

HOW SHIPPING COMPANIES AND MARITIME PORT AUTHORITIES ADDRESS THE WELL BEING OF SEAFARERS

Good morning all. Let me thank OAS/CIP for inviting me to speak on the topic **Social Responsibility for Seafarers-Wellbeing, Safety and Labor Dignity**. I am going to focus on How Shipping Companies and Maritime Authorities address the wellbeing of Seafarers. Let me also greet my Co panelists Captain Andre LeGoubin, a fellow member of the Nautical Institute and Captain Marisa Abarca, Director of Ports, Secretary of the Navy, Mexico. Together we are going to take you on an interesting voyage as we navigate through this very complex topic. I will first talk about my career as I am not from a family of seafarers and neither did I live near the sea.

I went to sea in 1967 on Texaco tankers. I could not even dream about an experience like this. It was difficult sailing around the British Coast experiencing fog, cold weather, very powerful storms and very long hours of work. As a Cadet on a British ship with English labor, I realized I was the bottom of the ladder and in the UK, racism was rampant. For the record, I did not know I was black, but that is another topic. Another matter was Cadets did not get overtime so I was used for any and every job.

On trips like this, you slept when you could and also made time to study as I had correspondence courses to do before I qualified to go to college to sit for my first Certificate of Competency. And most importantly get ashore when you could. Mind you, I could not do much as the ship did not carry duty free items and my Salary left me a meagre six US dollars a month to spend on goodies.

This introduction to life at sea had its advantages as it toughened me and I became a dependable cargo handling seafarer. For some reason I understood the workings of pumps and segregation of cargoes with surprising ease. Another thing was understanding radar operations. Radars were new and our ship had a first generation radar that only the Radio officer understood. I was a voracious reader and spent spare moments at sea with the Radio Officer and pretty soon I was recommended to the Captain as one who really understood and could operate the radar.

That had its advantages, as most days there was fog or very bad weather, and I would be summoned to the bridge, to operate the Radar. Here I was an eighteen-year-old giving instructions to the master on the situation no one could see, zero visibility, because of the fog, and it worked. I was relieved from the chores that a lowly ranking person would have to do and I used my time on the bridge wisely.

On a ship like that, consideration for the wellbeing of the seafarers was not primary. The focus was safe navigation, getting to port on time as many ports were land locked and ensuring food was provided. There was no time for socializing on board. At the load port, the refinery had a bus service basically to drop you at the nearest pub and return you after the pub closed. The trips were varied. The length of a voyage never bothered me as I looked upon it as gaining sea time. I joined my first ship after sea school in 1967 and left the ship about six months after to join the replacement ship, as the previous ship was on its way to the breakers. I left my second ship in mid-1969 to attend a Mid Cadetship course and returned to the ship until 1970. A Captain who loved Trinidad concocted a story that I needed to go home as I was away for too long. Texaco sent me home for about 2 months and I returned to the UK to join an ice-blocked ship in Sweden.

I mention this to point out that there was no train of thought regarding time on board, state of mind etc. Officers I must admit changed frequently, but they could not get British cadets agreeing to sail around the UK and Europe. Trips now are less than six months.

In due course, I went through the entire program and passed for my Masters, Foreign Going, now called Class 1 unlimited, in 1976. Life was a breeze on the bigger ships, even on vessels up to 300,000 tonnes. In fact, some of it was boring. It became particularly so during the oil embargo when ship speeds were drastically reduced causing Persian Gulf to Europe voyages taking about 2 and a half times longer. In fact, that was the time that seafarers welfare should have been foremost in the minds of the Shipping companies. There were however, movies supplied and these were changed if you were lucky fortnightly. Viewing one movie numerous times was quite common.

