



# Torpedo on the hook

Edi Keck snags a Soviet torpedo with the point of his anchor – and lives to tell the tale!

**D**uring the late morning of 20 July 1989, after successfully clearing Customs (and KGB) out of Tallinn, Estonia, *Single Malt* was heading north along the precisely ordered course line.

A group of Finnish yachts had visited Tallinn the previous year, but our Amel ketch was probably the first foreign yacht for decades to visit Estonia, which at that time still belonged to the USSR. On board with me and my late wife Doris, were our elder daughter with her boyfriend and another lady, an old family friend.

Once in the open waters of the Gulf of Finland, *Single Malt* headed for Hanko to clear into Finland, so that we could visit the outer islands of the Åland group.

Despite the night-time twilight, at nearly 60°N the approach to Hanko harbour was fairly demanding, due partly to the lack of available information at that time – and no GPS in those days.

Upon arrival at Hanko harbour, we finally got the anchor to hold at 0315. The fairly shallow sea bottom, as well as the many surrounding islands and rocks, is granite,

polished by the various ice ages, with little mud or sand covering it, which makes anchoring quite hazardous. In addition, the sea water is brownish due to the swampy lakes further north, and vertical visibility was no more than 30cm on that particular day.

At 0700 we started to weigh anchor in order to make fast alongside a small fuel station, so that the crew could do the necessary shopping (which was impossible in Tallinn), while I would clear in with the authorities and take on fuel and water. We wanted to save time so that we could reach the Åland Islands that day.

Doris was at the helm while I operated the anchor winch. Suddenly the winch stopped with the anchor chain bar tight. With the polished granite bottom we couldn't figure out why the anchor would not move.

We tried approaching the anchoring spot from various different angles; no success. As time was running out for our plan for the day, I suggested trying to force it – I assumed we must have caught a waterlogged piece of timber or

something like that. We motored into the cable and, as soon as the boat bowed down a bit, I took in the slack. After about three such manoeuvres something gave way and *Single Malt* was suddenly surrounded by thousands of air bubbles and a stench of fuel.

## Ruptured pipeline worries

I was immediately worried about having ruptured a fuel pipeline, so I sped from the bows down to the chart table... there was no indication of a pipeline on the chart.

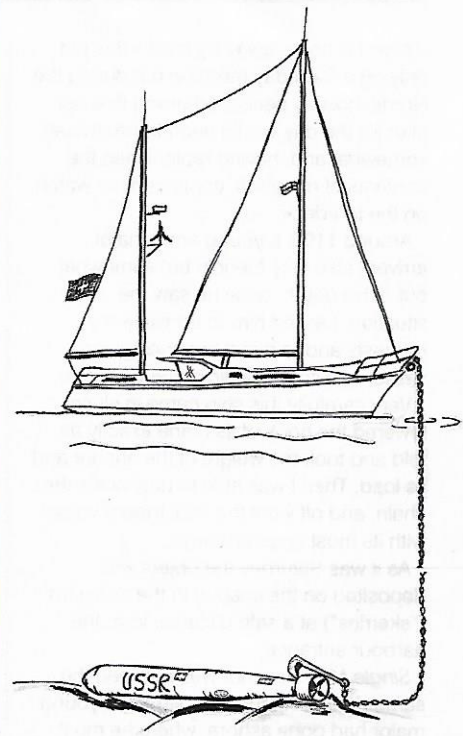
By the time I got back to the cockpit there were no longer any air bubbles, nor was there that terrible stench of fuel. We tried our anchor winch again and, very slowly, we were able to hoist our anchor while preparing some lines to free it from its heavy ballast. The anchor shaft was barely out of the water with the plough of the CQR still about 30cm below the surface when I saw that it was entangled not with a piece of timber but with the rear part of a torpedo.

We could see the circular housing, four small rudders (rudders and elevators),





**BELOW** Edi Keck's Amel ketch *Single Malt* makes the most of breezy conditions  
**BELOW** RIGHT Almuth Otterstedt's illustration of how *Single Malt*'s anchor snagged the Russian torpedo



and the two propellers in tandem. We had no idea how big the thing was as most of it was suspended vertically out of sight in the dark water. We also didn't know what state its fuse was in, but we did know that the bottom was solid granite. We lifted it up as high and as carefully as possible, but when the rear part of the torpedo reached the surface we stopped, as the weight and strain on our anchor gear was already hard enough and *Single Malt*'s bow was dipping noticeably. Then I called

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Retired Swiss Army officer Edi Keck, 83, has owned the 39ft Amel ketch *Single Malt* since 1988. In 1998 he and his partner Almuth Otterstedt, who did the line drawings for this feature, set off on a 14-year global circumnavigation. In mid-December they plan to leave Agadir, Morocco, to sail Arrecife, Lanzarote.

the Finnish coastguard, informing them about our identity, position and the torpedo on our hook.

A Finn in a tiny fishing boat came along and asked if we could use any help. We asked him to put out another anchor for us to steady the boat. When, after 40 minutes, we had still not heard anything from the coastguard,

I called them once more and asked them to hurry up a bit. After another 20 minutes or so a modern coastguard vessel with water guns and a hydraulic crane came steaming into the harbour, and soon a Finnish coastguard officer asked for permission to come aboard. He saw our plight and, using his authority, commanded that everybody leave the boat with him.

