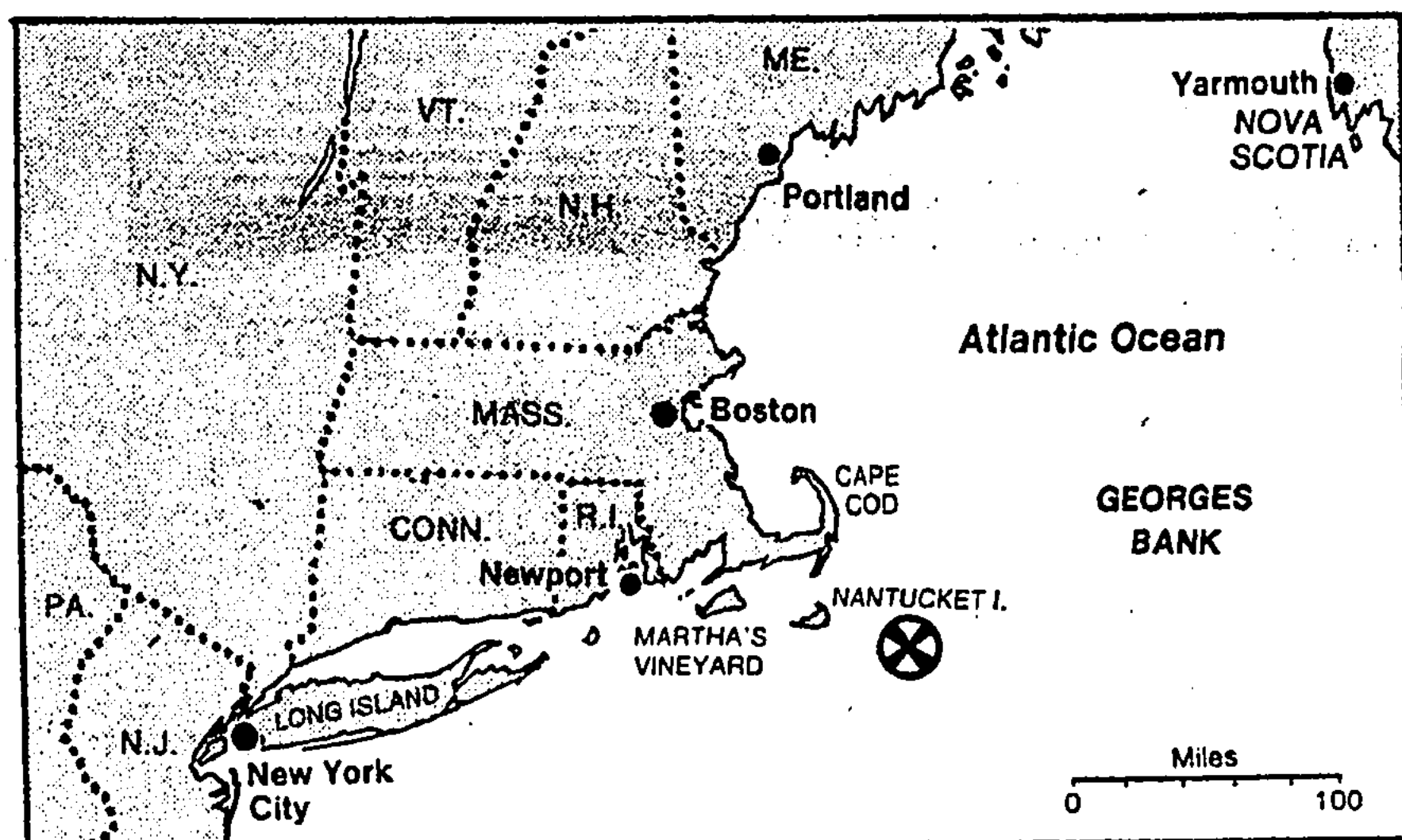


Associated Press

The Tanker Argo Merchant after it broke in half yesterday, spilling millions of gallons of oil off Nantucket

Split Tanker Leaves 60-Mile Oil Slick Off Nantucket



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By JOHN KIFNER

Special to The New York Times

MASHPEE, Mass., Dec. 21—A grounded Liberian-flag tanker broke in half off Nantucket this morning, spilling some five million gallons of heavy oil into the Atlantic Ocean.

