Mooring system

Background of the Invention

The invention relates to a system for mooring a vessel at an offshore site.

For the offloading of tankers, in particular those that carry Liquefied Natural gas (LNG), it is at times advantageous if they can be moored offshore, in a safe and expedient manner, such that offloading can be performed well away from congested harbour and populated areas. Examples of such offshore offloading systems are known, e.g. the "Accelerate" on-board regasification project in the Gulf of Mexico. Such systems have not found application in a widespread manner.

The major issues in offloading such LNG tanker offshore are many.

For instance, to date, there are only a few (i.e. less than 1%) LNG tankers outfitted with re-gasification equipment. Gasification requires an expensive extension to each vessel such as to be able to re-gasify the cargo on board and this equipment is only required for typically 3 days per, say,3 weeks and hence is cost-inefficient. It is much more efficient if LNG could be offloaded without the need for onboard re-gasification.

Multibuoy moorings have been in use in the offshore oil industry for decades and various vendors supply these systems, but they all suffer from significant drawbacks if bigger ships have to be moored. It takes generally many hours to fit the mooring lines between the ship and the buoys. If any of those lines was to disconnect during the offloading a dangerous situation could occur which could even lead to collision between the vessel and any the offloading equipment near the watersurface.

For these reasons, most, if not all, present LNG terminals are located inside protected waters, some distance away from population centres. A standard quayside/pier arrangement is then used, such as shown in fig. 1 of US-A-6 886 611, employing rubber fenders and nylon or polyester mooring ropes to secure the vessel to the quay/pier.

Since the amount of LNG import is rising dramatically, a significant shortage of suitable vessel berths will occur in the next decade, a shortage which can be mitigated by mooring and offloading such vessels offshore.

Object of the Invention

It is an objective of the invention to provide a temporary mooring system for any vessel, in particular for LNG vessels, ranging in size between 80 000 m3 and 200 000 m3 storage volume, which allows a vessel to be manoeuvred into position by marine support vessels in exactly the same way as employed with an inshore jetty.

According to the invention a system for mooring a vessel at an offshore site is provided, comprising at least one floating mooring element with two opposite mooring bodies for receiving therebetween and engaging the hull of the vessel, wherein each mooring element is movable between an upper position for engaging the hull of the vessel and a lower position in which at least one of its mooring bodies is lowered below the upper position for disengaging the hull of the vessel and wherein further means are provided for maintaining a substantially stationary position of the mooring element relative to the seabed.

Once in position, the system of the invention is mobilised in a matter of minutes to secure the vessel in its position. Since no use is made of synthetic mooring lines to secure the vessel, the reliability of the mooring system is significantly enhanced.

The mooring system can be used in conjunction with a loading system for example a loading system as shown in fig 1 or fig 2 of US-A-6 886 611.

Preferably the system according to the present invention comprises at least two mooring elements spaced in the longitudinal direction of the vessel to be engaged thereby. This offers a very reliable and stable mooring of the vessel.

Further, preferably, the mooring element is anchored to the seabed using anchor lines. As a result the mooring element (and thus the vessel) maintains safely its position, also relative to any loading/unloading equipment (on a quayside or pier, for example).

Moreover it is preferred that the mooring bodies comprise at least one buoyancy tank. The buoyancy determines the position of the floating bodies relative to the water surface. The mooring bodies then may define semi-submersible floating bodies (it even might be possible to have mooring bodies which are fully submersed in the upper position of the mooring element, but preferably the mooring bodies partly are positioned above the water surface).

For lowering and rising the respective mooring body, an array of possibilities exists. For example, at least the buoyancy tank of the mooring body which can be lowered may comprise ballasting means for changing the buoyancy of the mooring body.

As an alternative, however, the mooring body which can be lowered may be provided with hoisting means connected to a ballast weight.

As yet another alternative solution, the mooring body which can be lowered may be provided with hoisting means connected to the seabed.

In a preferred embodiment of the system according to the present invention the mooring bodies comprise settable fender means for engaging the hull of the vessel. When a vessel is positioned between the opposite mooring bodies of the mooring element(s) and

the mooring element(s) has (have) assumed the upper position, the fender means may be set for engaging the hull of the vessel. By way of non-limiting example the fender means may be supported by cylinder-piston assemblies.

To increase the force with which the fender means engage the hull (which force basically is based upon friction) it is preferred that at least some of the fender means comprise a space opening towards the hull of the vessel and with means for lowering the pressure inside the space for creating a suction force on the hull.

