

# ***SEAMANSHIP THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR***

It has been repeatedly observed that nowadays, Seamanship onboard commercial cargo ships tend 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 are the related consequences for the shipping industry. But how important is the term Seamanship?

In order to comprehend the gravity of the term an attempt for an analysis can be performed. Seamanship shouldn't be interpreted only 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 onboard a vessel. It's worth also to mention that seamanship involves a knowledge on a variety of fields and development of specialized skills including but not limited to: management, navigation, weather meteorology and forecasting, watch keeping, ship-handling, operation of deck equipment, cargo pumps, anchors and cables, communications, precise execution of various duties such as cargo handling equipment, cargo pumps, 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. But is seamanship still at play, or it has 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.

Seaman's life isn't as it used to be twenty years ago. One can recall that a ship's Master had only one or two folders behind his desk whereas nowadays there are forty.

Taking into account the mass of paperwork created and maintained onboard a vessel, the additional paperwork required to meet each Oil Major's criteria and of course adding the actual operation of the ship, Master and crew are under constant pressure.

As a consequence, it is almost certain that 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 onboard, 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 onboard, safety and survival at sea.

There are numerous training programs, manuals, requirements of the International Maritime Organization, rules and legislation that modern seamen are required to be intimately familiar with. However training and education are not enough to 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:

“20 thousand leagues under the sea” – the novel of the famous writer Jules Verne – would be a small notebook compared to that book. 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 which 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 the findings could be summarized as “lack of seamanship”.

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 are still increasing. It is self-evident that all regulations in the form of conventions, codes, resolutions and circulars had and have only one scope which is the establishment of high standards for the Safety and Quality in the shipping industry.

One can realize that most of these were deemed necessary and in fact might contribute to some improvements. However, we truly cannot express satisfaction with the overall picture of shipping as of now. 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 Safety onboard will be attained through continuous onboard training, frequent supervision / attendances of experienced ex mariners /superintendents, management of risk and implementation of good or -as typically called- best working practices.

Good seamanship commands that each one of the mariners serving onboard a vessel should have strong self-initiatives and moreover have set their personal high professional standards.

Crew bonding and participation is of paramount importance for morale boosting purposes. A glimpse of light will then be visible at the end of the tunnel: the lost seamanship.

**Source : Capt. Charis Kanellopoulos**