Seamanship, the Forgotten Factor

It has been repeatedly observed that nowadays, seamanship on board commercial cargo ships tends to be extinct. If it is indeed so, one cannot help but wonder in what degree this has taken place, which factors contributed and how severe the related consequences are for the shipping industry. But how important is the term seamanship? In order to comprehend the gravity of the term, an attempt at an analysis can be performed.
Seamanship should not only be interpreted within the literal sense of the word, which involves the practical art of operating a ship. It should be attributed a wider meaning, which is a combination of experience, knowledge, professionalism, safety culture and performance ability on board a vessel. 

It is also worth mentioning that seamanship involves knowledge on a variety of fields and development of specialised skills including, but not limited to: management, navigation, weather meteorology and forecasting, watchkeeping, ship handling, operation of deck equipment, anchors and cables, communications, precise execution of various duties such as operating cargo handling equipment and cargo pumps, handling dangerous cargoes, tank cleaning operations, dealing with emergencies and more. The degree of knowledge needed within these areas is dependent upon the nature of the work, rank and the type of vessel on which a mariner is employed.

We should not omit to mention that seamanship is transferred from one generation of seamen to another. In a nutshell, seamanship is a “best practice guide” based on all aforementioned elements.

Paper Ocean
But is seamanship still at play, or has it been lost somewhere in the immense volume of bureaucracy? Nowadays, one might claim that seamanship tends to be obsolete and, consequently, the number of accidents tends to increase. Should one wonder why, the reasons are quite transparent: each one of us, members of the shipping community, has contributed in transforming captain and crew to bureaucrats.

A seaman’s life is not as it used to be twenty years ago. In the past, a ship’s master had only one or two folders behind his desk whereas now are forty. Taking into account the mass of paperwork created and maintained on board, the additional paperwork required to meet each oil major’s criteria and whims, and of course adding the actual operation of the ship, master and crew are under constant pressure. As a consequence, it is almost certain there will be an impact both on vessel maintenance and safe operation with potentially severe and domino consequences including possibly loss of human life and environmental impact.

It should not be omitted that the combination of required paperwork and operational/commercial necessities increase the fatigue on board, since the number of crew is either decreased or remains the same - at best. The shipping industry has invested a vast amount of resources in training and education of seafarers for better performance on board, safety and survival at sea. There are numerous training programmes, manuals, requirements of the International Maritime Organisation, rules and legislation that modern seamen are required to be intimately familiar with. However, training and education are not enough for safe navigation in the so-called “paper ocean” and the fearful storms blowing within. If one collected all the requirements that seafarers have to respond to in one single volume, we would be surprised: “Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea” - the novel of the famous writer Jules Verne - would be a small noteblock compared to that book.

Errare Humanum Est
But are all these regulations sufficient in order to establish high quality standards and achieve good seamanship? Could the increasing ocean of paper and bureaucracy be the main contributing factor that corroded seamanship as we knew it?

Seamen are constantly being judged for their overall seamanship skills. In case of a marine incident, it is often concluded that the root cause was human error. “Errare humanum est” - to make mistakes is part of the human nature. Many factors are taken into account while investigating reasons for accidents. Fatigue, stress, lack of experience, short period of adaptation... However, in many cases, all findings could be summarised as “lack of seamanship”.

Simple, Safe, Straightforward and Practical
There is no objection that the ISM era has brought a level of quality in the shipping industry. But since then, numerous new requirements and regulations came up - and their number is still increasing. It is self-evident that all regulations in the form of conventions, codes, resolutions and circulars had and have only one scope: the establishment of high standards for safety and quality in the shipping industry. Most of these were deemed necessary and in fact might contribute to some improvements. Yet, we truly cannot express satisfaction with the current overall picture of shipping.

Quite possibly, shipping would be drastically improved by embracing and restoring the lost traditional ideals of being simple, safe, straightforward and above all: practical. This is not feasible without reducing, as far as possible, uncontrolled bureaucracy and the associated “paper kingdom”.

In addition, implementation of good seamanship and achievement of quality standards and achieve good seamanship? Could the in-

Give Us Your Opinion
Readers are invited to give their views on the observations of Capt. Kannelopoulos on seamanship in this article. We will provide the author with your views and remarks and publish the responses in one of the coming issues of SWZ Maritime.

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