

# Command seminar – the ship/port interface

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The final seminar in the 2011 series took place in Bristol, finishing a journey which has led from Baltimore to British Columbia, Cape Town and Shanghai. As the President, Captain James Robinson, said in his opening address, the wide geographical spread of these seminars brings home the global reach which The Nautical Institute now possesses.

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**T**he packed seminar attracted attendees from all levels of the industry, as well as from all sectors. It was particularly good to hear from a group of cadets, whose attendance at the seminar was sponsored by the Institute, and who were invited to give their opinions on the seminar – and on the industry – by the President. There was a general feeling that the seminar had given them a chance to get a much better feel for the scope of the maritime industry and the possibilities that it offers than is available from training in general. ‘I hope you’re going to have more cadets coming, not just because of the presentations, but because speaking to people individually has been very beneficial,’ said cadet Samantha Mason. ‘Everyone has been so encouraging and motivational.’

## The mariner’s view

The seminar began with a presentation from Ian Lawrence, a serving seafarer. As a Master with a UK dredging company, he sees a lot of the ship/port interface, as he enters port on average once every 24 to 36 hours. Somewhat unusually, his company does not employ a port agent, so he deals with the ports directly. He set out, clearly and concisely, what the Master expects from the port, and what the port expects from the ship.

There are a number of stumbling blocks in the process of preparing for port calls, not least the different documentation

required by the ports – often, even when they need the same information, it will have to be entered into entirely different forms, with formats for pre-arrival information varying from a phone call to providing non-zipped Microsoft file 24 hrs before arrival.

The call for greater communication between ship and shore reflected conclusions from the British Columbia seminar, chairman Michael Barritt noted, where there was real emphasis on how much ship and shore might learn from each other. The need for greater communication amongst the industry as a whole became the overarching theme of the seminar.

The next presentation, from David Snelson, past chief harbourmaster at the Port of London, looked in more detail at the requirements and duties of the harbour authority according to the Port Marine Safety Code (PMSC). Often, mariners are not aware of the demands – or even the existence – of the PMSC, although the Code means that seafarers can have confidence that the port is taking safety seriously, and that risks have been properly mitigated.

A major difficulty at the moment is the need for ports to publish safety plans and performance statistics. While publishing the plans is straightforward, monitoring performance is more difficult because it requires some form of benchmarking that will apply across a huge variety of ports. Ultimately, the mariner must have confidence in the port – and the PMSC, if properly applied, can help develop that confidence.

## Pilotage

Stephen Gobbi looked at the ship port interface from the perspective of the harbour authority. All too often, he said, the port forgets that the ship is the purpose for which the harbour exists in the first place – not just a risk to be mitigated. Encouragingly, he said he had already noted several points from Captain Lawrence’s presentation which could help ports improve their level of service to the



▲ Cadet Samantha Mason

seafarer – proof that the Command Seminars are a very real and effective way of creating dialogue, and getting results.

He looked in some detail at the rights and responsibilities of the harbour authority under UK law, before going on to look at the role of the harbourmaster. ‘I think it’s been long ignored that harbourmasters are a particular type of mariner,’ he said. Ultimately, both harbourmasters and the Masters of vessels need clarity, and that means that the expectations of the port should be standardised. ‘It is not beyond us to introduce this – or even to standardise documentation,’ he said – offering hope to Masters like Captain Lawrence who have been struggling with complex entry requirements. Gobbi concluded with a call for more frequent and widely used seminars across the industry to promote an exchange of information between different sectors.

The Master/Pilot relationship is one of the most vital, and sometimes one of the most fraught, elements of the voyage in and out of the port. Rod Lewis of the pilotage authority ran through the whole thing from the pilot’s perspective, explaining that expectations of the pilot

will vary from ship to ship, so that in some regular calls, the Master may expect no more than advice on tides, depths etc, while in others the pilot may be completely integrated into the bridge team. Whichever model is followed, he emphasised that it must be clear who is conducting navigation.

