



Special Report on The Hijacking of the *Whale 7*

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Hijacking of tug boat, the *Whale 7* and barge, the *Sinobest 2503* on 7 September 2008

Name of Ship : *Whale 7*
Type of Ship : Tug boat
Flag of Ship : Singapore
IMO Number : 9455428
GT : 227

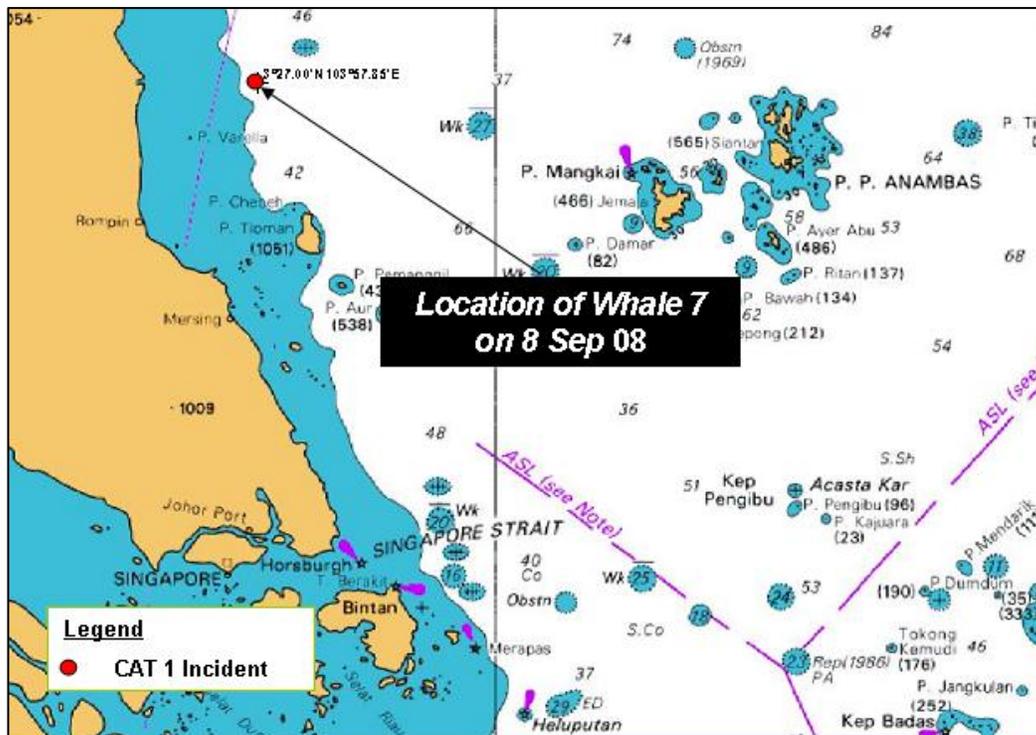
Name of Barge : *Sinobest 2503*
Type of Ship : Barge
Flag of Ship : Singapore

Background

1. On 7 September 2008, the tug boat *Whale 7* was towing a Singapore-registered barge, the *Sinobest 2503* enroute from Singapore to Sattahip, Thailand. At about 2030 hrs on 7 September 2008, the *Whale 7* was approached by three speed boats with 15 robbers onboard whilst she was approximately 12 nm north of Pulau Tioman.

2. The robbers boarded the tug boat and took control of the *Whale 7*. All seven members of the crew were tied, blindfolded and was subsequently abandoned on a remote beach at Pulau Tioman. Villagers from the island found them and brought them to the police station. The crew did not sustain any injury and was later repatriated to Singapore. The tug boat and barge were nowhere to be found.

3. The tug boat's owner reported the hijacking incident to the Singapore's Port Operation Control Centre (POCC) which is also the ReCAAP Focal Point for Singapore. The report was duly transmitted to the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) and all the other Focal Points in the network. The ship owner also reported the incident to the MRCC of Putra Jaya. According to the ship company's tracking system, the tug boat's last known position was at 03°27'N, 103°57.85'E on 8 September 2008. Please see approximate location of the tug boat below. This information indicated that the tug was heading in a northerly direction after the robbers have boarded.



Approximate location of the Whale 7 on 8 Sep 08

Follow-up by the ReCAAP Focal Point (Singapore)

4. The Singapore’s Focal Point promulgated four hourly Navtex broadcast and twice daily SafetyNet broadcast to all ships about the incident. Ships operating in the vicinity were requested to keep a look-out for the missing tug boat and barge.

