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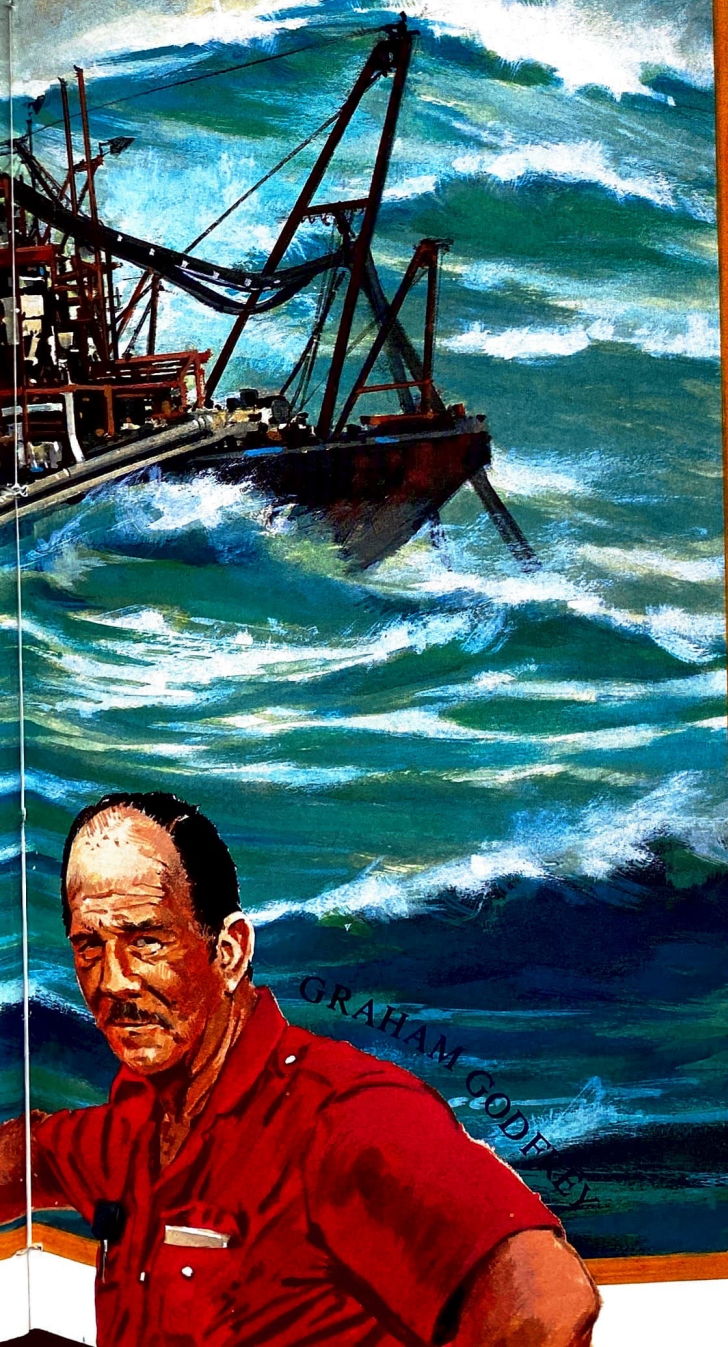


Illustrations by Jim Deneen

days on the Skeleton Coast

GO OF AFRICA'S DIAMOND BARGES

by Lisa Kondor



They looked like monstrous sea creatures, squat, misshapen things covered with odd protuberances, wallowing in the Atlantic Ocean off the Skeleton Coast—that deserted, ocher wasteland in what then was South-West Africa and today is known as Namibia. Yet their appearance belied the glamorous work they were destined to perform, for they were floating diamond mines—the first of their kind in the world.

The man who conceived the idea of dredging offshore for diamonds was a Texas entrepreneur and subsea engineer named Sam Collins. Drawn like so many before him to the Skeleton Coast and its lure of instant wealth, Collins in 1961 formed Marine Diamond Corporation. Concessions granted by the South-West African government enabled him to search for diamonds in waters north of landworkings controlled by the giant De Beers Consolidated Diamond Mining Group.

An optimist with an almost mystical faith in his ability and luck, Collins felt certain that in just four years his group would equal De Beers' annual production in South-West Africa of some one million carats or two million diamonds. Unlike most southern African diamond deposits, which contain a blend of gem-quality and industrial diamonds, virtually all the diamonds produced in South-West Africa were of gem quality, so Collins had ample incentive to make this dream a reality.

