



Wake up and smell the coffee

WE WITTER on about fatigue, and how tired and stressed we all are, but I wonder how the prospect of a reduction in your working hours to a 91-hour week would grab you?

Because that is what we are legislating for in our hours-of-rest regulations, just in case you were wondering, and in many ships this is, like government policy promises, 'aspirational'.

Fatigue is a subject that has been lurking about for years. We know that other modes of transport take it extremely seriously and the book is routinely thrown at hauliers who fall asleep at the wheels of their trucks, while other drivers who nod off at a crucial moment, whether this is fatigue-induced or not, can expect no mercy if this lapse results in death or injury.

Although we raised the issue of fatigue rather late in the shipping industry, there is very little that we do not know about it. I would suggest that there is not a mariner anywhere who has not, at some time, experienced its effects. We have all devised strategies to deal with them, whether it is ingesting vast quantities of strong coffee (which is bad for you), chain smoking (which is probably worse), or standing on the weather side of a freezing bridge wing (which is difficult with warm and cosy all-enclosed bridges, designed to pamper the electronics). My own preference was sitting on the top of a brass telegraph, from where, if you fell asleep, you hit your head on the wheelhouse windows and woke yourself up. But such telegraphs are now only found in museums, which says something about my age and the era of my seafaring.

The London Branch of the Nautical Institute held an excellent and well-attended joint-institution seminar on the subject the other evening, aboard the Honourable Company of Master Mariners' *HQS Wellington*. The NI has been stepping up its campaign against ships where master and mate work watch-and-watch, and this was designed to promote a bit more awareness on this subject. Commodore David Squire, who among other jobs is editor of *Alert*, helpfully alerted us to a Finnish survey, which revealed that of 185 experienced responders, 17% confessed to have fallen asleep on watch, 40% said they were near to nodding off, and 20% had been involved in near-miss situations. I do not suppose Finns are genetically more disposed to slumber than the rest of us.

Colin Sandeman of the Bahamas Administration took us through the regulatory situation on safe manning, hours of rest and work prescribed by the International Labour Organisation and the Convention on Safety of Life at Sea, the way it can now be verified and logged, and hinted that it is not taken sufficiently seriously. It is a complicated formula that has to be gone through with the ship's trade, management systems and the operational context. But then, if there is no spare cabin for an additional deck officer, what then? A safety management system needs to consider crew health and welfare, but it's not easy to say precisely how.

The Standard Club's Eric Murdoch, a former seafarer, sees things in the worst possible light; in the claims that result from human element casualties. He notes that it is operational intensity that is the problem, as there have always been two navigator ships, but it didn't matter when a master could always lay over the tide, and when you didn't get Rotterdam Port State Control wanting to wake everyone up for an inspection, even though everyone was exhausted. Why are they allowed to behave like this? Masters need to be empowered and their decision needs to be respected by owners, charterers and officials.

We know a great deal about fatigue, having a few years ago recruited medical and psychology experts to tell us about its symptoms and its management. I think that some of the most convincing arguments



about fatigue and its effects were provided by Martin Dyer Smith, a former Royal Fleet Auxiliary chief officer and professional industrial psychologist, who undertook an extensive study for the Maritime and Coastguard Agency some years ago, when One-Man Bridge Operation was looming, urged on by various equipment manufacturers and enthusiastic owners who had outfitted their ships in anticipation of this exciting, low-manned future.

Smith spent six months lurking about in the back of the wheelhouses of predominantly small, hard-working ships with masters and mates working watch-and-watch, and I would like to think that this research, and the refusal of the good old US Coast Guard to agree to OMBO, killed it off, at least officially.

This research is well worth revisiting, but I have always remembered the phrase Smith used to describe the state of a master or mate, well into a three-month tour of duty, standing in a darkened wheelhouse, eyes wide open, but oblivious to the ship coming down on a steady bearing on the starboard bow. He was not supposed ever to intervene, but on more than one occasion he did so, after he passed his hands over the eyes of the lone watchkeeper, with alarmed flashes coming from the oncoming ship. The master, or the mate, was, as he described it, a person in "a catatonic trance" — outwardly alert but inwardly as unconscious as somebody who was fast asleep.

We have moved on a long way from OMBO, to a regime where hours of rest are prescribed by law and practically every month there is some hard-hitting MAIB report urging a stronger line on manning, after some short-sea ship has come to grief in embarrassing circumstances, with a comatose watchkeeper and no lookout.

The incidents have become legion, but all have a grim similarity about them, with hours of rest legislation being widely flouted, logbooks being routinely flogged and manning at such a level that it would be physically impossible for any crew to stay legal under the current regime.

Thanks to the intervention of these medical specialists, we know all about circadian rhythms and the proof that the worst accidents happen in the grim hours just before dawn, or at the end of a six-hour watch, after an "official" 12-hour day that has

A Finnish survey revealed that of 185 experienced responders, 17% confessed to have fallen asleep on watch, 40% said they were near to nodding off, and 20% had been involved in near-miss situations

stretched to 16 or even longer, in a tour, when the last eight hours continuously spent in bed were two months previously.

