

ADDRESS TO SAMSA DAY OF THE SEAFARER EVENT 25 JUNE 2021

Seafarer experiences – prior and during COVID-19

Honourable Minister, esteemed guests.

Historical changes

Life at sea in the early days was very different to what it is now. However, as much as things change, they stay the same. Consider this – in 1895 a 20 year old young upstart by the name of Marconi invented radio, and as one Captain complained to another, whilst the transoceanic cable, shortened the line of communication, this “strengthened owners control and gradually reduced the role of the captain, thus reducing him in his view to the role of an underpaid first-class clerk.” How strange that this is exactly what friends warned me about 120 years later when I expressed an interest in returning to the sea after a long career ashore!

One of the things that attracted me to the sea, was what arguably makes the seafaring life distinctive - the persistence of maritime law. At the centre of this law was the master, who, in a contemporary’s view, was “answerable for everything, and subject to emergencies which perhaps no other man executing authority among civilised people is subject to.”

Exploring this further, a gentleman by the name of Hopkins wrote in 1873 that “mariners were exposed to a class of casualties and perils from which the landsman is exempt.” He then listed a concerning range of possible problems “There are troubles in port as well as at sea; monetary embarrassment, legal structures, opposed interests, conflicting authorities.

Seafaring is one of the oldest professions around, and dates back to the days that trade first started. Of course it has changed, we have roughly 56000 ships in the world, manned by about 1.65 million seafarers. Roughly 9% of ships are passenger ships, the balance are cargo ships of one type or another. Passenger ships are responsible for employing

about 25% of all seafarers, most of these being hotel staff. Mr Hopkins would be horrified to learn that instead of the troubles he spoke of being resolved, they are today much worse than even he would have imagined. It is too easy to blame the pandemic as many do, but the fact is that Covid has unmasked a plethora of underlying problems which lie beneath the surface.

Crew changes and the vaccine

Most seafarers today are contractual workers – a problem in itself – whose contracts are either extended beyond their wishes, or they sit at home, unable to travel, waiting for a new contract. For example, I signed a 6 month contract to serve as Master of a Bulk Carrier, in August last year. My ship traded mostly around the middle and Far East. I was able to finally leave my vessel only at the end of April this year – that’s nearly nine months. Yet, I was one of the lucky ones, I am fortunate to work for employers who work hard to support their crews even to the point of deviating their ships, to effect crew changes. My employers also fortunately resist the immoral attempts of charterers to write a “No crew change” clause into the Charter Parties.

In our case, it was more the failure of governments to comply with the legislation which they themselves embraced - I speak of the Maritime Labour Convention or MLC, and to allow crew changes to happen. I finally managed to disembark – not without difficulty – in India, and promptly contracted Covid whilst travelling. Please note that I exclude South Africa from the countries on my personal “black list” – thanks to DOT, and SAMSA in particular, we are a regime which is friendly to crew changes, yet effects these sensibly and with due regard to the proper health protocols. Thank you SAMSA and DOT for not agreeing to crew changes, then making them difficult to achieve by imposing complicated requirements for them, as others have done!! (I think here of one country which has allowed many seafarers to disembark, but only during certain hours. The same country is a major bunkering port, and ships very often arrive at night, and sail a few hours later, meaning that no crew

changes are possible to effect.) Now, as Mr Madiya said so correctly, it is time to get to work on making the vaccine available to all visiting seafarers, whether South African or foreign, now that the J&J single-dose vaccine is available once again. Please, we need this jab to keep us safe whilst travelling, as well as keep us safe from shore officials, whilst aboard .

Treatment of seafarers by port officials

I personally didn't travel to a large number of countries during my last 8 month stint, but can assure you that South Africa was the friendliest of them all. We were treated as lepers in most others, to the point of not even being allowed out on deck in port in one. I must ask why, when we are hardly super-spreaders. So long as we abide by sensible and strict protocols – which we do - we live in secure bubbles, which are only breached by shore officials. It is simply not possible for us to be infected whilst at sea! Accessibility to the vaccine will reduce this risk.

I cannot talk about this subject without mentioning the unmentionable – the case of the Master who died at sea recently, after his ship called at one of our own ports. Perhaps he was infected whilst travelling to the ship, we will never know. What has been astonishing has been the attitude of the countries the ship sailed past or to, which firstly refused him treatment, and then once he died, refused to permit his body to be taken ashore, and to be repatriated. I am sorry to have to mention this, but there was even talk of his body being incinerated at sea. Are you aware that his crew would most likely have had to dismember it, to fit it into the incinerator? I would suggest that it would only be fair for seafarers and their employers to start boycotting countries who treat their fellow humans so badly.

