



The Apostleship of the Sea - Diocese of Beaumont

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On the Waterfront and the Ship - What Seafarers Are Saying

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For more than 10 years, it has been a requirement that every deck officer must take a Bridge Resource Management course. This course teaches techniques which emphasize decision making based upon conditions related to workload and potential threats to the vessel. The intent of the program is to define the individual task and responsibilities of the various team members while developing a situational awareness to prevent individual errors.

We have seen the effectiveness of BRM in the continued decline in the number of collisions, allisions and groundings. The Coast Guard performance report for 2009 noted that over the five-year period between fiscal year 2005 and fiscal year 2009, collisions, allisions and groundings declined by 9 percent.

What surprises me, is that the integrated approach of BRM is not recognized in the relationship between seafarers and the integrated global transportation system. Instead of working toward a goal of greater solidarity, cooperation and coordination in the ever greater globalized world, we find too many examples of what can only be described as, "I don't give a damn about you, just take care of my needs!"

The best-known example of the non integration of seafarers in the globalized transportation system is shore leave. There are many stories of seafarers being denied shore leave, and do not require repeating here. However, the words of a shipmate from the US-flagged *M/V Seabulk Challenge* are very relevant.

In October of 2001, after loading at Camden, N.J., where we had fairly easy access from the dock to the main gate where we were able to catch a cab to town, we sailed to Houston. On arrival, we were informed by the chief mate that we would not be able to leave the immediate area of the ship, nor walk the 50 yards to the main gate to get a cab. This was a particularly hard pill to take because during the 30-hour discharge period, we watched dozens of tank trucks drive right by the side of the ship, and enter the bowels of the facility. In addition, many of the unlicensed crew were from Houston, and used these port calls to visit families, and take care of personal business.

As one crewmember stated to me as we crossed paths in the passageway, "They want our oil, but they do not want us!"

Though his words grew out of frustration, the wisdom they hold is very relevant. US and foreign seafarers, those who work deepsea, on our rivers, or in the oil patch have heard much talk about

globalization, the importance of integrating all the elements of the transportation system, and the importance of overcoming all unnecessary impediments to the flow of commerce. However, each has experienced being cut out or alienated from the integrated maritime logistic system.

The goal of the maritime transportation network should be total integration of all aspects of the system. This applies especially for the human element. The many stories of arbitrary denial of shore leave, extortion-like fees for escorting, the establishment of a maze of rules whose only purpose seems to be to frustrate seafarers; all point to a failure on the part of the maritime logistic system to recognize the mariner as an essential element to the whole system, and the primacy of his or her human dignity.

What do I mean by the statement “. . . primacy of his or her human dignity?” Let me give a negative example from my own Neches-Sabine Waterway. A tanker calls at a Port Arthur facility on Friday afternoon, but because of the coming weekend, the lateness of the hour, and the lack of overtime for Customs & Border Protection agents, the crew must wait until Monday to be cleared. However, the vessel was able to begin to discharge its cargo in Port Arthur, and then shift to Beaumont, where it completed discharging, because its cargo could be cleared by a fax to CBP. By the time CBP finally boarded the ship, all cargo operations had been completed, and the vessel was preparing to sail.

Though one can make all kinds of arguments for the efficient movement of commerce, if the human dignity of seafarers is not respected, we have a broken and exploitative system. From a seafarer and a seafarer welfare perspective, “If you can’t take care of the human beings, then you shouldn’t be able to take care of the cargo.”

We cannot be satisfied by building a globalized, integrated maritime system that allows products, to move freely and efficiently throughout the world, while at the same time, ignoring the needs of the people who actually do the moving. We must work to build a system that works to value people as much as the movement of products.

Building such a system can be difficult since economic structures often see people not as human beings with dignity, but as labor, or as liabilities or expenses. A company may have a great mission statement that states “. . . our people are our greatest asset,” or “. . . we honor the mariner,” but the reality is that the mariner is just a temporary contract worker, who can be replaced at any time.

Last summer, Pope Benedict XVI offered the world an opportunity to reflect more deeply on our globalized world in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*. Instead of just focusing only on the efficient and integrated system for the movement of goods, services and capital, he invited everyone to reflect on the importance of solidarity in any system. In paragraph 38 of *Caritas in veritate*, he notes:

“Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone.”

When we begin imagining our systems through the lense of solidarity, then many of the

challenges that we presently are facing will go away. We have begun to see some efforts in this area in recent Coast Guard guidelines.

