

Incident information sheet of MELBRIDGE BILBAO 2001

The incident

On Monday 12 November 2001, the container ship *Melbridge Bilbao* (150 m long, 9,650 tonnes) journeying from Havana to Rotterdam under a light fog and calm weather, with 218 containers and 330 crates on board, should have taken the upward rail off Ushant. It veered off by multiple nautical miles, without answering calls from the CROSS Corsen, which noticed the dangerous cape on their radar. It ran aground at full speed (17 knots) on Molène Island, right in the middle of what will become the Iroise marine park, just after 7h00.

Luckily, the floor was mainly composed of sand and the vessel ran aground during a low tide, with an increasing tidal coefficient. The Abeille Flandre quickly arrived on site to tow the vessel during the high tide of the afternoon, right after it was refloated with the helped of a team from the French Navy and was headed towards reefs.

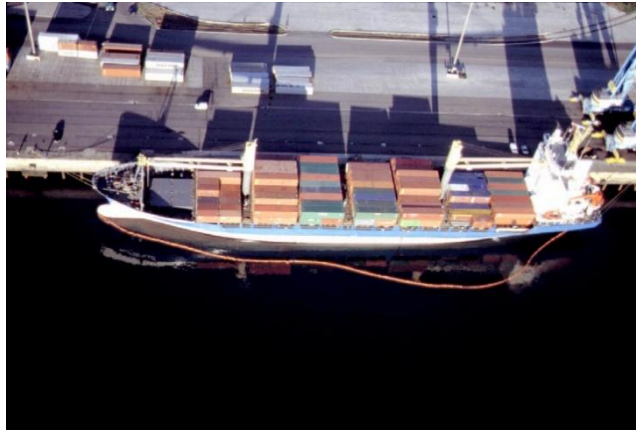


Vessel awaiting towing in Bertheaume cove, surrounded by a pollution response boom under the supervision of the Abeille Flandre ©CEDRE

Spill response

The *Melbridge Bilbao* was then towed to a sheltered area in the Bertheaume cove for inspection and safety operations, before being towed to the port of Brest, where it was unloaded and repaired. Once no major risk was established, the vessel was towed inside the port of Brest in the evening of 13 November and moored to the quay of the container ships, surrounded by a boom provided by the French Navy.

On 15 November, the containers of the midship bay were unloaded on the docks to free the access to the tanks, then the *Melbridge Bilbao* was transferred on 16 November to the dry dock for repairs.



The Melbridge Bilbao in Brest, surrounded by a pollution response boom ©CEDRE

The oil contained in the central tanks was then pumped. The following day, fuel started leaking from breaches under the vessel, near the ballast tanks, which indicated that the internal walls of the double bottom were damaged and the fuel was travelling between the tanks and the ballasts. The oil released in the dock were contained by a boom that required adjustments due to the viscosity of the product and the wind changes.

The pumping operations necessary for a complete depollution of the ship before repairs and the cleaning operations of the dry dock required consequent resources and spread to the 30 November.



Tanker trucks for the collection of pollutant ©CEDRE

A cleaning worksite for the equipment used was then set up on CEDRE's technical platform. The duration of the operations, carried out in optimal conditions, in a confined area, showed how much damage Molène avoided. If the vessel had not been refloated quickly and had been progressively dismantled by the winter winds, the cleaning operations on the archipelago would have lasted for months. This is what

happened in 1986 on the shores of Gijon (Asturias) with the wreck of a collier, [the Castillo de Salas](#), of which only the front half could be refloated.

It can be hard to understand how a recent vessel, in seemingly great shape, could go off its route and run aground, almost as if the captain fell asleep at the helm. This sadly happens multiple times a year throughout the world. The cause is generally human mistake, sometimes a mechanical or electronic error. The works by Ph. Vallois "Le transport du pétrole par mer" (edited by CELSE) indicates that 51% of pollution above 700 tonnes are caused by groundings and that tiredness is the cause or more than half of those.



Cleaning of the response equipment by the company on CEDRE's technical platform ©CEDRE

Legal proceedings

On 5 February 2002, the tribunal in Brest sentenced the second in command (on deck during the incident) to 6 months of conditional prison and a 3,000 Euro fine for accidental pollution.

