

Yukon barge burns

By MITCH DEMIENTIEFF

BAKER CREEK -- The flag ship of the Yukon River tug fleet, the recently renovated M.V. Yukon, exploded and burned at 11 p.m., Friday, August 23, four miles above Manley Hot springs.

All of the 15 member crew escaped injury and there was no damage done to the freight on two barges the boat was pushing, but the vessel itself was a total loss.

According to initial reports, the origin of the explosion may have been an older hot water heater which had not been replaced in a recent overhaul of the vessel.

Owned and operated by Yutana Barge Lines, Inc., the vessel was on a regular freight run to the Lower Yukon when the explosion occurred. The crew had just tied up the Yukon to the north bank of the Tanana River, four miles upstream from Manley landing, close to Baker Creek. The normal method of securing the tug and barges for the night is to anchor the tug to the shore from the stern, leaving the barges extending downstream.

"There was no panic," said Tom Hulbert, Captain of the Yukon. "Obviously there was a little confusion because nothing like this has ever happened before, but no panic."

"We couldn't fight the fire because of too much smoke within the vessel and we had to fight the fire from outside, which meant we couldn't get through to the flames," said Hulbert. "It was too far gone."

Within 10 minutes of the first discovery of the blaze, flames were shooting up to 30 feet in the sky.

"Actually, it couldn't have happened at a better time," said Larry Shelberg president of Yutana Barge Lines. Shelberg said the vessel's engineer was shutting off three of the four fuel lines feeding the four diesel engines on board

prior to the blaze, leaving only one fuel tank feeding the fire and thus diverting a major catastrophe.

Shelberg and Holbert agreed that fire drills and viewing of safety films were useful in preventing injuries.

When the fire was raging out of control and no hope remained to save the vessel, the winches that fastened the tug to the barges were loosened allowing the barges to drift a safe distance from the tug. With added barge-to-shore securement the load was left entirely unscathed by the blaze.

The vessel continued to burn for 14 hours, during which time there was some concern that the boat would explode. "We were afraid the structural integrity of the boat would go

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in the heat of the fire," Shelberg said. "That would have caused air to get to the flames and cause the fuel on board to explode.

In the wake of the fire, there remained no further possibility of explosion or oil pollution.

The M.V. Yukon was just completely overhauled with a new power unit installed.

"There was no problem with the new repairs; the problems were with an older hot water boiler," Shelberg said.

The boat was built 25 years ago out of WWII Navy surplus material. "For that reasons, replacement parts for many of the vessels functions were hard to find," said Shelberg.

Most of the crew sought

refuge in Manley, with only a skeleton crew remaining with the boat to observe the fire. "They were super people," Captain Hulbert said of the residents of Manley. "Mrs. Lee Woods fed the crew and made sure they had a place to sleep in town."

There will be some freight delays in coming

Yutana schedules, but the M.V. Pack is heading upstream from St. Michaels to relieve the situation.

Financially, the company may have some problems replacing the M.V. Yukon. The TUNDRA TIMES asked Shelberg if the vessel was a total loss.

"I'm sure she is," Shelberg responded. The rep-

lacement of the pride of the Yutana line depends on the ability to finance the project. "The cost to replace the tug is about \$2 million" said Shelberg.

He said the company has already begun to tackle the problem. "Lots of plans; it's just a matter of getting the money," explained Shelberg.