

THE SIRC COLUMN

Changing views – the world through a porthole

Dr Nicholas Bailey of the Seafarers' International Research Centre is trying to understand why seafarers' perception of risk varies depending on their nationality

I first went to sea in 1977 straight from school aged 16. I came from a rural part of England and had spent the previous year working part-time on a dairy farm. I had no connection with the sea and knew nothing about what it was like to work as a seafarer. Six months before leaving school I had come across a brochure advertising jobs at sea. On the cover of the leaflet was an officer in white uniform standing at the stern of a passenger ship with a cocktail in his hand and an attractive woman beside him. I decided that this would be the life for me.

I joined my first ship on a cold November day. It was a 15-year-old general cargo ship with seven holds, two 'tween decks, deep tanks, four derricks per hatch and two jumbo derricks. At the time I was shocked. The ship was rusty and dirty and there was not a cocktail or woman in sight. I don't think I even realised that cargoships existed, never mind

that there were different types. When I look back now, however, it is with fond memories and a degree of nostalgia. The navigation equipment was basic: no GPS or ARPA radar – we relied on visual bearings and sextant readings. There was no air-conditioning and I remember the Red Sea in summer. The toilets and showers were communal – no en-suite in every cabin. The work was often physical and dirty, like moving wooden hatch boards in the 'tween decks, cleaning bilges or dancing around the anchor chain – inside the chain locker – while trying to stow it.

Things have obviously changed a great deal and in many ways they have improved. But what I remember most was that it was a happy ship. I recall the social life, the people I met and the places I got to see. It was the simple things that seem to stand out most – watching a movie once a week (there was no television or video), or sitting in someone's cabin or the bar having a beer, talking and listening to music. Specifically, I remember the passage through the Magellan Straits, a football match in Chile, a birthday in Murmansk, wondering around a market in Sri Lanka, a visit to the Batu caves in Malaysia and a ride on the bullet train to Tokyo in Japan.



Clearly our perceptions change with time, and even from ship to ship, often depending on the people around us or things that are going on in our lives. Indeed, life changes, and our understanding changes to reflect that. Life at sea today is very different than 30 years ago. Crews are now much smaller, ships are more sophisticated, there is less time in port and many ships are now "dry". As a researcher, I have had the opportunity to go on board a range of vessels. I personally find it a rather uncomfortable experience. While it is nice to be on board, I am not there as part of the crew

– my role is different than it was. As a researcher, my role is primarily to observe, listen and try to reflect the life and understanding of those on board as faithfully as possible. As a consequence, I find that I now think about and understand life at sea in a very different way than when I worked on board, even though I only came ashore four years ago.

There were 54 of us on my first ship. We had enough people to work safely, but still there were a lot of accidents. I witnessed numerous severe injuries and several fatalities. With smaller crews and busier schedules, today's



Left: Nick Bailey in front of the British Antarctic Survey vessel Ernest Shackleton moored to fast ice in the Weddell Sea, Antarctica. He worked for BAS for six years immediately before joining SIRC. Above: Nick (back right) more recently with crew members while on a research voyage for SIRC

seafarers have to work more efficiently and with a far greater awareness of the risks involved in their work. But how individuals make sense of those risks, how they go about their work on board ship, is influenced by the way they see the world, by their lifetime of experience. This includes upbringing and general education, experience of company culture, and group or personal attitudes, such as appreciating how things are done in this company or with this chief or bosun.

My current research is about safety and perceptions of risk. My colleagues and I have conducted a

questionnaire survey, interviews and undertaken shipboard observation, and are now in the early stages of trying to write up the findings of this project and to make sense of differences in perception.

What we found was that shore-side managers and shipboard personnel tended to see things differently. Also, ratings were less inclined to see the likelihood of experiencing a major ship incident as high when compared to officers and managers. The most significant finding, however, was that people from different countries tended to see risk differently. Those from China, for example, were more

inclined to see the likelihood of experiencing an incident as high compared to those of other nationalities, while those from the Philippines were more likely to see it as low.

The problem is to understand what factors are influencing this. Is it training, something about life in the home country, different educational systems, the companies worked for, particular experiences or could it be related to faith or belief system? As I have said, the way we make sense of the world is complicated and so to understand why one group sees things differently to another is proving to be equally complicated. If you wish to read about our findings, they are published as reports on the SIRC website at: www.sirc.cf.ac.uk.

Furthermore, if you would care to write to me telling your story as a seafarer – why you went to sea and what you think is good or bad about life at sea, the risks, the rewards, the high points and the lows, and suggestions as to what could make life better – I would be happy to receive it. My plan would be to make the stories anonymous and possibly use them in future research or to write some sort of account of life at sea. Unfortunately, I will probably not be able to write an extended reply to each one, so many thanks in advance.