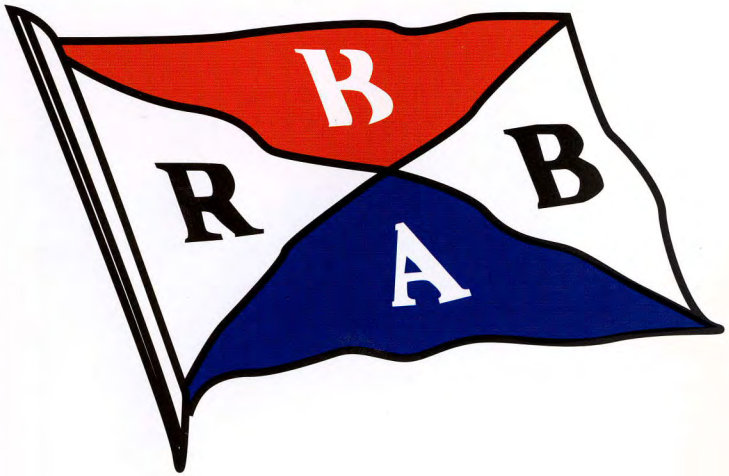
Previous page: Bugsier's Hamburg headquarters.



Bugsier's house flag.

A group of Hamburg sailing ship owners established The United Bugsier Steamship Company (Vereinigte Bugsir Dampschiff Gesellschaft) on January 6, 1866, and this grew quickly to become the largest towing operation in the port. By 1898, the company had amalgamated with Leichter Gesellschaft and, on May 1, 1919, the enterprise was rechristened Bugsier Shipping and Salvage Company (Bugsier Reederei und Bergungs AG).

Seven years later, Wilhelm Schuchmann, a 68-year-old native of Neuharlingersiel, acquired a majority shareholding in Bugsier and his eldest son Berend J. Schuchmann assumed control, guiding the company successfully through the difficult period that followed the First World War. Having established itself as one of the largest towing and salvage operations anywhere, Bugsier would then lose almost all of its fleet during the course of the Second World War.

Undaunted, the company started to recover and, by 1952, was competing successfully for business with the Joint Service Tugs Union (JSTU) in Hamburg Harbor. By 1954, four additional vessels had been delivered by F. Schichau GmbH of Bremerhaven and Bugsier was also managing another five on behalf of H.E.W. Berndt. But the rate-cutting necessary to secure work meant that none of the Hamburg tug operators were making money and made for strained relationships among the stakeholders in the port. Accordingly, on July 1, 1955, Bugsier reached an agreement with the Joint Service Tugs Union, which formally divided the ship handling business, with 30 percent going to Bugsier, and the rest to the JSTU.

