

## The Master/Pilot relationship

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The relationship between Master and Pilot has probably changed less than any other relationship in shipping – the idea of taking aboard a person with specialised local knowledge of a port and its approaches certainly goes back to the early Middle Ages, and very little seems to have changed.

An early attempt to regulate the relationship between Master and Pilot can be found in the Code of Oleron, which was published by that remarkable woman, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, round about the time when her son Richard the Lionheart was away on the Third Crusade – say between 1189 and 1192 – and she was vice-regent for him in his territories. It seems that she may have picked up knowledge of the Code of Rhodes when she was on the Second Crusade with her first husband, Louis VII of France. Anyway, this is what she has to say about the Master- Pilot relationship:

### **Article XXIII**

**If a Pilot undertakes the conduct of a vessel, to bring her to St Malo, or any other port, and fail of his duty therein, so as the vessel miscarry by reason of his ignorance in what he undertook, and the merchants sustain damage thereby, he shall be obliged to make full satisfaction for the same, if he hath the wherewithal, and if not, he ought to lose his head.**

Not quite the Pilotage Act of 1911!

The explanation often given for this drastic approach to the Master/Pilot problem is that it was not unknown for professional wreckers to pose as Pilots and to deliberately strand ships. We can all see the obvious flaw with this approach – nobody is going to want to be a Pilot if the consequences of a mistake include having your head chopped off!

Which led inevitably to the Pilotage Act of 1911 and immunity for Pilots, except in the USA and of course the Panama Canal. Having had a ship involved

in a prang in the Canal Zone my amazement when the Canal Authority offered to foot the bill was considerable!

I could occupy a fair part of your evening regaling you with silly things that have happened to ships that I was responsible for when under pilotage, but I will confine myself to two.

A handysize bulk carrier stuck her Ice Class 1 bow into the revetment of a lock, expensively, when the Pilot, who was in the middle of giving orders to the tugs in fluent Flemish, had a heart attack. Considering the age of the average Japanese pilot, I am surprised this does not happen more often!

A small containership parked herself on a coral reef when the Master decided to show the Pilot how the new radar worked... this particular Master, whom I still see from time to time, used, when he was still Mate, to be preceded round the fleet by a comment from the Commodore to the effect that the first thing any Master who was unlucky enough to get him ought to do was to confiscate his Swiss Army Knife, before he got anywhere near the radar set or the gyrocompass!

An awful lot of things that go wrong with ships under pilotage are the ship's fault. Just the other day we found that a ship had been handing out the same pilot information card for a couple of years, regardless of port or state of loading. More seriously Masters often compromise their own effectiveness when under pilotage by allowing themselves to get too tired to be able to work properly before the Pilot boards.

Communication, of course, is greatly aided by the use of language, in which respect I must commend to anyone seeking to join a pilot service today that he or she acquires at least a working proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, Hindustani and Tagalog, in order that, when things do go wrong, they can at least panic in the same language as everyone else in the wheelhouse!

Language is not strictly necessary to a Pilot. Here is my favourite description of a ship under pilotage, in unusual conditions:

*"The number two pilot may be in charge until nearing the foot of the rapid. The number one then comes on the bridge and silently stands beside him for a*

*while, until the number two signals a firm “steady” to the helmsman and swiftly leaves the bridge to join the boatmen with their sounding poles...*

*Now comes the moment of high drama, the smooth tongue of the rapid is ahead, crossing the bow diagonally from the shore.*

*The pilot pulls back the long sleeve of his gown and gives a stern backward glance to the helmsman. (Steering orders are passed in silence, normally by the movement of a forefinger, but emphasis is needed when entering a rapid.)*

*The Master telegraphs down for absolute full speed, the bow touches the tongue and the pilot with a dramatic gesture brings the helm hard over to meet it. There is a confused rush of water as though a sluice had been opened and the low forecastle disappears beneath a rush of foaming water. The ship quickly surfaces and is now almost at a standstill in the centre of the tongue, near what we could call the throat...*

*The “slope” of a really bad rapid can be six or seven feet in the length of the ship...”*

That comes from a book called “Yangtze Reminiscences”, by Captain Graham Torrible, OBE, whom I had the pleasure of knowing as one of the senior figures of Hong Kong shipping. I have left out the equally gripping part about the handling of the coal fires, assuming that few engineers will be present this evening.

Enough of all that – have I any useful suggestions to make?

Well, yes, I have a little list, as Gilbert and Sullivan would put it, and top of the things that hardly would be missed is the thoroughly bad practice of PSC authorities getting Pilots to do their spying for them. This does the already-fraught relationship between Pilot and ship no good whatsoever, and may lead to attempts to conceal and hide things that are downright dangerous. I am not saying that if a pilot steps off a thoroughly bad ship he should not report her – what I am saying is that the initiative in that respect must come from the Pilot, and never ever from PSC.

Next is the anomalous state of deep-sea pilotage. I don’t think enough attention has been paid to the huge increase in density of traffic, the

thoroughly out of date nature of the 1972 Colregs and the deterioration in manning levels and in ability aboard ships passing through the major international straits. Merely because the Straits of Dover, the Bosphorus and the Straits of Malacca are international waters, people seem to think that there is no need for pilotage in waters that, were they national waters, would beyond any question be a compulsory pilotage area.

I think these places should be compulsory pilotage areas, either under consortia of local administrations or case need under the IMO. Lest anyone say “there is no precedent for such a thing” I would refer them to the arrangements for navais in the Arabian Gulf, which have been in place for quite a while....

And lastly, the wretched business of pilotage exemptions. Surely there ought to be a common standard for these and they should only be given against examination, in dare I say it a simulator?

If the examination can be done on the job, better still, but surely a simulator is better than “twenty questions”?

You can tell that by and large I am on the side of the Pilot, and the reason is simple – pilotage dues are not a huge cost, compared to bunkers or port dues, or even luboil, these days, and they are on the proverbial level playing field – everyone pays them, unless they have exemptions, so they are “fair” as between shipowners in competition. We need more pilotage, not less.

Thank you.