Inputs from the Malaysian Authorities

5. Apart from the ReCAAP Focal Point (Singapore), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) also provided updates of the incident to the ReCAAP ISC. The MMEA assessed that the hijacked boat might have been brought to Thailand.

Follow-up by the ReCAAP ISC

6. From the indication of the last known position and with MMEA’s inputs that the hijacked boat was navigating north towards Thailand, the ReCAAP ISC alerted the Royal Thai Navy which is the ReCAAP Focal Point for Thailand to look-out for the *Whale 7* and the *Sinobest 2503*. Details of the tug boat and the barge were forwarded to provide better clarity of the missing vessel. The ReCAAP ISC classified this incident as a Category 1 (very significant) incident.

Follow-up by the ReCAAP Focal Point (Thailand)

7. On 24 September 2008, the Thai Marine Police captured a tug boat named the *Saga 01* and barge, the *Sinoveht 2503*. The Thai Marine Police discovered that the *Saga 01* bears the same IMO number as the *Whale 7*. The Thai Marine Police believed that the robbers had re-painted the *Whale 7* to another colour and changed its name to *Saga 01*. See photograph of the *Saga 01* below. The Thai Marine Police reported that five robbers were arrested at a location about 7 miles off Prajauabkirikahn Province, Amphur Pranburi, Thailand. The robbers revealed that they had been paid 1.2 million baht (US\$34, 863) to bring the tug boat and barge to Ko Chang, Trad Province, Thailand. The Thai Marine Police is currently investigating the incident.



Courtesy of the Thai Marine Police

Photograph of the “*Saga 01*”

Comments by the ReCAAP ISC

8. The hijacking of the *Whale 7* appeared to be pre-planned and well organized. However, unlike in other previous hijacking incidents where members of the crew were normally thrown overboard, the crew of the *Whale 7* was abandoned on a remote beach at Pulau Tioman.

9. The successful recovery of the hijacked boat demonstrated the alertness and efficiency of the Thai’s inter-ministries’ authorities in tracking down the phantom vessel. This incident reflects the value and importance of enhanced co-operation on information sharing among maritime port authorities of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

10. The ReCAAP ISC would like to commend the ship owner for reporting the incident to the ReCAAP Focal Point (Singapore). This enables the Focal Point to issue timely Navtex broadcasts of the incident alerting ships operating in the vicinity. In addition, the ReCAAP Focal Point, upon receipt of such information should inform its own internal maritime agencies and communities. An incident report was also extended to all ReCAAP Focal Points via the ReCAAP Information Network System to inform neighbouring ReCAAP Focal Points who could render assistance to the victim ship by dispatching their enforcement vessels in the vicinity in accordance with its country's national jurisdiction and policy.

11. Between January 2008 and September 2008, a total of six incidents were reported in the South China Sea, all occurred while the ships were under way. Of the six incidents, three involved tug boats and three involved chemical tankers. The ReCAAP ISC notes that the incidents involving tug boats were either Category 2 (moderately significant) incident or Category 1 (very significant) event. The tug boats that had been attacked were: the *PU 2008* on 30 April 2008 (Category 2) incident, the *Wecoy 6* on 29 June 2008 (Category 2) incident and the latest incident involving tug boat, the *Whale 7* on 7 September 2008 (Category 1). Tug boats were known to be more susceptible to attack especially when under way as they have low freeboards and navigate at a relatively slow speed when towing barges.

Recommendations

12. In accordance with the IMO MSC/Circ.622/Rev.1 and MSC/Circ.623/Rev.3¹, ship masters should report incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships to the nearest coastal states as soon as possible for timely recovery/enforcement actions. The ReCAAP ISC also encourages ship owners and ship operators to report incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia to the ReCAAP Focal Points. This procedure reflects the enhanced information sharing process for incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia.

13. The ReCAAP ISC advises ship masters and crew, especially tug boats towing barges to maintain vigilant and adopted appropriate anti-piracy measures when operating in the vicinity, particularly during hours of darkness.

14. For information please.

¹ The MSC/Circ.622/Rev.1 is a maritime safety committee circular on recommendations to Governments for preventing and suppressing piracy and armed robbery against ships. The MSC/Circ.623/Rev.3 is a maritime safety committee circular on guidance to ship owners and ship operators, ship masters and crews on preventing and suppressing acts of piracy and armed robbery against ships.