In such a case the means for lowering the pressure inside the space for example may comprise pump means for pumping water out of the space. As a result of pumping water out of the space (after the fender means has engaged the hull such that the space is fully closed) the pressure within the space drops with a resulting suction force on the hull of the vessel.

The integrity (and thus the correct functioning) of the system according to the invention may be safeguarded in an easy manner when, according to yet another embodiment thereof, the two mooring bodies of the mooring element are interconnected such by a frame member that the mooring element is substantially U-shaped with the mooring bodies defining the top of the legs of the U and the frame defining the bottom of the U.

Such an embodiment of the system offers the possibility of obtaining an even more stable positioning of the vessel relative to the mooring element, for example when the frame member comprises bumpers for engaging the underside of the hull of the vessel in the upper position of the mooring element.

When, as stated above, the system comprises at least two spaced mooring elements, it is preferred that these at least two spaced mooring elements are interconnected by connecting lines, such as anchor lines (although it also is possible that each mooring element is anchored individually and independent from the remaining mooring elements).

For preventing, in such case, undesired mutual influences between adjoining mooring elements through the connecting lines, it is preferred that the connecting lines extend freely movable through channels provided in the mooring elements. Still it may be wise to provide the connecting lines with stopper means cooperating with the mooring elements for defining at least one position of the connecting lines relative to the mooring elements.

Brief description of the invention

The invention will be further described with reference to the figures.

Fig.1 shows the general arrangement of an embodiment of the mooring system of the invention when not in use, in a side elevational view.

Fig 2 shows a top plan view of fig.1.

Fig.3 shows a front elevational view, on a larger scale, of figure 1 in combination with a detailed view of a part of the system.

Fig.4 shows the general arrangement of the mooring system in a lowered position to receive a vessel.

Fig.5 shows a vessel being manoeuvred into position relative to the mooring system.

Fig.6 shows the situation after the mooring system has again assumed its upper position and before components of the system are mobilised to maintain the tanker in position.

Fig.7 shows the situation after the mooring system has again assumed its upper position and after components of the system are mobilised to maintain the tanker in position.

Fig.8 shows a side elevational view of the system with engaged vessel.

Fig.9 shows a top plan view of the system with engaged vessel.

Description of a preferred embodiment of the invention

In the figures a preferred embodiment of the system of the invention is shown with the main elements to be installed at the offshore site. Firstly referring to figure 3 a pair of opposite semi-submersible floating mooring bodies 1 is provided. These bodies 1 are interconnected by a frame member 2 for defining therewith a substantially U-shaped mooring element 3. These mooring bodies 1 are anchored to the seabed 4 by a plurality of anchor lines 5 (see figures 1 and 2).

Each pair of mooring bodies 1 determines a mooring area for a vessel 16. Preferably, the number of anchor lines 5 is selected such as to provide each individual mooring body 1 with its own means for keeping it stationary. Optionally, the mooring bodies 1 at the same side of the mooring area may also be interconnected to each other, e.g. by an anchor leg 6 (see figure 1 and 2).

In order to avoid congestion and clashing of anchor lines under and near the footprint of the vessel 16, it may be desirable to route those anchor legs 6, which depart from a mooring element 3 towards an adjoining mooring element 3, through a guide pipe 7 integrated in that other mooring element (i.e the body 1 thereof, see detailed view in figure 3, in which the upper right part shows a view of a mooring body 1 in correspondence with figure 1 and on a larger scale, and the lower part shows a cross-section therethrough on a still larger scale), and then on to its seabed anchoring point, in such a way that no force along the anchor leg axis is exerted by that anchor leg 6 on that other mooring element 2.

Advantageously, such an anchor leg 6 comprises a steel cable which is employed in conjunction with a freesliding member 8 in a hawse pipe 7. The freesliding member 8 may be fitted with a stopper (not illustrated), abutting against the hawse pipe, at the outboard side of the mooring body 1. In this way the distance between the two adjacent mooring elements is practically

speaking fixed when the system is installed. Under the action of the various anchor chain forces, the stopper will lose contact with the hawse pipe to allow the anchor chains to "load" the steel cables 6 between the mooring elements (i.e the semi-submersible mooring bodies thereof), and hence transfer the mooring force from the "aft" semi-submersible mooring body to a seabed anchor point.

Each of the mooring bodies 1 comprises (preferably two) buoyancy tanks 9 interconnected by the frame member 2 which, in an upper position of the system, is located underwater at a depth generally below the vessel keel.