The 640-foot Argo Merchant ran aground on the sandy Nantucket shoals, 27 miles southeast of the resort island, last Wednesday morning. Since then, storms, cold weather and high seas have hampered attempts of salvage crews in the Coast Guard to pump off the oil and limit a spill.

The oil had been seeping from the vessel even before the breakup. This afternoon, Capt. Lynn Hein, the director of the Coast Guard salvage effort, estimated that between 50 and 75 percent of the 7.5-million-gallon cargo of No. 6 oil had been lost. He added that the ship was leaking about 10,000 gallons of oil an hour, but that precise measurements were impossible. The ship carried enough cargo to fill 2,500 average oil trucks or to heat a medium-size city for a winter.

For much of the day, the oil slick drifted northeastward toward Georges Bank, the area's prime commercial fishing grounds. But, in the afternoon, a fortuitous wind shift began to drive the slick to the southeast, away from Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, the Cape Cod beaches and the New England land mass.

Ecological Threat Is Major

If all the oil from the vessel leaks into the ocean, the spill would be about the 10th largest ever, but its potential for ecological and economic damage far transcends its rank in size. [Page 58.]

In Washington, Russell E. Train, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, told a news conference that even if the oil missed coastal areas, it posed long-term danger for the fishery resources of the Georges Bank.

"By all odds, this is the biggest oil spill disaster on the American coast in our history," he said.

After the ship broke apart, Gov. Michael S. Dukakis asked President Ford to declare southeastern Massachusetts a dis-

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Joe Jiva, a scalloper from New Bedford, Mass., holds scallop shell covered with oil from tanker.

Grounded Tanker Breaks in Half; Oil Slick Is About 60 Miles Long

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aster area and provide special aid for 30,000 workers in the fishing industry.

Shortly after 5 P.M., the oil slick was described by Coast Guard technicians just back at Otis Air Force Base from a helicopter flight as an irregular blotch about 60 miles long and 27 miles wide, heading due east from the stricken tanker.

Pounded by a winter storm that came up last night, the Argo Merchant broke apart at about 8:55 this morning.

From a Coast Guard plane this afternoon, the tanker appeared snapped in half, and twisted into a "V" shape. Her aft section lay low and flat, rolling in the seas, nearly all under the water. Her sharp bow, riding high and pointing skyward, was almost nestled next to the wallowing stern. Signal flags on the rigging were black with oil, their messages unreadable.

Fifteen-foot-high waves battered the stricken ship. On the sea, green under the overcast sky, the vile splotches of the oil shimmered.

Uncertain Situation

The late afternoon charting of the oil spill, according to Joseph Deaver, a Coast Guard civilian oceanographer, indicated that the spill would go just south of the Georges Bank fishing ground as it headed toward open sea. But the situation remained uncertain because of the restless weather.

The oil is No. 6 residual oil, one of the thickest, heaviest forms, used in firing electric power generating plants. It is believed that much of the oil may sink to the sea bottom rather than continue to float as a slick.

A major worry for environmentalists and state officials was for deep-sea scallop areas and a spawning grounds for cod, flounder and haddock, said Russell Silva, Massachusetts' Assistant Secretary for Environmental Affairs. The flounder and haddock are due to go into their spawning period shortly, Mr. Silva said, and would be vulnerable because of their floating eggs and larvae.

Much of the fishing grounds have been depleted in recent years by the huge, well-equipped foreign fishing fleets, so the stock is already low. Many of the fish taken in New England waters are bottom fish, like flounder, which could be harmed if the oil settled in their grounds.

