading until 2001.

The days of pride, sparked by the construction of the 'Gruž', soon became the years of silence. Faced with market turmoils and the consequences of brutal war against Croatia, the Atlant Heavy Lift was struggling to survive and over the following 15 years not a single ship joined the fleet. Older heavy lifters were sold and finally the glorious 'Gruž' left, sold in 1997 to the French company d'Orbigny of Boredaux. She became the 'Clipper Cheyenne' sailing under the flag of the Bahamas. Five years later her name was in the frontlines of world maritime publications. She sunk!

In early June 2002 she arrived to the Irish port of Foynes on the river Shannon to load a large dredger. While nearing the completion of the ballasting procedure to flood her cargo dock, the 'Clipper Cheyenne' rolled to starboard and hit the bottom. She rolled back up and rested on the seabed alongside the quay.



Figure 11.

'Atlant Svenja'.

Source: Atlanska plovidba, Dubrovnik.

Several crew members were thrown into the sea but luckily there were no fatalities and no serious injuries.

A renowned salvage company, Titan Maritime Industries of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was hired to remove the ship from the port of Foynes. Former the 'Gruž' was raised on July 12, 2002 and a month later towed to Cherbourg for repairs. It took her over a year to return into service. After many name changes, flags and owners, the ship is still sailing. Her most recent name is the 'Papenburg', her owners are Germans and her flag that of the Caribbean state of Antigua & Barbuda.

After 15 long years, two ships finally joined the fleet of the Atlant Heavy Lift in 2002. These were second-hand sister ships with rather unusual names – the 'Love Letter' and the 'Love Song'. They marked the beginning of the German phase in the chronicles of Adriatic's strong ships.



Figure 12.

'Atlant Trina' – the last of ships.

Source: Atlantska plovdba, Dubrovnik.

Contrary to the previous practice of fleet renewal, these newcomers were already old: the 'Love Song' was built in 1986 and the 'Love Letter' in 1987. Originally they were called the 'Conti Nippon' and the 'Conti Gallia', as a part of a large series of ship designed and built by the renowned J.J. Sietas shipyard of Hamburg. Owing to German quality and reliable Finnish Wärtsilä main engine, the two Love boats were in good condition. Being 115 meters in length, the ships were equipped with a pair of 120 ton cranes.

Atlantska Plovdba purchased the duo from a heavy lift specialist company Schiffahrtkontor Altes Land G.m.b.H. of Steinkirch. Commonly known as SAL, it is a part of Heinrich family shipping business dating back to 1865. Nevertheless, with heavy lift equipment consisting of only two 120 ton derricks, these ships soon proved weak and were sold in 2006. But, a contract on the purchase of four heavy lifters was already signed with SAL.

These vessels were also built by J.J. Sietas shipyard and delivered between December 1994 and April 1996. Named the 'Frauke', the 'Regine', the 'Svenja' and the 'Trina', the sisters were 7 meters shorter than the Love boats but much better equipped to deal with heavy loads. Two 250 ton cranes allow 500 tons cargo to be handled. Furthermore they had the container capacity of 460 TEU. But their main new feature was a stability pontoon that was lowered into the water during loading/unloading operations. After joining the Croatian fleet, the quartet's names were changed by adding the prefix 'Atlant'.

It must be stressed that further fleet renewal based on second-hand vessels was not in the plans of Atlant Heavy Lift and that the purchase of four SAL sister ships was a forced decision. In June 2004, the Dubrovnik company signed a contract with Romanian shipyard Severnav S.A. of Drobeta-Turnu Severin to build two heavy lifters equipped with a pair of 250 ton cranes. It was stipulated that the first ship had to be delivered in December 2005 and the second in March 2006. But the contract, worth EUR 28 million, was cancelled already in September 2004, after Atlantska Plovdba refused to accept the builder's request for significant modifications.

After that, faced with the shortage of ships, the company opted for a further acquisition of second-hand tonnage. And the ships of choice were the SAL sisters. But it was the beginning of the end for the Adriatic's strong ships. Only four ships with classic technology and modest capacity were unable to play any role on the demanding international market. So in 2011, the ships were put up for sale, but at the worst possible moment. The crisis of the shipping industry was reaching its peak and no one was keen on buying Dubrovnik's lifters. It was months before the 'Atlant Regina' and the 'Atlant Svenja' found a buyer, a Chinese company. The farewell to the 'Atlant Frauke' and the 'Atlant Trina' had to wait until the spring of 2014.

At the very end of the story of Adriatic's strong ships it is worth noticing that all of them were lucky while sailing under

Dubrovnik's flag. Over quite a long period of 35 years, not a single seafarer's life and not a single ship were lost, quite a remarkable record indeed. Here is a dramatic photo that went around the world in August 2006.

The 'Atlant Trina' was unloading a shipment of huge plastic pipes at the Brazilian port of Niteroi when cargo on deck suddenly

burst into flames. Intense fire was visible from many miles away and dozens of fire-fighters tried to extinguish it for over 24 hours. When it was all over, the 'Atlant Trina' looked devastated. But only a month later, in September 2006, she was repaired and returned to the sea...



Figure 13.

'Atlant Trina' in flames.

Source: Atlanska plovidba, Dubrovnik.