"No way," I replied. "You can take my crew, but I am going to stay where I am!"

I asked him what his intentions were, to which he answered that the navy would have to deal with this problem and that he would call and inform them. Then he started to talk into his radio in Finnish and soon the sirens of police and fire-brigade

cars could be heard approaching the harbour. The officer's last remark before taking my crew ashore was that the harbour would now be closed.

While the coastguard vessel stood by at a safe distance, I made myself comfortable on the foredeck with a book and a wee dram. From time to time I needed a sharp whistle to slow down small boats wanting to see what was going on, as they were creating waves causing *Single Malt* and its load to move vertically up and down – a movement I disliked, in view of the fuse at the lower end of our 'catch'.

Eventually a naval launch with three officers arrived. They came on board, were very friendly and after exchanging greetings I asked the officer, who was carrying some lanyards and a plastic bag, what he was going to use that for.

"It's for wrapping up the duds," he told me. But when they saw the size of the weapon on the hook they shook their heads.

"We'll have to call an expert from the Newland Brigade," they said.

That brigade was located near Helsinki





**LEFT** *Single Malt* at anchor in quieter times

– over 1½ hours away by road – this not only on a Saturday morning but during the Nordic holiday period. I realised that our plan for the day would need to be revised somewhat and, having replenished the contents of my glass, continued my watch on the foredeck.

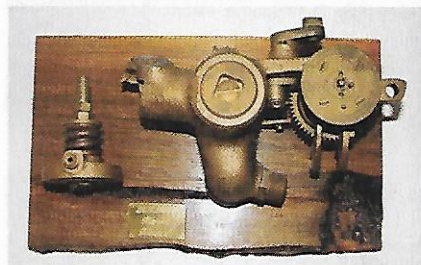
Around 1100, a young army major arrived, also very friendly but somewhat out of his depth, once he saw the situation. I asked him to translate my requests and to direct the coastguard vessel with its hydraulic crane via radio.

Very carefully this ship came in close, lowered the hook of its crane exactly as told and took the weight of the anchor and its load. Then I was able to unshackle the chain, and off went the coastguard vessel with its most unusual cargo.

As it was Saturday the object was deposited on the seabed in the skärgård ("skerries") at a safe distance from the harbour entrance.

*Single Malt's* anchor was returned the same day, but in the meantime the young major had gone ashore, where he must have given interviews using the expression 'flying bomb' instead of 'torpedo'.

After tidying the boat and picking up the second anchor I motored to the fuel dock, where a large crowd, together with many



**TOP** During a reception given by the Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Forces, on Finnish Forces Day in December 1989, Edi was presented with a memento of the adventure – parts of the driving and steering unit of the torpedo.

**ABOVE** Edi and his late wife, Doris, who was among the crew during the torpedo incident

reporters – and fortunately my crew – was waiting for me.

Before I had even thrown the first line ashore, radio and TV reporters, as well as many newspaper journalists, were urgently demanding interviews. I told them, that first I had to tie up *Single Malt*, and that the whole thing was not a major issue. But they all insisted that it was, and that being shortly before noon they needed interviews for the midday news as well as for the afternoon newspapers. I was unable to shake them off, especially as they knew I was the Swiss military attaché in the four Nordic countries. There was no way out.

The following week the object was inspected by divers.

They found that it was just the rear part of a torpedo – the driving and steering unit – which had been ripped off by our 'forceful manoeuvre'. This explains the air bubbles and fuel fumes.

As they knew very accurately where our anchor had been dropped, divers inspected the site and found the front part of the torpedo. This was also taken out to



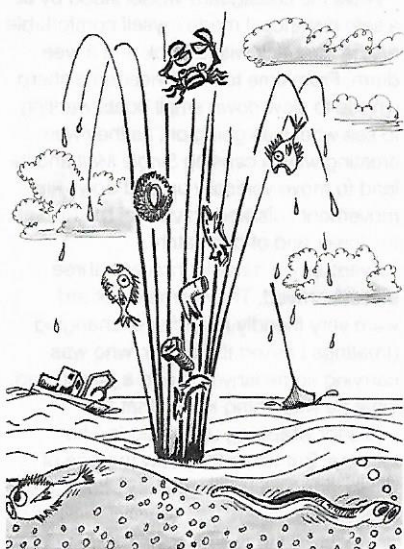
**BELOW** Edi's torpedo incident caught the imagination of local press, radio and TV reporters

the skärgård, where it was destroyed – apparently it exploded beautifully. It was a Soviet T-27 torpedo with a calibre of 53cm, carrying 450kg of explosives. It had been dumped into the harbour in December 1941 during the Finnish 'Continuation war', when Soviet forces were forced to retreat from Hanko and surrounding land that they had previously occupied.

## LESSON LEARNED

A few months after this happened I read in a Swedish yachting magazine the roughly translated headline: 'It is dangerous to sail in Finnish waters'. I don't think it is! Not for a moment...

■ This article first appeared in a 2014 edition of *Flying Fish*, the magazine of the Ocean Cruising Club, and was republished in a 2019 edition of the Cruising Association magazine.



**Edi Keck's torpedo 'exploded beautifully' when detonated by the Finnish military**

\*Send us your boating experience story and if it's published you'll receive the original Dick Everitt-signed watercolour which is printed with the article. You'll find PBO's contact details on page 5.



