

THE SIRC COLUMN



Nick Bailey, research associate at the Seafarers' International Research Centre, urges

all those at sea to plan for the future in case of illness, accident or other misfortune.

With the introduction of ISM and safety management systems, all those who work at sea cannot but help be aware of risk assessments. Every aspect of shipboard working life should be planned, documented and risk-assessed. There are passage plans to cover the vessel's voyage, contingency plans to deal with problems, maintenance plans to ensure the ship's equipment is kept in good order, there are even waste management and ballast management plans. All facets of shipboard life, from the most complex to the most routine, should have been planned for. But what about the individuals who spend their lives aboard such vessels? How many seafarers can honestly say that they are as thorough when it comes to their own life plans.

In the last edition of The Sea,

Bernardo Obando-Rojas discussed the need for seafarers to build a portfolio of skills to ensure their employability. I shall argue that they need to think beyond their immediate and foreseeable careers and plan to keep their options open.

Until recently, I was a serving deck officer. I believe I am well trained, highly qualified, and I was fortunate to be working for a good company and to have a secure position. However, as I reached my 40th birthday, I increasingly became aware of how vulnerable my position actually was. I realised that no matter how good I was at my job, or how many qualifications I had, if my health failed me or I had an accident, I would soon find myself unemployed and unemployable as a seafarer. Unlike many shore-side jobs, seafaring requires that the employee meets stringent medical requirements. Indeed, in some countries, crewing agencies are now reluctant to accept seafarers over the age of 40, because they also realise that the possibility of a medical problem and the consequent costs is a significant risk. But the risk of illness or an accident is real for seafarers of all ages, as the

following comments from a survey of seafarers working on cruiseships show:

"I have worries about health in general because need to be healthy to do job and keep job at sea."

"I am worried about health problems that might affect my ability to do the job, especially an accident."

"I am worried about personal injuries and insurance cover."

Having acknowledged the problems, what can a seafarer do to address them?

I would suggest that there are at least three areas to be considered:

1. Fitness to do the job - qualified, competent and able.
2. Keeping your options open.
3. The ship.

Firstly, the seafarer must be suitably qualified and competent to do the job, and it is up to individuals to ensure they have the requisite training either by investing in themselves, or negotiating with their company. The importance of good health has already been discussed. Many ships today make some provision for fitness training, and most people are aware of the need for a balanced diet and to avoid

excessive consumption of alcohol and cigarettes.

Secondly, although most seafarers are highly trained specialists, their skills and qualifications may not be readily recognised by a shore-side employer. Thus it may be worthwhile contacting a training establishment to look at your training against comparable shore qualifications.

Furthermore, it may be useful to reflect on what skills you actually possess that might be relevant to a non-marine based position, for example people-management or supervisory skills, computing or accounting skills, and so on. Additionally, it is possible to do part-time courses while on leave or at sea to develop skills or acquire new ones.

The aim is to ask: "What would I do if I couldn't continue at sea." Hopefully, it will never happen, but in the course of my work as a researcher I have met many seafarers who now find themselves unemployed owing to accidents, injury or because their skills are no longer required, such as radio officers.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most difficult for many seafarers is to ensure that the ship they join is a fit place to work. The most important thing is to know what you are signing, what is the name and address of the employer, the name and flag of the ship, the rate of pay, the length of the trip, medical and accident cover, and so forth. Advice can be obtained from colleagues, friends, union representatives, seafarers' missions and so on. It is not uncommon for seafarers to be desperate for work and, as such, to be vulnerable to exploitation. Sadly, some find they are left abandoned in a foreign port, with no pay, no food and no way home.

A reasonable question to ask is: how would I and my family manage if I was injured or killed? What are the medical provisions, and what is the process for making a claim for compensation should the need arise? International Maritime Organisation (IMO) guidelines require that all ships have an insurance certificate, relating to the owner's P&I cover for seafarer injury and death, displayed in the accommodation for seafarers



A DIFFICULT problem for seafarers to address is ensuring that the ship they join is a fit place to work, so they don't end up stranded without pay like the seafarers on board the Asphalt Carrier and Al Baraka in Dubai. (Photo: Stephen Miller)

to inspect.

And, very important, is the ability to manage your finances in a way that allows you to buy some time should

you be unable to work for whatever reason. The good mariner is traditionally the prudent mariner, the one who takes action to avoid the storm.

Each individual must make his or her own decisions, but it is better to have thought about the issues while times are good rather than at the time of crisis.