Each buoyancy tank 9 is fitted with at least one fender means 10. The configuration is such that at least one fender means 10 can be moved transversely (for example by cylinder-piston assemblies) to engage the hull of the vessel. In this way a clamping force is exerted by the combined fenders 10 on the vessel hull and the magnitude of such clamping forces is pre-selected based on the forces occurring in the anchor legs 5 during the offloading operation. It should be clear that the mooring bodies through the fender means 10 each are fully and independently locked by friction to the vessel hull.

Alternatively, those fenders means 10 located under the water level 11 could be combined with a sealable enclosed space, from which water can be pumped to create an under-pressure and hence additional clamping force on the hull.

The offloading equipment itself is preferably configured as a fixed platform 12 (figure 1) connected by submerged or, alternatively, non-submerged pipelines 13 (figure 4) to the shore. Loading means, such as hard pipe loading arms 14 complete the offloading equipment.

As shown by way of example in Figs. 4-7, the method of operation of the mooring system with semi-submersible floating mooring bodies 1 comprises firstly ballasting the buoyancy tanks 9 of the mooring bodies 1 nearest the vessel (which in figure 4 will approach from the left), such that the respective side of the

frame member 2 is lowered (together with the respective mooring bodies 1) and, if the water is sufficiently shallow, settles temporarily on the seabed 4.

Next (figure 5) the vessel 16 is positioned (for example pushed by its tugboats) over the submerged mooring elements 3, towards the fender means 9 of the mooring bodies 1 opposite the now lowered mooring bodies. In the illustrated embodiment part of these fender means 9 always remain above the water level 11.

Then (figure 6) the buoyancy tanks of the lowered mooring bodies 1 are emptied and the frame member 2 again rises towards the surface, until bumpers 14 provided thereon will make contact with the underside of the hull of the vessel 16.

Finally (figure 7) the fender means 9 are stroked out to engage the hull of the vessel 16.

As an alternative to the shown ballasting system, the lowering of the mooring bodies 1 on one side of the frame member 2 can also be achieved by installing a winch (not shown) on said mooring bodies and hoisting a heavy ballast weight or even connecting the winch line at its free end to an anchor pile , driven into the seabed 4.

In the embodiment described above, each semi-submersible mooring body 1 is anchored individually to the seabed 4. In order to increase the holding capacity of the overall mooring system, more anchor legs can be added.

The invention is not restricted to the above described embodiment which can be varied in a number of ways within the scope of the following claims.

Claims

1. System for mooring a vessel at an offshore site, comprising at least one floating mooring element with two opposite mooring bodies for receiving therebetween and engaging the hull of the vessel, wherein each mooring element is movable between an upper position for engaging the hull of the vessel and a lower position in which at least one of its mooring bodies is lowered below the upper position for disengaging the hull of the vessel and wherein further means are provided for maintaining a substantially stationary position of the mooring element relative to the seabed.

2. System according to claim 1, wherein it comprises at least two mooring elements spaced in the longitudinal direction of the vessel to be engaged thereby.

3. System according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the mooring element is anchored to the seabed using anchor lines.

4. System according to any of the previous claims, wherein the mooring bodies comprise at least one buoyancy tank.

5. System according to claim 4, wherein at least the buoyancy tank of the mooring body which can be lowered comprises ballasting means for changing the buoyancy of the mooring body.

6. System according to any of the previous claims, wherein the mooring body which can be lowered is provided with hoisting means connected to a ballast weight.

7. System according to any of the claims 1-5, wherein the mooring body which can be lowered is provided with hoisting means connected to the seabed.

8. System according to any of the previous claims, wherein the mooring bodies comprise settable fender means for engaging the hull of the vessel.

9. System according to claim 8, wherein at least some of the fender means comprise a space opening towards the hull of the vessel and with means for lowering the pressure inside the space for creating a suction force on the hull.

10. System according to claim 9, wherein the means for lowering the pressure inside the space comprise pump means for pumping water out of the space.

11. System according to any of the previous claims, wherein the two mooring bodies of the mooring element are interconnected such by a frame member that the mooring element is substantially U-shaped with the mooring bodies defining the top of the legs of the U and the frame defining the bottom of the U.

12. System according to claim 10, wherein the frame member comprises bumpers for engaging the underside of the hull of the vessel in the upper position of the mooring element.

13. System according to any of the previous claims and claim 2, wherein the at least two spaced mooring elements are interconnected by connecting lines, such as anchor lines.

14. System according to claim 13, wherein the connecting lines extend freely movable through channels provided in the mooring elements.

15. System according to claim 14, wherein the connecting lines are provided with stopper means cooperating with the mooring elements for defining at least one position of the connecting lines relative to the mooring elements.