

Annual tank inspections required by OCIMF

When I was at college doing my Second Mate's ticket, I joined the British Sub-Aqua Club in order to train to dive. The first requirement was to swim 200 yards. The training included swimming with a snorkel and no mask with the face in the water all the time. It included diving to the bottom of the deep-end of the pool and putting all of the equipment on before coming to the surface, and amongst other things swimming around the perimeter of the pool fully equipped but with a blacked-out mask whilst others in the group interfered with mask, snorkel and other equipment including shutting off the air supply. It was all comprehensive stuff which had to be completed satisfactorily before allowing one to be involved in an open-water dive. What training do ship's crew have before they are asked to don a breathing apparatus and go into an alien environment?

In water, if things go wrong, one can make a controlled ascent to an abundance of fresh air. Not quite so easy in a large cargo tank.

For too many years we have seen reports of tank entry fatalities. In 2008 the UK Club issued a technical bulletin on enclosed space entry which recorded the heightened frequency of enclosed space incidents resulting in death of both crew members and visitors. These included in Spain, April, 2008 a cargo receivers' surveyor entering an un-tested hold via an open access hatch despite the surveyor having being strictly advised by the chief officer and another crew member to remain out of the holds until clearance was obtained – that surveyor died.

In Indonesia, June, 2008, two shore based contractors boarded a ship with the intention of removing sludge from a tank. Unknown to the crew member they gained access to the tank. They were not using breathing apparatus, had not taken any measures to determine the composition of the atmosphere within the tank and they were overcome by fumes and died. It is thought likely that one of the contractors entered the space in an attempt to rescue his colleague.

Also in June, 2008, in the United States, a bulk carrier was discharging a coal cargo when a stevedore entered a hold via an Australian ladder. The bottom of the ladder compartment was blocked by coal and it was later determined that the oxygen level was well below normal. The stevedore died. A crew member using only basic equipment was lucky to escape with his life after he had courageously but recklessly entered the area in the hope of helping the stevedore. It was later determined that the stevedore had fallen and broken his neck as a result of losing consciousness. Not a tanker but it illustrates the point.

Ship owners are encouraged to ensure that there is an onboard system which ensures that all shore based personnel are aware that they must not enter an enclosed space without prior permission of the master. Rigorous enforcement of the ships ISPS system should ensure that the business of all visitors to the vessels is known and understood by the ship's senior officers.

The bulletin goes on to illustrate the basic minimum standards required for the issuing of permits and the tagging system for both visitors and ship's personnel.

There are many other horror stories out there where the rules have been bypassed and those entering the tanks have lost their life and so have those going to rescue them. This has been going on for as long as I can remember. And I went to sea 42 years ago. Why are we still sending people into tanks? It is a dangerous environment. I understand that sometimes it is essential but is an annual survey essential?