The facts of geography and geology were certainly on his side. The west coast of Namibia is the only place in the world where diamonds have been deposited in waters along a beach. Geologists believe the diamonds arrived here about 90 million years ago when a volcanic eruption in the hinterlands of southern Africa—which today contain the world's greatest hoard of diamonds—flung the precious stones to the surface, where they were carried by rivers to the South Atlantic Ocean.

**In a week the barges plucked nearly
14,000 diamonds from the oceanbed.**

The Orange River, which flows between Namibia and South Africa to the Atlantic, appears to have been the main conduit for these diamonds. Pushed farther along the coast by the cold Benguela Current and southwest winds, a hoard of diamonds finally came to rest in the seabed at Chamaïs Bay, about 70 miles as the crow flies from the Orange River delta. It was here that Collins began his quest.

The men who supervised the diamond barges were tough as the diamonds they sought. One of them, plant manager Graham Godfrey, whose weathered and scarred face attests to years spent on the barges, remembers those days.

In some ways, Godfrey recalled, the diamond-barge work crews were like a miniature United Nations: seekers of fortune who came from as far away as England, France and North America. The men worked 12-hour shifts, for 20 days at a time. "The pay was good for all, except, oddly, the divers, who had to plunge into the icy Benguela Current day and night, in good weather or in foul—all for just one rand (about \$1.40 back then) a dive," Godfrey recalled.

Security on the diamond barges was as tight as a prison. Searches were thorough, right down to the haircream and toothpaste, "so you constantly felt like a bug under a microscope." The reason and results were obvious: Diamonds were stolen by seamen, and they invariably ended up in jail.

To mine tons of diamondiferous soil, a special vessel was necessary and Collins' first prototype was the *Emerson K*, a Royal Navy salvage tug converted to carry dredging equipment and a

small processing plant. Operations started in 1962 and results were encouraging enough to warrant the construction of a full-fledged sea-mining unit, the 1,100-ton *Barge 77*.

This vessel was purpose-built for diamond mining and contained large-diameter dredging equipment, a recovery plant, a power plant and accommodations for crew. With all that equipment on her flat deck, *Barge 77* looked top-heavy. But she weathered severe storms—until one summer day in 1963 when she was thrown onto the reefs in Chamais Bay near the mining concession, then battered by a second storm that generated waves 40 feet high.

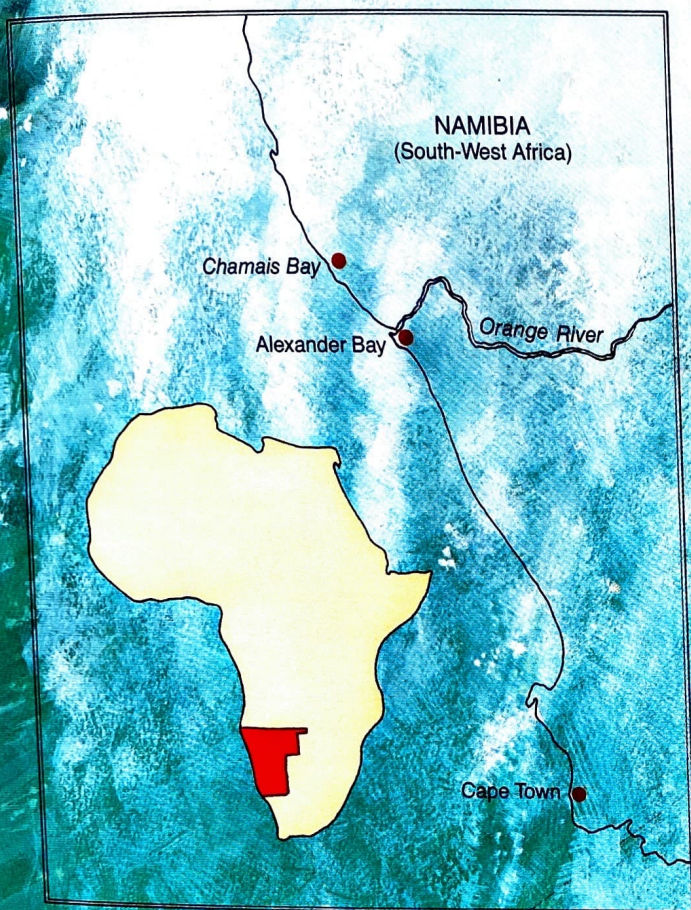
All on board got off safely, including Collins' 14-year-old son. Refloating her, however, proved to be difficult. Salvagers from Cape Town, prohibited from crossing overland through the restricted De Beers diamond area, had to be shipped 500 miles to Chamais Bay. Two months later, all the equipment was salvaged, though by then it was too late to save the barge.