Molène Island and the mixed syndicate for shoreline protection (former Amoco syndicate), which constituted the prosecution, respectively received 2,000 and 1,000 Euro.

CEDRE's actions

CEDRE played its part as a technical advisor for Polmar authorities. Mobilised by the maritime prefect in the hour following the incident, CEDRE sent its Interventions manager to the marine operations center to help gather necessary information on the situation, the risks linked to the propulsion fuel and cargo, as well as the areas environmental sensitivity. The emergency response center was activated to answer questions and provide support to the manager on site. An aerial observations expert took part in a helicopter flyover in the area on 12 November, she noted that the pollution at sea was limited to some sheen in the wake of the vessel.

On 13 November, CEDRE asked Météo France for two derivation simulations for eventual slicks, one for the wreck and one for the entry in the Bay. These simulations helped steer the aerial surveys. On the same day, two shore cleaning specialists and an environmentalist from Ifremer boarded a helicopter from the French Navy to carry out an aerial survey in Molène. They met the mayor's deputy and visited creeks where oil had been observed. Their observations revealed that the impact was limited to small spots of oil covering a maximum of 5 m², similar to the effect of de-ballasting, which sadly happens multiple times a year in the Iroise Sea. Taking into account the important tides and the nature of the areas, no cleaning worksite was suggested, unless the oil was to be remobilised in the following days.



Accumulation of oiled algae ©CEDRE

On the same day, CEDRE made phone calls to enquire about the only product in cargo classed as hazardous: 60 barrels of additive catalyst from Mexico, in a 20-foot long container. It was actually used as protection against the clogging of burners in thermal equipment, diesel based, from Europe, and returned by the Mexican client for lack of conformity. Three hours after starting the research, the security data sheet, kindly provided by the French supplier, was made available to the interested authorities, confirming that there was no risk in allowing the vessel to enter the port of Brest. It might have made things easier if the captain of the vessel had had access to this document. But this is not mandatory according to international regulation.

CEDRE had one of their specialists available to the French Navy, on 14 November, for a helicopter flyover of the commercial port and the entrance of the Harbour, to check for visible pollution, then a team was sent to assess the situation in the water around the vessel. Once the repairs were started in the dry dock, CEDRE, at the request of the charterer, provided technical advice and the contact for a specialised intervention company, which was mobilised on the same day. CEDRE then made its technical platform and human resources available for the cleaning of the equipment used. The incident remained minor and only necessitated a small scale intervention. But this intervention still required specialists, and equipment for more than a month, as part of CEDRE's Polmar mission to support maritime prefects, in close relation with CEPPOL (French Navy's commission on pollution response techniques) and the commercial port of Brest.



Oiled rock in Molène archipelago ©CEDRE

A typical incident

Historical examples of incidents due to human error or equipment malfunction leading to groundings during calm weather are numerous. Some of those led to major changes in maritime safety. The most famous example is the incident of the squadron of the British admiral Clowdesley Shovell, in the night of 24 October 1707, after a fight with the French in the Mediterranean. Navigating through dead reckoning during the night, in the fog, the admiral thought he was West of Ushant. He was actually in the Scilly islands, on which four vessels of his squadron wrecked. Almost 2,000 men died, including the admiral (not drowned as most of his men, but killed by an islander coveting his ring). This unprecedented tragedy in the history of the Royal Navy pushed the British parliament to vote the “longitude Act”, which offered 20,000 Pounds Sterling (a considerable amount at the time) to anyone who could find a sure way to precisely calculate longitude.

Here is a list of some incidents from the last twenty years around the globe. As you can see, this also happens in the USA, despite their very well doted Coast guard. These incidents are explained in detail in the “incidents” section of our website.

[CMA-CGM Normandie](#), 27 March 2001, Singapore

[Mistral](#), 20 February 2001, Caribbean

[Bunga Teratai Satu](#), 2 November 2000, Australia

[Natuna Sea](#), 3 October 2000, Singapore

[Exxon Valdez](#), 24 March 1989, Alaska

[Kini Kersten](#), 1 January 1987, France