Except the tramp ships of a by gone era, ships generally have regular trading routes. On deep sea voyages coming to a port was and still is huge. Depending on

the cargo type, size and manning arrangements the vessel's stay in port is determined. The agent could be bringing mail, your only link with loved ones. All seafarers will arrange to ensure that some will go ashore. These could be adhoc or arranged by the Shipping line. Sadly in some trades and now with less and less city ports, the ports are stuck in the middle of nowhere away from civilization,

In many Ports the Mission to Seamen, Flying Angel, Mariners Club and Seafarers House Inc., all play an important part. The Chaplain and the assistants, make themselves available to assist. In other Ports for example Rotterdam, the duty free shops provide transport as well as come aboard to offer merchandise and consumables for sale. It is also a time for some social activity like inter ship games and on board socializing where the seafarers mingle in a more relaxed atmosphere.

In a country with one or two ports, this could be easily organized. If I can use Trinidad and Tobago as an example, we have over twenty approved ports where ships of various sizes berth. Some of these terminals are not backed up with villages close by so it is usually the Ships agents who arrange activity or if you have an active Missions to Seamen, they get involved.

The Merchant Marine is manned by numerous nationalities. China, South Korea and Japan make up 90% of seafarers. Crews from Ukraine are deemed to be the best in terms of skill sets and fraternization. There are still Flags of Convenience and even more recently, ghost flags where conditions aboard are terrible and seafarers are abandoned. Port state control worldwide must be extremely vigilant to terminate this practice.

When I decided to come ashore, I had two things foremost in my mind. One was to encourage young people to go to sea and the other was to work towards getting places like the Mission to seamen better organized. While at sea, I was entrusted as Chief Officer to mentor the first female Cadets on Texaco Ships. A rarity on British ships in the seventies. I therefore encouraged young women as well to pursue sea-going careers. Initially ships were not geared to accommodate females. Now however all ships have been modified or built to have suitable accommodation.

The Mission to Seamen is an extension of the Church of England. I got to know the local Bishop and after discussions, we had a chaplain from the UK. We were able

to get grants from the Mission as well as the International Transport Federation. We were able to refurbish the Mission as well as to purchase a small bus to transport seafarers. The renovations to the building added a dormitory, allowing for destitute or abandoned seafarers to have a place to stay. Provision was also made for postage and telephone arrangements as well as some socializing at a bar with reasonable prices. The postage facilities as well as the telephone arrangements were before internet and e-mails etc., and trying to call from a ship was extremely expensive.

The wellbeing of seafarers was well highlighted during the COVID pandemic. I am staying away from all the controversy that came out of this and sticking to the shabby treatment given to seafarers worldwide. The Prime Minister of Barbados out shone everyone by allowing her Port to be used by these abandoned seafarers that could not have been repatriated or find on going employment. This was not only an act of kindness but it showed that the value of our seafarers must not be taken lightly. Seafarers must not be treated as the dregs of society.

The wellbeing of seafarers should not be left to bargaining units of labor unions or charitable and welfare institutions. While it may be placed in a collective agreement or contract of employment, it must be part of a National Policy. The follow up to this must be diligent Port State control. Various bodies in the maritime sector speak to a shortfall in 2026 by some 100,000 thousand seafarers. Recruitment is becoming more and more difficult. Beside poor conditions at sea, the salaries are no longer attractive. Positions ashore offer better salaries and conditions of work. There are no risks that one has to face as in a sea-going career. This places an extra burden on the existing cadre of seafarers.

A statement made by a Port Chaplain who meets seafarers when they need support, hits very deeply. For long months at sea to overwhelming inspections, from emotional burnout to silence around mental health, she is there with no agenda except to listen. Discussions were held about,

The emotional toll of modern seafaring

Why even unlimited Wi-Fi is not always a comfort

How women are showing up fully in this space

And, what care really looks like when the ship would not stop moving.

It's all about presence and humanity, recent statistics show that over 60% of officers time is now spent on paper work which has been forced upon the crew because of ever changing Rules and Regulations

A seafarer's life is a lonely one but we must never underestimate it. Let me leave you with this statement

NO SEAFARERS MEANS NO SHIPS, WHICH MEANS NO SHOPS.

I thank you.