Unsurprisingly, Lewis saw a continuing need for pilots on vessels, describing them as 'a safety management system for ports'. However, as in many sectors of the industry, there is increasing concern about where future generations of pilots are going to come from, as many of the pilots in the UK are due to retire within the next 10-15 years.

## The shore side

A more detailed look at the operational side of the ship/port relationship followed, with presentations from port agent John O'Connor and from John McCorquadale, speaking for terminal owners. O'Connor outlined the three stages involved in a port call from an agent's point of view; pre-arrival; arrival and cargo operations, and preparations to depart. Of these, the pre-arrival stage is probably most important, he said. AIS information should allow the agent to monitor vessel progress two or three ports ahead to spot potential delays, and inform the Master of issues with berth availability, update him on expected cargo load, etc. Ultimately, though, while the agent can help make the ship/port interface more efficient on a day to day basis, in the long term efficiency can only be achieved by a joined up approach linking all stakeholders, and agents must be part of the wider conversation.

John McCorquadale outlined the wide range of checks which must be carried out on vessels by terminal operators, again

emphasising the need for greater communication between ship and shore, and between different sectors onshore to avoid duplication of paperwork and of effort.

The day concluded with a lively question and answer session, mostly concentrating on possible solutions to the paperwork problem. Ben van Scherpenzeel, harbourmaster in the port of Rotterdam suggested that, while we will never have a system where documentation is standardised worldwide; one possible solution would be for ships – or shipowners – to maintain a secure website, from which the port can pick the information it needs. This theme was also picked up on by other attendees; it was agreed that there is likely to be a lot of positive development in this direction over the next few years, but as yet, many ships still do not have Internet access, or have problems with connectivity.

## Beyond the port

The second day of the conference looked at new developments within the industry that could affect the port/ship interface. NI Project Director David Patraiko looked at the development of e-navigation. As this becomes a reality, it has the potential to greatly increase ship safety, but also to increase the complexity of relationships between ship and shore, he said. As a result, getting the procedure right will be just as important as getting the technology right, and it will be vital that shore personnel understand ship operations, and know what is and is not a hazard. 'Good communication depends on teamwork and respect,' he said.

The following presentations looked at legal aspects of the ship/port relationship, with Joe Quain, a partner at law firm

Bentley Stokes & Lowless pointing out that while the vast majority of ships never have to give any thought to these matters, when something goes wrong, it can cause serious problems. 'Ports are not there to sue ships, but sometimes it can feel like it,' he warned. This is exacerbated by the fact that ships are governed by strict liability. He went on to explore the relationship in some detail, including a look at the list of legal statutes and relationships governing ports, contracts and contractual services, as well as the fraught issue of the safe port – bearing in mind that a port can be safe for one vessel, but not for another. However, while unsafe port claims are quite common, they usually come up between owner and charterer, rather than ship and port, he said.

Barrister Peregrine Massey, a director at Thomas Miller (UK P&I Club) looked at the nature of risk in the maritime industry, and the problems of increasing liability for P&I Clubs and seafarers alike. In particular, he warned, there seems to be an impression that insurance is a bottomless pit of money. In fact, insurance capacity is finite, and dependent on the ability of capital to accept risk. In addition, liability is always developing, to the extent that it is no longer possible to calculate the potential loss on a voyage, simply due to the plethora of liabilities that could apply if something goes wrong.

Issues such as piracy – where no one wants to pick up the bill for the risks – continue to put the system under strain. While P&I clubs do have what he described as 'stratospheric' cover to meet these risks, that cover is not unlimited, and this will be an increasing concern for the future.

Ben van Scherpenzeel closed the seminar on a more optimistic note. After all the discussion on the importance of communication if the ship/port interface is to work smoothly, he was able to point to two projects which had brought together different parts of that interface with great success – the production of two DVDs, 'The Chain' and 'The Missing Link' (see *Seaways* November 2011 for more information).

Summing up the presentations, Ian Lawrence said that he was impressed that many of the issues he had raised in his opening presentation had received such attention across such a wide cross-section of the industry. This underlines the power of command seminars to reach out across the industry – and to make a difference to the way things happen.



▲ A packed audience drawn from all sectors of the industry