

The Masses, The Media And The Invisible Seafarer

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All those who walk up the gangway when a ship is alongside a dock, regard crew-members on board in a rather bizarre way. For some, they are like a ship's gadget, a kind of working gear, an odd device. For others, they are an awkward and embarrassing presence, an annoyance populating the quarters. In particular, a person on board is seen by outsiders as a non-entity. The indistinct and vague silhouette of an individual wandering about the decks is barely noted. Visitors generally have more important business to deal with, than to waste time and efforts in discerning, identifying and penetrating the real-life soul wandering about. For them, crewmembers does not exist. It is as simple as that!

On the other hand, ordinary people living ashore, the landlubbers, see the seafarer as a real, life-like, accident-prone personage, involved in the foundering of the Titanic or in the massive polluting of the pristine Alaskan waters by the Exxon Valdez. So-called public opinion - a blurred and barely discernible aggregation of easy-to-influence individuals usually eager to present listeners and TV viewers with abused sentences, share with the media the perception that seafarers exist solely to be blamed when something at sea goes wrong!

Operators in the shipping community, those who should know better about professionals manning this utensil called a ship (on which they and many others depend for their bread-and-butter), are even less virtuous and decent in their judgements. They see the seafarers as mere tools, unfortunately needed to navigate the ship, and whose most sought-after talent is that they are available in large quantities and at low cost. The seafarer is perceived not as an ordinary individual with a brain, a heart, a soul, but just as a kind of impersonal modern slave, available for hard and prolonged work because of sheer necessity!

Consequently, crews are not regarded as a composite aggregation, a team, of skilled and well-trained individuals exercising respected professions, but as an inevitable necessity to be assembled in the most irrational way, to be dispatched at the cheapest price to the working site and to be, as soon as possible afterwards, completely forgotten.

As a matter of fact, manning agents, the masters of the selection process, base their activity on purely economic factors, cost-effectiveness being the most important and often the only consideration in the recruiting of a seafarer. If the applicant can submit a certificate of competency complying with Stew '78, as amended in '95, and he appears to be reasonably fit, there is no more screening to interrupt the selection process other than deciding the wages. The lower, the better!

Once selected, whatever the vessel, conventional or hi-tech, he is assigned to, the mariner enters his new working environment, often totally unknown to him. He takes charge of complicated instruments frequently never seen before, he lives with a group of fellows that may well come by as many as 26 different countries and he undertakes, motu impromptu, an unguided ship's familiarisation course; all this gives rise to a high likelihood of many future problems. To complicate and confuse all this process, he will be faced with cultural differences and language barriers.

And more harsh problems await the mariner who joins a Flag of Convenience vessel. He lacks the most common rights of a migrant worker and he is alone against the flag, the law and the contract of employment, which is often a mere four pages of nonsense hieroglyphics!

That's why a seafarer, today, perceives himself as an underprivileged and a non-essential person, easily expendable once used. Motivation, ambition, self-esteem, job-satisfaction, loyalty, commitment: all these are irrational words having no place in his cultural sea-chest anymore. He joins a ship with the objective of making enough money to return home and to invest the savings in a more dignified activity.

He knows that overbearing shipowners, pressed by greedy shipmanagers, are asking him to be flexible, meaning with this word, that he has to work much more for substantially less, to operate without complaints in a hostile environment, to accept to live in miserly conditions and to accomplish his duty under pressure and exertion, dictated by economic reasons which favour someone else. And all this, there is no doubt, is to be accepted in soundless silence!

Sub-standard shipping operators ought to be hounded off the seas by the weight of a helpful and mindful public opinion. But seafarers and the marine industry do not have much support of this nature. Other businesses are in a far better position. Air disasters are fully reported by the world's press, and if the cause of the crash is a faulty pin holding the engine to the wing, this is fully reported. It is the same if the pilot overshoots the landing strip. Mechanical failure or human error - public opinion considers both as natural consequences of doing business and people keep flying.

The public has been told repeatedly and in a straightforward manner, that the marine industry is professionally managed by competent, well-trained and experienced seafarers who every day, without posing any hazard, operate thousands of ships, an essential contribution to world trade. But this indisputable truth is counter-balanced by the massive and ill-informed media coverage which follow sea-accidents such as those of Scandinavian Star, Herald of Free Enterprise, Sea Empress, Haven, Moby Prince, Exxon Valdez and others. This has led to a hostile attitude to the widely-publicised "human error" factor. If the error is human, then it must be the seafarer's fault! It is very arduous to explain to public opinion that the human element, not human error, is the major culprit in most sea disasters. It is even more arduous and difficult to explain this to a professional!