Inability to get back to work

Forget about the lack of shore leave – I know of no ports which permit this – and the chance to get to the shops to buy that item which you really need, that is not going to happen. Put aside for a moment that fact that seafarers are unable to travel home when someone close to them is ill, or even dies – this happened to me, I was informed that my sister had passed away, whilst I was navigating my vessel through the Singapore Straits - *one just has to endure* these things. Think for a moment instead of the fact, that for every seafarer unable to sign off and proceed on leave, another is unable to get back to work. Think of the risks they face when they do travel – remembering that only one or two countries have made vaccines available to seafarers (and SA is not one of them, yet.)

Anomalies in way seafarers are treated

Other than Covid, there are many other troubles, to use Mr Hopkin's words, which we face. Remember that every officer aboard a ship has to have a CoC. Every seafarer – officers and ratings, by law have to have attended various basic courses, as required by the STCW Code. Yet, we deal every day with ship's agents, Customs officers, Immigration officials, even shipowners who are not required to have any qualification whatsoever, and who have little if any understanding of the life of a seafarer. In the case of port authorities such as Customs, Port Health, and so on, we are subjected to extortion attempts in many ports every time we berth. I steel myself every time we arrive in port, to stand up to these officials who demand to be allowed into the Crew Accommodation, on some ruse or another. Of course they are legally entitled to, but I have yet to find just ONE, who was able to show me a valid Covid certificate showing that his test results were negative.

Blame culture

Putting Covid aside for a moment, I ask that you think for a moment about Minimum Safe Manning. This is the minimum level of manning which the administration considers safe for the running of a ship. But

just how safe is it when the same Administrations have to police Work/Rest hours, which so many “flog” when they know that they will get into trouble when their hours have yet again “gone red.” Just how much thought has gone into this? Lets’ consider Port State Inspections, and Vetting inspections, the purpose of which is said to be to check compliance with SOLAS and other statutory instruments, and to maintain standards. I support this in principle, of course. However, these “inspections” have fact become audits, or fault-finding missions of the worst type. Of course somebody will get into trouble when adverse findings are made. I agree that the one must be drawn somewhere, but just how much thought has gone into deciding where to draw that line. There are of course practical Inspectors, but there are also may others, less-trained usually, who adopt officious, even arrogant police-type attitudes when encountering even minor administrative misdemeanours, such as the failure to sign a page of two of a logbook. All this does, is to promote the “Blame Game” which all P&I Clubs and others with genuine vested interests in safety at sea will tell you is not conducive to a safety culture. So, it is self-defeating, and wholly unfair in practice. There are surely better ways of ensuring compliance.

Quality of Life aboard

The quality of life aboard ships is nowhere near what it is ashore, regardless of what an employer invests in this area. Connectivity has improved, but Wifi remains expensive, and very slow. The availability of news from ashore is tightly controlled, perhaps due to the cost of delivering it to a ship. Seafarers are normal people – or most of us are, anyway – and we enjoy hearing what is happening ashore. There are limits to this of course, I personally hope never to have to live through a US presidential election again, or not while I am at sea anyway! My Filipino crew were starved of any local information, which for them was a challenge, albeit a relatively minor one.

Training – are we wasting students’ time and money?

Finally, I need to raise concerns which I have with the training of our youngsters. In the first instance, I have concerns about an education system which it seems complies more with the needs of our education authorities than with our actual training needs. This is a subject of its’ own.

SAMSA introduced the National Cadet Programme some years ago, which has met with only partial success, mainly because of the paucity of berths which are made available by foreign shipping companies. Yet we continue to motivate and inspire youngsters to go to sea, churn them out in numbers, and create expectations of employment which we cannot meet. I know of many graduates who qualified in our institutions, but have yet to find a berth. Is it fair to promote a career at sea when we are not going to be able to meet their expectations? I can only hope that more will be done to encourage foreign companies who trade with SA to employ SA cadets.

It is also time to engage constructively with programs in SA such as the SATS General Botha Old Boys Association Bursary Fund, remembering that it was alumni of this famous training school that built the excellent reputation South African seafarers have enjoyed internationally for 100 years. Today they have returned to give back, by sponsoring promising youngsters through Lawhill Maritime College, and tertiary training, but mostly, and especially, through the way the old salts – some of them legends in the international maritime industry - mentor and encourage the youngsters. I can tell you that in my experience, their cadets are amongst the best prepared I have had the pleasure of employing, and of sailing with. They have been trained by the best, after all.

Port Welfare Committees

I urge you also to throw your weight behind programs such as the Port Welfare Committees, which can make a big difference in the everyday

life of seafarers when in port. My colleague and friend Rev Mark Claasen will no doubt tell you more about this.

Conclusion

In closing, I thank you for this opportunity to present the case of the seafarer, and appeal to you to do something about a situation which is very wrong. We have heard many words about what WILL be done, but many of these words are empty. An example is that SA declared Seafarers to be Key Workers last year, but how has that translated into practice? Yes, Crew Changes is a part of that, but I put it to you that until vaccines are made available, this will continue to sound hollow. It is your actions which will effect not only the lives of those 1.6 million seafarers currently at sea, but also of the lives of their families – I would estimate around 8 million lives around the world in total, if not more.

Thank you.

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