Mr. Silva said that bodies of oil-soaked ocean birds were beginning to drift ashore. He said that some 60 dead gulls, three muirs and an eider duck washed ashore on Nantucket last night. Three bird-cleaning stations have been set up on Nantucket. But, in the frigid weather, there is an additional problem because detergents to wash the oil off the birds' feathers also take away the natural oils that keep them warm, and large warming areas are needed to help the birds recover. Many will not be saved, Mr. Silva said.

State officials were gathering equipment and putting private clean up contractors on standby, in the event that any of the oil should drift onto the beaches.

10 Miles Off Course

The tanker was about 10 miles off course when it ran aground in the shallow waters on Wednesday. She was bound for Salem. Although the ship was equipped with sophisticated navigation gear, her master, Capt. George Papadopoulos, has said only that the ship had become stuck "because I was in the wrong position."

The Argo Merchant has been involved in 18 other accidents, including two previous groundings since 1964, according to the Center for Short-Lived Phenomenon in Cambridge, Mass. She was grounded off Calabria, Italy, in 1971 and off Borneo in 1969. A number of accidents involved engine failures.

"It's a bad record for any vessel," said

Jan Conerry, a research coordinator at the center.

The 23-year-old tanker is owned by the Thebes Shipping Company of Monrovia, Liberia. Liberia has the world's largest merchant fleet, perhaps some 40 percent of it actually American-owned, because many shippers use the registration as a "flag of convenience" to avoid higher American and European pay scales and the more stringent marine safety requirements of other nations.

The salvage effort was headquartered at the Cape Cod Coast Guard Air Station here. A 20-member Coast Guard team from the Atlantic Strike Force, a unit specially trained in fighting oil spills and other pollution has been brought here from its base in Elizabeth City, N.C.

Lowered about 100 feet to the rocking, half awash, oil-covered ship by wires and harnesses from helicopters, the men have been attempting to prepare to pump the oil out of the ship's tanks.

But the weather has turned so rough that the men had to be pulled off the craft at one point by helicopter in dark and stormy seas. They lost three special heavy-duty pumps worth about \$50,000 each in the storm.

Only a delay in getting equipment together this morning prevented the strike force team from being aboard the ship when she broke apart.

"There was no indication the ship was going to break up," Lieut. Comdr. Barry Chambers, the strike force leader, said over a cup of coffee this afternoon. "A ship talks to you when it's breaking up. You can hear the metal tear. It must have just fractured quickly."

A major difficulty in pumping the fuel out of the ship, Commander Chambers said, was that the thick, viscous oil was normally pumped at about 125 degrees, but that the water temperature at sea was about 40 degrees, making the oil even gummier.

Pattern of the Spill

The Coast Guard oceanographers who flew over the slick this afternoon described it as thick and gummy in the immediate vicinity of the wreck, spreading out in an irregular pattern of what they called pancakes, or thick flat globules of oil. "We scooped some up and it was like a bucket of goo," one of the technicians said.

The 38 crewmen from the Argo Merchant, a multi-national group including Greeks, Pakistanis, Hondurans, Trinidadians and Cypriots, were air-lifted off the ship by the Coast Guard last Wednesday. A cutter brought them to Nantucket, where they were billeted in the Breakers, glumly watching wrestling matches on television and worrying about their lost luggage and belongings.

Since then, the Coast Guardsmen, along with Navy and civilian salvage workers have struggled to save the ship, but were buffeted by the high winds and water.

Now the Coast Guardsmen and oceanographic experts are faced with the problem of how to clean up or control the oil spill.

"This latest event is an enormous threat," Governor Dukakis told a news conference in Boston hours after the ship broke apart.

Meanwhile, fishermen in Cape Cod filed a class action suit in Federal District Court in Boston seeking \$60 million in damages for alleged harm to the fishing grounds from the oil leaking off the tanker.

Early this evening, Captain Hein said that he planned to refloat a section of the ship still containing oil, to seal the sections up and then sink them. He and his officers discussed several methods of doing this throughout the afternoon, depending on whether the remaining cargo tanks are still intact. If they are not able to refloat the portions of the ship, he said, they would have to pump the remaining oil off onto barges.

When they could begin the operation would depend on the weather, the captain said, adding that it did not look promising.