

## **Prestige: what happened**

### **The ship**

Managed by Universe Maritime of Athens, the 81,600 dwt, Bahamas-flag tanker Prestige was built in 1976. Under the single-hull phaseout schedule agreed in the wake of Erika, Prestige faced forced retirement in 2005. The ship's classification society, ABS, had carried out the last annual survey of the ship in May 2002 while Prestige lay at anchor in ballast off the United Arab Emirates coast. The two tanks where the damage that led to the sinking was alleged to have occurred - starboard No 2 aft and starboard No 3 wing - had not been inspected on that occasion. These tanks were adjacent to cargo tanks fitted with heating coils and, thus, under IACS unified requirements for oil tankers 15 years of age and more, should have been inspected. However, when the master reported to ABS that the coils had been blanked off, the class society interpreted the rules, correctly, that this condition obviated them from the need to examine those tanks.

### **Cargo**

Prestige was carrying 77,000 tonnes of fuel oil loaded at St Petersburg, Russia and Ventspils, Latvia at the time of the accident. Prior to departing St Petersburg to load a topping off cargo in Ventspils, Prestige had been moored in waters just outside the Russian port between June and October 2002, serving as a floating storage vessel for fuel oil shipped from the country's inland refineries. The tanker was enroute from Ventspils direct for Singapore when the accident occurred. Crown Resources, the Russian/Swiss oil trader, had chartered the ship for the voyage in question.

### **Incident**

Prestige ran into trouble on November 13, 2002 in severe weather close to the northwest coast of Spain, and rapidly developed a 23 degree starboard list. The stricken ship was only three miles off the coast when the salvors secured a line onboard. When the Spanish authorities refused the ship entry into more sheltered waters, the salvor was forced to take the stricken tanker out to sea under tow and head in a southerly direction in search of calmer waters. The ship broke in two six days later. Initial investigations indicate that the most likely cause of the accident was the loss of side plating in way of the two starboard ballast tanks in question, which were empty at the time. Many naval architects and tanker hands believe that if decisive action in bringing the ship to a safe anchorage had been taken immediately after the problem became apparent, and before the fuel oil cargo began to leak, Prestige could have saved and pollution avoided. By the time the ship sank some 18,000 tonnes of HFO cargo had been released from the vessel. Much of the remaining cargo lies within the two halves of the sunken tanker which are sitting on the seabed 3.5 km apart at a depth of 3,500 metres, 170 miles off the Spanish coast.