One example of a change from just security and commerce to one that is more inclusive of the seafarer and the human factor was the April 7, 2008 Sector Houston-Galveston PSIB 04-08. Capt. William Diehl stressed to his local stakeholders that:

“It is also important that port facilities seek a balance between the needs of security and the needs of the ship and its crew. A singular focus on security of the port facility is contrary to the letter and the spirit of the ISPS Code and will have possible negative consequences for the international maritime transportation system that is a vital component of our global economy.”

On November 26, 2008, Capt. Robert O’Brien, Jr., of Sector New York, issued a white paper that furthered the Houston-Galveston PSIB. Instead of focusing exclusively on the ship/facility interface from a security and the facility’s property rights, he expanded maritime security to include the needs of the seafarer, and the safe operation of the ship. Some of these safety concerns directly related to seafarers. These concerns were:

1. No security standard for facilities to address crew and vessel service access, which has inadvertently resulted in an increase of risk to shipboard operations/conditions.
2. Potential for having less competent seafarers employed on ships entering U.S. due to ports with extensive access restrictions.
3. Rapid crew change reduces time frames necessary to comply with STCW.
4. Crew morale impacted due to no shore leave, delayed stores delivery, chaplains being denied access.

Finally, on October 8, 2009, RDML Kevin Cook issued the ALCOAST 575/09. This instruction is the strongest and clearest call by the Coast Guard to incorporate the human factor and seafarers into the maritime security matrix. This document clarifies the right of seafarers for reasonable shore leave. It states:

“The Office of Maritime and International law (CG-0941) recently completed a legal review on the issue of seafarer access and determined that the Coast Guard in meeting its international and statutory obligation has the authority to mandate MTSA regulated facilities provide reasonable access to seafarers. This may be the subject of a future regulatory change.”

In addition, the Captain of the Port will confirm that every facility security plan describes coordination of shore leave.

Many US ports offer warm and welcoming environments for seafarers. They recognize that the better they meet the needs of the ship and its seafarers, the higher value they offer their customers. However, there are a handful of facilities, which from a seafarer’s perspective, do everything they can do, under the guise of security and liability, to make life absolutely miserable, and say “We just want your oil, and not you.”

However, one cannot conclude that once the maritime security issues are solved, our problems will also be solved. The seafarer's feelings of the lack of integration and solidarity are not limited to shore leave issues. Today, the seafarer finds himself or herself struggling to continue to meet new requirements and standards. If these standards are not met, the mariner will be cut out of the industry.

Three of these requirements or higher standards are:

1. A higher level of responsibility;
2. An ongoing regime of training;
3. A higher level of personal fitness, and better health.

These changes have brought about a great deal of cursing and grumbling among my fellow seafarers. I hear the following statements over and over again:

1. What, me worry? It's the company's problem?
2. I have been doing this job for years, what can they teach me in school?
3. I don't have a weight problem. I can still do my job.

There is not enough time on this panel to go into depth on these statements, but let me just say that with the Department of Justice's greater use of the Seaman's Manslaughter Act, and tendency to criminally prosecute unintended pollution incidents, it is no longer just the company's problem anymore.

Second, we mariners are transitioning from on the job training, to ever more formal and standardized training. The level of professionalism has risen significantly for officers, but with the new standards being discussed at the IMO, the expectation is that ratings will also be called to a higher level of professionalism.

Finally, the days of Heavy Duty, the 450 lb. fireman who sailed with me on the Sabine Towing tanker *Guadalupe* are numbered. The new medical NVIC has caused no little complaining from the mariners. However, if one is really concerned about mariners as individuals and as a crew, someone who has serious medical issues becomes a threat to his or her own health, as well as the safety and welfare of his or her fellow mariners.

The seafarer experiences many things that reinforce the feeling that he or she is either an outsider looking in, or someone who is not valued as a human being. The reality is that we desperately need the seafarer. He or she brings the things that are essential for our way of life. If the mariner does not leave home, and operate these very sophisticated and valuable ships, our lives will be so much less. In this vein, we are joined with the seafarer in a very intimate bond. For us to live as we live, we must support the seafarer so that he or she will continue to support us. If we are in solidarity with each other for our very lives, then the ominous struggle that both the US and foreign shipping companies and maritime unions are having in attracting both the number and the quality of men and women necessary to be the next generation of professional mariners should be very worrisome.

Finally, we will have reached the goal of solidarity and responsibility for seafarers when we think of the maritime industry, that we not only think of this (Maersk SHIP), but also this (SEAFARERS CREW Shot).