The fact that the majority of crossings of the English Channel by oil tankers and ferries take place without any danger to the environment or to lives is not perceived in the positive light that it deserves. Public opinion is largely formed by what the media show; images of an oil-caked sea-bird are presented time after time until this image becomes synonymous with a tragedy provoked by seafarers. The 900 victims of the Estonia disaster in the Baltic Sea are today less remembered than that poor bird!

Lloyd's List, the best-known and most widely read maritime daily newspaper, prints 17,000 copies daily, and it is thought to reach a total reading audience of about 100,000. Fairplay, Trade Winds, Seatrade, Tecnologie del Mare, Uomini e Navi, Avvisatore Marittimo and others print just a few thousand each. In no way can these compete with the Sun (four million copies daily), Wall Street Journal (1,800,000 daily) or the Daily Telegraph (1,000,000 daily), the New York Times and the Washington Post.

Some of the senior executives, operators, insurers, charterers, brokers, salvage experts, surveyors, port pilots and mariners read Lloyd's List and another one or two daily papers; but people who enact and enforce laws which directly and materially affect international maritime structures, rarely read it, while they sharply peruse every morning at least three or four major newspapers. This may explain why, under strong pressure from public opinion influenced by reports written by mostly incompetent journalists about the grounding of the Exxon Valdez, the US Congress unanimously and hastily approved the Oil Pollution Act 1990. A costly and useless regulation. The tanker went

aground through an error in navigation. The Act does not correct any navigational procedures, merely legislating that a double bottom hull would suffice!

On the other hand the shipping industry is not without controls regarding safety of ships and prevention of environment disasters through pollution. Ships' classification is the primary and traditional function of Classification Societies. The class concept originated from the insurer's need to know that risks during normal operations at sea are acceptable for granting insurance coverage. There was, at the beginning, one recognized society, the Lloyd's Register of Shipping, then others entered the market. Now the 11 most important and reputable societies are grouped in the IACS, the International Association of Classification Societies, while a large number of newcomers are struggling to make it into this select club.

In Italy, the RINA, Registro Italiano Navale, is the technical body of the Maritime Administration which carries out surveys required by international conventions and issues relevant certificates. RINA is presently authorized by about 70 Flag State Administrations to provide the same service to them. As with the other 10 members of IACS, RINA assists shipping companies to comply with legislation on safety at sea and marine pollution prevention. Due to its considerable know-how and experience the RINA certified 650 companies in ISO 9000 standards and since 1995 is actively cooperating in ship inspections with Port State Administrations (US Coast Guards, Australia Maritime Safety Authority(AMSA), UK Marine Safety Agency, Netherlands Shipping Inspectorate, France Maritime Affairs, and many others). As of 31 March 1997, 170 detention orders of 130 individual ships for a total number of 1.672 deficiencies were performed. Other Agencies are doing even better due to an early participation in the Memorandum of Paris on Port State Control. IACS members are actively involved in the application of STCW 78/95, the standards for seafarers training, last amended in February 1st 1997, whose objective is to improve education, skills, workload and other quality aspects of those involved in navigation.

More prominence is often given by newspapers to Flags of Convenience, FoC. There is more spicy news in this largely unregulated maritime labour regime which comprises the majority of the 76.000 ships plying the waters of the world. And press relationships with FoC are usually two-fold, disagreeable in case of a sea accidents and disturbingly sensitive when issuing solicited and well-paid editorials!

But Flags of Convenience have much more appeal to unscrupulous owners. Therefore to counterbalance their infamous influence and increasing "deflagging", some Maritime Administrations decided to institute a parallel register for ships, known as the Second National Register. Norway (NIS), Germany (DIS) and others - most likely Italy will soon join them - are offering ship owners the possibility of selecting crews of any nationality, generally the less expensive available on the labour market, fiscal bonuses and other fringe benefits to induce them not to deflag any further. This option, which solves some problems, is not without creating others.

Welfare, state protection and social benefits especially designed for seafarers were distinctive legacies of countries traditionally marine-oriented in the past, but now suffering a decline of their fleet because of the widespread flagging out. Such traditional maritime nations had in place structures, such as the Shipping Office in UK or the Contenzioso (Litigation) Office in Italy, ensuring that seafarers were fed and paid accordingly to labour agreements and the laws of the land, and that accommodation was clean and adequate. Such public structures were intended to check and rectify mistreatment and abuses, and to put a stop to the exploitation of seafarers; but the competitive world of maritime shipping today wants no hindrance in its path. As a consequence, these positions were abandoned, even with protective laws still in place. FoC's want unrestrained liberty for their activities, no fastening buckles!

Because of their plain and useless organisation, FoC administrations know very little about the people on board their ships and they see no need to involve themselves in such non-profit activities as the generation and enforcement of sound employment laws and welfare provisions. The naive and basic maritime rules of FoC registers, where existing, gives little recognition to people working under their flag, and their ineffectual and incompetent organisation is incapable of enforcing anything.

