The container ship Rena was sailing at 17 knots when it slammed into New Zealand’s Astrolabe Reef on 5 October 2011, 15 miles from the country’s coast. The impact ripped open the Rena’s hull and left the 236-metre ship teetering on the reef, its oil (and later) many of its containers spilling into the ocean.

The Rena grounding is the country’s “worst maritime environmental disaster,” according to New Zealand’s Environment Minister. And while images of the wreck have fallen off the rest of the world’s TV screens, Svitzer Salvage, one of the world’s leading salvage operators, has been deeply involved with the cleanup.

“In some sense the Rena was ‘just another job,’” says Drew Shannon, regional manager of Svitzer Salvage in Australia and the Rena project manager. “At the same time it was – and still is today – a challenging salvage operation because of the circumstances.”

Pressed for time
Less than 24 hours after the accident, Svitzer’s first personnel arrived onboard the Rena by helicopter. Cracks in the hull were allowing the 1,400 tonnes of fuel in its tanks to leak out rapidly, so siphoning out the remaining oil was Svitzer’s first priority. After that, the tricky process of offloading the 1,368 containers would start – the eight hazardous ones first. Lastly, they would try to refloat the ship.

That was the plan, anyway. With the clock ticking, the circumstances made everything more difficult. For starters, New Zealand is 1,200 nautical miles from its nearest neighbour, Australia. The remoteness of Rena’s location, together with the severity of the damage and the vulnerability of the ship to severe weather meant every day was critical to avoid a much larger environmental disaster.

“We needed to get people and equipment moving to the site as quickly as possible,” says Shannon. “We signed a Lloyds Open Form with the owners within hours and in the next couple of days flew in more than 30 personnel from Australia, South Africa, Singapore, the Netherlands and the United States,” he says.

Cargo planes carrying much of the needed equipment arrived from Australian and Dutch warehouses also within days. Two barges for the containers and the bunker fuel could not arrive sooner than two and four weeks.

Oil slicks, scuba divers and spider monkeys
Svitzer quickly learned that siphoning out the remaining oil would be no easy task. Rena’s oil tanks and piping were so badly

Salvaging Rena is “just another job”
damaged that its own systems could not pump out the oil. They needed to insert two submersible pumps into the ship’s fuel tanks and weave 200 metres of hosing up and over the side of the ship to connect them to an oil barge. As the days and weeks wore on, the temperature of the bunker fuel dropped, turning the fuel into a thick sludge and slowing the process considerably.

“Throughout the operation, the most unpredictable and influential factor on the Rena salvage has been the weather. In the first weeks, high winds and waves completely shifted the ship from an 11 degree port list to a 22 degree starboard list,” says Shannon.

The stress of that movement caused a large crack to appear in the hull, sent more than 80 containers tumbling into the ocean and forced Svitzer to shift their focus and launch an immediate container recovery plan.

Divers tagged as many of the containers remaining onboard so they could track them if they fell overboard. Shannon says on ‘a good day’ they could recover 30 containers from the deck.

To offload the containers still on the vessel, crane operators required the help of rather unusual specialists: rope access handlers, or ‘ropeys’ as they’re called in Oceania.

Subcontracted by Svitzer, these human spider monkeys were hired to scramble up and around the Rena’s container stacks, unlocking twistlocks and releasing lashings before guiding the cranes’ lifts to the containers.

The Rena today

Today the Rena is still there at the Astrolabe Reef – but in two distinct pieces. Six-metre swells ripped the vessel in half in January; fortunately, Svitzer was able to remove all accessible oil from the ship’s tanks before that happened.

At this point in the job, more than half of the Rena’s 1,368 containers have been recovered from the wreck and moved ashore.

With plenty of work still left to do, Shannon reflects on the Rena job thus far:

“With any operation like this you need good people and planning, plenty of flexibility to change, and also competent partners. Maritime New Zealand has played a central role in the management of the emergency response and has showed great leadership throughout. As a company, we’re proud to be able to use our skills to help New Zealand out of tough situation,” he says.