That same year, the *Emerson K* was badly holed when she struck submerged rocks near Penguin Island. Divers leapt over the side of the stricken vessel with mattresses, which they secured across the gashes under the waterline. Their quick thinking kept the *Emerson K* afloat until she could be salvaged.

These setbacks, however, only pushed Collins to try harder. The diamonds, after all, were still there waiting to be harvested. In fact, he'd learned valuable lessons from his stricken "ugly ducklings." These lessons resulted in the *Diamantkuis*. Purchased at a cost of \$126,000 from the U.S. Navy and refitted at a cost of \$4,200,000, the world's largest diamond-mining vessel had a tougher hull than her predecessor, carried five positioning anchors to keep her in place in rough weather, and machinery capable of scooping five times as much diamondiferous soil from the seabed as her predecessor. Since about a ton of muck had to be sucked up for every diamond recovered, the greater suction capacity of this new vessel was significant.



Collins now had a sizable fleet: In addition to *Diamantkus* and *Emerson K*, there was *Barge III* and several ocean-going tugs. *Diamantkus* was odd looking and appeared top-heavy, but Collins, said Godfrey, bragged that "she's capable of taking a 45-degree list with a 70 mph gale hitting her on the opposite side."



There was ample reason for his optimism. Despite rough weather, in a seven-day stretch during 1964 Collins' fleet sucked nearly 14,000 diamonds from the ocean bed. The two best days yielded 5,400 and 4,400 diamonds, respectively. *Barge III* recorded the biggest one-day haul for a single vessel—4,386 diamonds.

But there were ominous signs too.

"Crew changes were dangerous," Godfrey related. "We'd do a change at 3 a.m. in the dark of night. This is when the men and the boys were separated. The small dinghy would disappear and suddenly reappear between wave troughs, whilst the barge rocked at anchor from port to starboard so violently that one minute the bloke was level with you and the next minute he'd drop by 15 feet."

Some men were so shaken by their first encounter with the diamond barges that they quit before they got off the dinghy.

"Seas were very rough one night when *Diamantkus* struck a pipeline [a portion of seabed thickly studded with diamonds]. Diamonds were being sucked in at a stupendous rate—5,000 in just one shift, a new record. When Sam Collins got the news, he radioed, 'Drinks on the house, boys!'

"Well, the boss's command was taken very seriously and as a result many of the crew were drunk. But my sense of danger was alerted and I stopped at two drinks. At about 9:30 p.m., a little chap we nicknamed Wee Jock called me. 'Get the lads to come and give me a hand down below,' he shouted. 'We're in trouble!'

**"I was 40 feet above the water and
was staring *up* at the crest of a wave."**

"When I went down, companionways were flooded and the night-shift crew was wandering in a daze around sick bay. Some were badly injured, cut up from cable on the vessel's stern cable reel that had snapped as a result of the pounding we were taking in heavy seas."

The fury of the storm was such that even the 10,000-pound anchors used to secure the diamond barge to the seabed were being dragged along, causing the vessel to drift helplessly toward dangerous breakers foaming along the shore.

The captain was arguing with the marine superintendent about how to save the ship and crew while the bow of the *Diamantkus* was scraping bottom. The marine superintendent was more concerned about cutting the anchor cables. The two argued at each other as men stood by with cutting torches, waiting for some resolve. Cut the anchor cables, the captain roared at last and four torches went to work. Sparks flew and the cables sprung away like snapped elastic bands.

But *Diamantkus* had now run aground and a Collins tug, the *Collinstar*, was called in to pull her free. Instead, the heavy waves smashed her into the *Diamantkus*, cutting six-foot holes in the diamond barge's bow.