At least there is a modicum of progress, with authorities, in the event of an accident, not just going after the exhausted immediate participants, but prosecuting owners, managers and even charterers for operating ships in an insupportable fashion. It would be good to see a lot more of this. Just as we know about the risks run by fatigued seafarers, we also jolly well should know that it is wrong to operate ships at such intensity.

But it really does need more proactive work by the authorities, because seafarers will tend to keep on going, believing that it is expected of them, and their managers ashore are only too happy for them to do so, and often expect it too. The less principled may even let it be known that masters who insist on adhering to hours of rest regulations might find it expedient to look for another job. Then there is the influence of the charterer, who will be "terribly disappointed" if the ship turns up late, and may well start throwing his weight around.

If you like, it is part of the traditional culture of the ship always coming first with which seafarers are brought up and nurtured from their very first voyage. It is the same culture, I am afraid, which will see a ship sailing blindly through thick fog at full speed, "because being late because of weather is not acceptable in this line".

It is the same culture as that which encourages an engineer to do amazing things with a magic pipe because the oily water separator will not work, holding tanks are not adequate and the ship is not bound for the US. But it is a culture that needs changing.

It is difficult to articulate a need for a change of culture on issues like fatigue without appearing soft. The superintendent remembers the days when he was in command and went all the way from St Vincent to the Kotka Inlet with two hours' sleep on the chartroom settee and his eyes held open with Sellotape. The operating managers and even the charterers recall the trouble-free voyages of other masters and ships, who never complain about the utter exhaustion they felt and would accede to the most unreasonable requests with a weary sigh. Charterers, who have got rather too big for their boots, do not help either, demanding that the ship sails, or threatening to blacklist it if it does not.

Fatigue is a sort of torture, which, in a normal commercial enterprise, is really quite unacceptable. It is no longer 1941, when the battle of the Atlantic was a valid excuse for people working watch-and-watch, and forcing their minds and bodies to keep going when every nerve is shrieking for sleep. It is the operation of ships in peacetime and we need to slow down the processes, just to let the human beings catch up.

Alternatively, if we are not going to do that, we need to man ships adequately, because it is painfully obvious that a two-watch system is inhuman at present levels of operational intensity, demonstrably hazardous, and is almost certainly shortening the lives of those forced to operate in such a fashion for any length of time, something that we need to research with some urgency. Where is the notion of job satisfaction when a voyage becomes an unrelenting physical ordeal?

So I would suggest that we should not be looking at this problem in isolation, but consider it in the context of an industry that is struggling to recruit and retain good people. Come to sea and be tortured to an early death. Is that the sort of slogan that will encourage recruitment of bright school leavers? When we are striving for the declared aim of a 91-hour week, is this something you would slip into the recruiting leaflet? "Go on, stop on" is not an adequate answer when a youngster asks about the working hours.

I think it is unquestionable that two-watch ships are more likely to be involved in accidents. I would suggest that the statistics back this up, although there are all sorts of dubious counter arguments deployed which suggest that small ships, close to the land and in and out of small ports are bound to be more at risk, whether they have two watchkeepers or six, and the manning is not relevant. It is also extraordinary that when it all seems so clear, so blooming obvious, different administrations fire conflicting statistics at each other and the European Commission indulges in cynical power plays to stifle national initiatives.

Can safety be improved in such circumstances? Probably, if hours-of-rest regulations were closely adhered to, and there was a change of heart among those doing the operating and scheduling. But who thinks that this will happen without intensive policing by port state control?

Can manning be improved while keeping a level playing field? That is a tough one, as long as Norwegians, who always seem to contrive to run ships with one or two less than the rest of us, are in these trades.

How much does fatigue cost? That is rather speculative. You could add up the insurance costs of the sinkings and groundings, add to that the cost of lost careers and ruined reputations. But we could also be thinking of lost lives and eminently preventable accidents, the costs of pollution and salvage operations. And I believe that we should never, ever, think of this subject without considering the very real possibility of a truly awful accident, caused by a small two-watch ship effectively torpedoing a passenger vessel or a tanker. Out of the question? Hardly. They have run into cliffs, rocks, beaches and banks, bridges and oil platforms and rigs; even Southend Pier has been neatly chopped in half.

And after this worst possible event, after they have fished out the bodies and cleaned up the worst of the oil, accident inspectors, police forces and media folk far more critical than me, are going to be asking the industry what on earth it is doing, in the 21st century, after the many warnings and hours of debate, still operating ships in such a cavalier fashion. We have taken these dangerous risks for long enough and we need some action now. Just in case.

Fresh take on manning?

THE Pirates of Puntland would be the subject for a light opera, was piracy not such a serious matter.

Aidan Hartley, who writes in the *Spectator* and has lived in Somalia for years, offers the alarming suggestion that most of these fierce hijackers now have EU or British passports. So when the maddened armies of Islamists (who disapprove of piracy) have conquered the Puntland clans, they will simply emigrate to Europe and the United Kingdom, cheerfully waving their travel documents at border controls, before settling down to lives of welfare and crime.

Those thinking outside the box might note that these are clearly efficient and effective sea people, whose seamanship and navigation might be usefully employed more legitimately, in an industry crying out for talent. Just an idea.