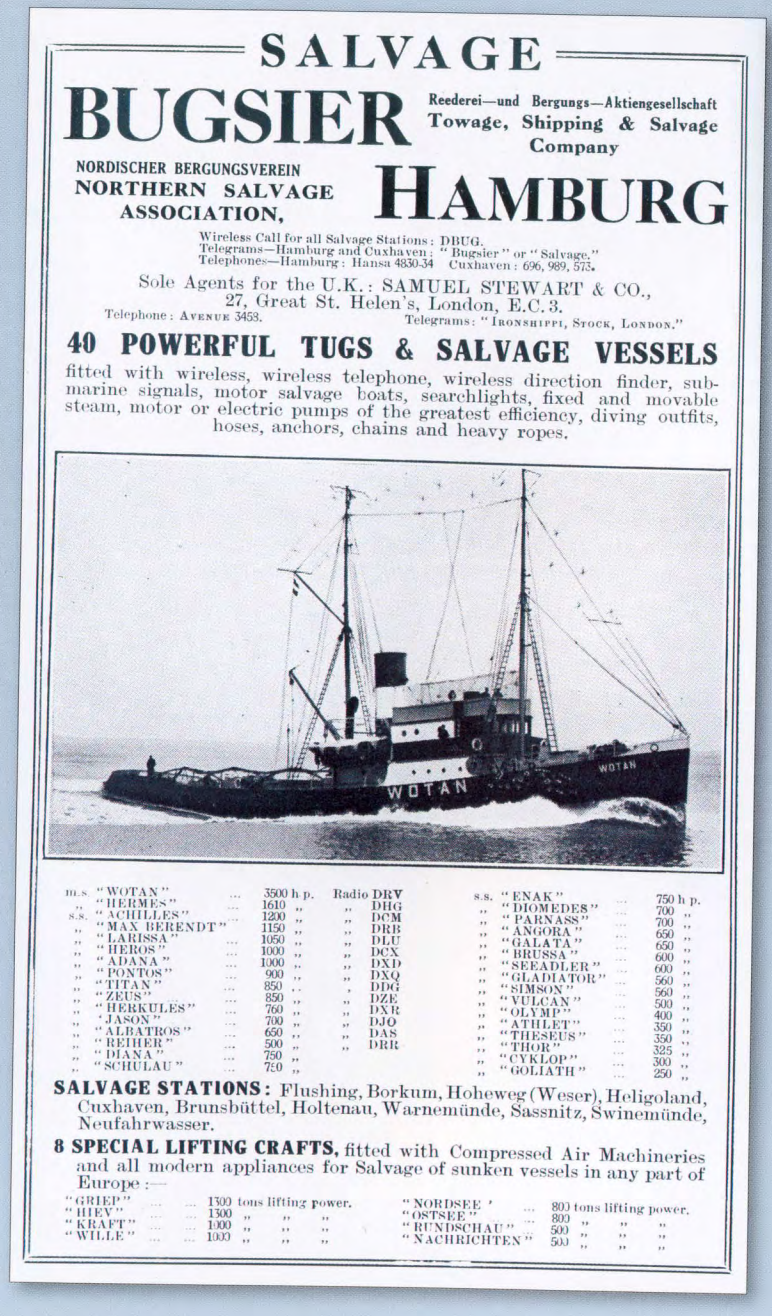
While all this was happening in Hamburg, the company had restarted salvage operations offshore and, by 1951, was at work on the wreck of the *Donau*. This ship had been lying in Oslo on January 15, 1945 and was due to sail for Germany with around 1,000

soldiers and a cargo of horses and assorted war materiel. During that night, members of the Norwegian resistance attached limpet mines to the hull, and these were timed to explode when the ship was at sea. But, due to delays in the port, the vessel was still in coastal waters when detonation occurred and the captain was able to beach her near Skiphellebukta, where almost all escaped unharmed, except for the horses.

Four months later, at the end of the war in Europe, the Norwegian Government assumed ownership of the *Donau*, which it subsequently transferred to the Henneseid shipping company of Porsgrunn. By 1951, title had reverted to the government on the grounds that salvage was impossible, although an unsuccessful attempt would be made in September of that year by Jansens of Bergen.

The Bugsier salvage vessel *Berger V* arrived in Oslofjord the following month, however, and divers were dispatched to inspect the wreck. Five weeks later, with Salvage Master Klostermann, two tugs and a further salvage ship, *Berger VII*, in attendance, operations began in earnest. Eleven divers and 90 others pumped and sealed the hull before positioning steel cables with heavy shackles and filling the ship's enclosed spaces with compressed air. With two specially equipped divers working in the deep water around the casualty's stern, and six lifting pontoons in position around the hull, the *Donau* was gradually refloated and towed to Eisen & Metall KG, Lehr & Co. in Bremerhaven, where she arrived for scrapping on August 20, 1952.

The Suez Crisis of 1956, precipitated by Egyptian President Nasser's nationalization of the shipping



An advertisement from the 1927 Lloyd's diary.

canal, and exacerbated by subsequent military action involving the Israelis, the British and the French, would provide further salvage opportunities for Bugsier. By the time the conflict was over, the waterway was littered with the wrecks of 51 ships, along with assorted pontoons and barges, and obstructed by the remains of several blown-up bridges. The canal would be closed for three years. Consequently, ships were no longer able to make use of this short cut to destinations in East Africa, the Persian Gulf, South and East Asia and Australasia and neither could they return except via the Cape of Good Hope, a factor which raised the price of freight, including oil. These events would have far-reaching consequences, not least in the development of larger ships and more powerful ocean-going tugs for towing and salvage.