"We were flooding, despite the pumps, so we told *Collinstar* she could do no more and to back off," said Godfrey. *Collinstar* then answered an urgent call to cast a line to *Barge III*, which was also dragging her anchors. But on the way to the barge, one of *Collinstar*'s engines failed and she collided with the tender *Cortes*.

When the storm subsided, the *Diamantkus* managed to free herself using her own engines. She then proceeded out to sea, where repairs were made to her bow. But she had to wait for another vessel to bring new anchor cables before she could return to the rich diamond lode.

The *Collinstar* and *Barge III* had to put in to port for repairs. Miraculously, no one was killed as a result of these accidents.

The collisions were not the result of poor seamanship; rather, an unpredictable sea and some very bad luck had triggered a series of events that none aboard the ill-fated vessels could avoid.

Collins recovered from that potentially disastrous night and its aftermath and continued to harvest diamonds from the sea. Duly posted back to Cape Town, Godfrey was transferred from the *Diamantkus* to a new Collins diamond barge, the *Colponton*. But once again the sea lashed out at the miners.

"One early morning in the winter of 1965 unusually rough seas had tossed me about my bunk when at 4:30 a.m. my friend Rico called me to silver-solder some very fine screens used to carry diamonds to the barge's sorting house," said Godfrey. "I volunteered for this duty because I was the only chap on the barge that knew how to do the work. So I made my way up to the deck to begin work.

"No sooner had I got there than I sensed something wrong. I turned around. Way above me I saw a mountainous wave. I wondered if my eyes were failing me: I was 40 feet above the water and here I was staring *up* at the crest of a wave. When it hit, it almost washed me off the deck.

"'Van,' I shouted to the marine superintendent, 'are we going to pull out of the deep tonight?' 'Orders are to keep on mining,' he yelled back."

"She was hit by a gigantic wave and tipped over like an empty beer can."

Powerful waves were pushing *Colponton* toward shore, despite her anchors, and the crew was shortly told to don life jackets and prepare to "hit the beach." *Collinstar* was called to try another rescue. But the two-inch hawser she cast to *Colponton* snapped. The tug tried again and a second hawser broke. Meanwhile, the *Colponton* continued drifting toward shore.

"Oddly, the *Collinstar* followed us," said Godfrey. "Her captain was either very brave or very foolish."

Suddenly, a huge wave washed over the tug. A flicker of lights and she was in darkness, her power and engine dead.

Godfrey's recollection is vivid: "I looked back at the *Collinstar*. Broadside to the sea; she was hit by a gigantic wave and flipped over like an empty beer can, her twin screws in the air."

In horror, Godfrey saw why the tug had been following them. Her screws had become entangled in the *Colponton*'s anchor cable and the diamond barge had dragged her helplessly toward the beach.



"Floating around us were mattresses, pillows and crates from the wreck. Among the debris I recognized the body of her second engineer. Several more bodies floated by. The sea was surfing them right up against our big timber rubbing strakes, bursting open their skulls.

"We lost one of our own—a seaman who slipped overboard. He shouted, 'I'll be ok.' But he went down like a stone in his oil skins, jersey and overalls. And though the *Emerson K* circled and circled looking for him, we never saw him again."

In all, seven men died that day. Though the *Colponton* was refloated, the *Collinstar* was damaged beyond salvage. Shortly thereafter, the *Emerson K* sank in Cape Town dock while having her hull repaired and Collins had to spend a small fortune to put her right again. Little wonder the diamond miners thought their mission was jinxed!

Despite these losses, Collins doggedly pursued his dream of mining riches on the Skeleton Coast. But after a while, the Texan's luck turned permanently sour. The cost of operating such a big diamond-mining fleet—the vessels, the equipment, pay for crew and miners, the salvage and repair operations—could not be offset by the dwindling number of diamonds he was lifting from the sea. Finally, the barges, which by 1966 had been taken over by De Beers, were no longer of any practical use.

There was one final indignity visited upon Collins and his diamond barges: As diamond security laws prohibited resale of the specialized barges (the fear was that diamonds might be stowed aboard, to be retrieved later by unscrupulous crew), the vessels were given to the South African armed forces for target practice.

As for Collins, little more is known beyond the fact that the flamboyant Texan died a pauper in London's East End in 1974. And our rough-hewn narrator?

"I too went out of commission," Godfrey told me. "Soon after the accidents, my wife, appalled by what could happen to me out there, would not allow me to return to the sea." ☉