St. Vincent & Grenadines register is located in a modest office in Switzerland, enrolls more than thousands ships and monitors the whole business with three inspectors. Cyprus is located in a larger bureau in Limassol, has 3.000 ships in the books and nine inspectors! Both these administrations, together with Malta, Romania and others, feature every month, without fail, at the top of casualty list and the catalogue of vessels detained according to the Memorandum of Paris because of safety and health deficiencies. To put it bluntly, Flags of Convenience are providing disgraceful shipowners with a lawless environment in which sovereignty is in their selfish hands.

Consequently, lack of control together with commercial pressure driven by a thoughtless imposition of deceitful economic rules dictated by competition, has made a ship's workload grow into an onerous and stressful activity. A routine day at sea is made of 14/15 hours of duty. When coasting in and out of various ports, it is not unusual to work 16 to 18 hours with short periods of rest when the possibility of getting sufficient sleep is made very difficult, particularly on small vessels subject to vile weather conditions and hull vibrations. Fatigue can kill!

Long hours of watch, excessive workload and lack of rest, lead to a wide range of conditions such as depression, heart problems, eating disorders and a greater risk of personal injury. Fatigue may cause psychological and physiological disturbances accompanied by emotional stress. Failing attention and anxiety may arise also, increasing the risk of accidents.

The revised STCW and the ILO Conventions set a maximum limit of duty on board at 14 hours per day and 72 hours per week, with a minimum of 10 hours rest per day or 77 per week - working and rest hours to be duly recorded in a file. The traditional watch schedules adopted at sea, 4 hours on/8 hours off on board ocean going ships and 4 on/4 off or 6 on/6 off almost universally adopted on coaster and cabotage ships, are not distressing per se, but are not adjusted to the man's sleeping cycle and have a detrimental side effect on the circadian rhythms. This decreases human efficiency and increases reaction-times in emergency situations.

It is inappropriate that crewmembers are called every day to work many more hours than the basic eight-hour scheme. A recent study highlighted that on board the EU fleet, 38% of the First Officers and 23% of the Masters work an average 5.3 hours and other Deck Officers an average of 4 hours, more than the traditional eight hours cycle per day. Ratings work from a minimum of 4 hours to a maximum of 10 hours more than the contractual 8 hours per day.

Truck drivers have a strict control of their working and resting periods, frequently controlled by the highway police. Train conductors have a well organised working pattern, normally not exceeding six hours per day and rest until next day. Alitalia pilots fly 40 hours per month.

Seafarers, Whatever The Birthplace, Work Round The Clock!

Port State Control is not yet so efficient as to monitor properly in this matter despite last year's diffusion. It is improving at a fast pace and good results will come in due time. Slavery, virtually, has been banned, just two centuries ago!

The remorseless reduction in crew levels carried out in the last two decades in the wake of naval automation, has been singled out and blamed as the most common cause of fatigue on board ships. Container ships with up to 6.000 boxes full of precious cargo and Ultra Large Crude Carriers carrying 500.000 tons of dangerous liquids, are manned by a bunch of lonely souls. Minimum safe manning levels do not reflect the realities of trading patterns and duties allocation, but any attempt to stop reduction of crews is overpowered and neutralised by the trend towards building hi-tech ships whose handling requires fewer and fewer operators.

All those involved in the fast-expanding technological revolution bear an element of collective responsibility for solving man/machine interface conflicts. The situation requires a firm decision to turn wheel back and to change course towards human dignity on board!

To distribute adequately the workload without losing efficiency in the presence of minimal crews, would require the acceptance of a conceptual new modus operandi where every crewmember is a navigator. This would involve a profound change of tradition by implying that every crewmember, engineers and ratings included, should be trained to perform safe watchkeeping as any Deck Officer and be paid accordingly. Deplorably, Unions and shipowners are concurrently resisting such an approach.

Wages and living conditions of seafarers are very obvious to the eyes of our Chaplains who visit ships in ports. They see at first hand how onerously the majority of seafarers gain their daily bread. A ship is not asked to be a four star hotel, but neither is it expected to be a camp-site! A ship is a profit-making enterprise, whose benefits should rightly go to the shipowners in measure commensurate to their relevant investment of money, but, even more rightly, in fair proportion also to the seafarers for their laborious efforts.

On the contrary, our pastors are frequently confronted with the anger and resentment of seafarers cheated of the little that is their due. Even mail is sometimes delayed in delivery. Morale, persistently, hits the bottom. What chaplains see, journalists do not see and consequently readers do not see either! As far as public opinion is concerned, the seafarer is practically invisible.

Ships of the future might well have a two-man crew, but the seafarer's future is dependent on ethical, not technical, solutions.

And please, if you can do something to help all concerned re- focus on seafarers' human dignity, thanks!