Bugsier dispatched two deep-sea tugs, *Hermes* and *Wotan*, each over 50 meters LOA (length overall) and with around 2,500 indicated horsepower apiece, and these towed *Ausdauer* and *Energie*, which were then among the largest salvage vessels in the world. They reached Suez in December 1956 and began the long job of clearing the canal, in conjunction with other salvors, by removing the remains of the Ferdan railway bridge, between Kilometer 60 and 70, which had been blown up by the Egyptians as hostile troops prepared to invade. Some 18 years later, Bugsier tugs would be involved in the second clearance of the Suez Canal, following the Arab–Israeli hostilities of late 1973. This time, it would be *Hermes* and *Bugsier 26* doing the work with the salvage cranes *Thor* and *Roland*.

Meanwhile, back in Germany, Berend J. Schuchmann had become the major shareholder and managing director of the Hamburg-Amerika Line. However, on September 30, 1958, following a disagreement with the other directors, he resigned, but not before securing their agreement (and that of Deutsche Bank) that the towing operations of Lutgens and Reimers (wholly owned by Hamburg-Amerika) and the shipping line's shares in the Joint Service Tugs Union, along with nine tugboats, should be transferred to Bugsier, which would now control 50 percent of all ship-handling work in the port of Hamburg. The three steam tugs that formed

part of the package were soon disposed of, and the remaining six, built by F. Schichau GmbH, were newly numbered *Bugsier 18* to *23*.

Having achieved something of a local coup, Schuchmann now turned his attention offshore. In the wake of the Suez Crisis, there were many more, much bigger ships at sea in the form of tankers, freighters and bulk carriers and all were as vulnerable as ever to breakdown, collision, fire, stranding and the stress of weather. Accordingly, the major salvage companies were competing to build larger and more powerful salvage tugs and Bugsier placed an order with F. Schichau GmbH for an ocean-going example, to be called *Atlantic*.

This vessel was delivered on October 29, 1959 and featured a range of some 13,000 nautical miles and a bunker capacity of 350 tons. Powered by two eight-cylinder Deutz diesels, she delivered 5,500 indicated horsepower with a bollard pull of 51 tons and was equipped with advanced electric towing gear and synthetic warps of the latest design to complement her conventional steel cables. Her upper superstructure and funnel was made of aluminum and her high bow and long, low-run aft gave her the handsome appearance that would be the hallmark of the big Bugsier tugs to come.

The next was *Pacific*, delivered by F. Schichau GmbH on December 19, 1962. Rated at 8,250 indicated horsepower and with a bollard pull of 72.6 tons, she was the most powerful tug in the world. She was fast as well, with a free-running speed of 17.3 knots, which would enable her to reach casualties before her rivals in what was becoming an increasingly competitive business. The universally recognized Lloyd's Open Form contract was the only document the master of a distressed ship needed to agree for the rescue to begin and, more often than not, in those days, it was the first tug on the scene that captured the prize. Furthermore, as the numbers of these giant tugs increased, so they were posted to keep watch in the danger zones off the Cape of Good Hope, Ushant, the Western Approaches to the English Channel and elsewhere. Wherever there was a Bugsier tug, though, there was opposition nearby, frequently in the form of a Dutch Smit or Wijsmuller vessel.

It was not just salvage that had sharpened Schuchmann's interest in larger tugs, however. The burgeoning offshore oil industry on both sides of the Atlantic and, closer to home, in the North Sea meant a lot more contract towing of rigs and platforms as well as floating docks and derelicts. New structures were being built, others repositioned and, by the mid-1960s, tows of more than 10,000 nautical miles were not uncommon. Accordingly, Bugsier ordered, and Schichau built, several more tugs to take advantage of the increasing volume of deep-sea

"...more often than not, in those days, it was the first tug on the scene that captured the prize."

"While the glory days of big ocean-going salvage tugs and the massive tows they undertook in the boom years of the offshore industry may be over, the proud traditions of a long-established company and its founding family remain."

work. These included the two most powerful of all, *Oceanic* (1969, 17,500 indicated horsepower) and *Arctic* (1969, 17,500 indicated horsepower) along with a class of four delivered between 1972 and 1975 with up to 13,000 indicated horsepower (*Wotan*, *Simson*, *Titan* and *Atlantic*) and a number of smaller but no less useful vessels. Bugsier was now among the biggest offshore operators in the world, matched in size and capability only by traditional rivals such as Smit and Wijsmuller. Furthermore, the Dutch and German concerns were the only ones keeping station abroad as well, so, as such, they controlled the bulk of global commercial towing and salvage.

Bugsier's co-operation with Schichau had been long and productive, and the two firms were of a similar vintage. The Schichau Shipping Company had been established in 1837 and was active in Baltic trading. It moved to Bremerhaven after the upheavals and destruction of the Second World War. The Seebeck Shipyard, which had been on the site since 1910, was itself established in Bremerhaven in 1876. Schichau-Unterweser AG was formed during 1972, in time to build the four ocean-going tugs ordered by Bugsier following the delivery of *Oceanic* and *Arctic*, the biggest of their kind to be constructed at this site, which was constrained by turning bridges and the relatively narrow locks that determined the maximum beam of any ship built there.

By 1980, Bugsier was at the height of its powers, with 30 harbor tugs, 13 salvage tugs and six ocean freighters, along with 14 barges, five salvage vessels, and four deep-sea salvage pontoons. The company was a major employer in its own right and had generated a lot more work for German maritime industries by continuing to insist that its ships be locally built, equipped, flagged, manned and refitted. But after disagreements with the unions during the spring of 1986, which resulted in a series of strikes, the Bugsier board decided to register the salvage tug *Seefalke* in Cyprus. By 1990, *Atlantic*, *Simson*, *Titan* and *Wotan* had joined her on the Cypriot registry. This move, while almost inevitable, was not an unqualified success because the employment of foreign crew, many of whom lacked the experience of the German

sailors, was a risky strategy in the highly professional environment of deep-sea towing and salvage. Accordingly, given the need to protect Bugsier's reputation, and being mindful of the competition posed by the new, large breed of supply vessel in the oil industry, the board decided to dispose of the majority of its ocean-going fleet. It was thus that, of the big tugs, *Arctic* and *Simson* became expedition yachts, *Atlantic* became *Khozam*, escort to the Saudi Royal Yacht *Prince Abdul Aziz*, and *Titan* was sold to the Vietnamese Navy. *Wotan* had sadly sunk as a result of a collision with her tow off the Frisian island of Terschelling in July 1990; she was later raised and broken up in Zeebrugge. By 2005, only *Oceanic*, the first of the six, remained on duty for Bugsier, patrolling the North Sea around Helgoland, chartered to the German Government under the ARGE Küstenschutz, or coastal protection plan.

In spite of these changes the company, now with Jan-Wilhelm Schuchmann in control, remains faithful to its origins with harbor towage services in the ports of Brake, Bremen, Bremerhaven, Brunsbüttel, Cuxhaven, Hamburg, Nordenham, Rostock, Stade-Bützfleth, Wedel, Wilhelmshaven and Wismar. It maintains 22 tugs for deep-sea and harbor towing along with three transport pontoons and a salvage inventory including a 600-ton floating crane. Other, more recently established services encompass the management of three oil-skimming vessels for marine environmental protection and a comprehensive mooring service based at Bremerhaven. While the glory days of big ocean-going salvage tugs and the massive tows they undertook in the boom years of the offshore industry may be over, the proud traditions of a long-established company and its founding family remain.

Simson in the English Channel.