How long can the allure of the sea hold out against bureaucracy?

Opinion

Seafarers need to be even more tenacious than ever to overcome the growing burden of paperwork and time spent at sea, writes Carly Fields- Friday November 04 2005

THREE years studying Maritime Studies, a year at a London shipbrokers and five years reporting for the world’s oldest newspaper Lloyd’s List; yet, in all that time, I’ve only set foot on a docked ship once and never ventured out on the high seas in anything bigger than a cross-channel ferry.

It’s not for want of trying, you understand. I’ve expressed at various points throughout my career a desire to actually ‘get out there’ and experience the life I have spent my formative years either studying or writing about. But the majority of the people I expressed this to either tried, in vain, to hide their amusement or just dismissed the notion out of hand.

Undeterred, I have casually mentioned that I’d like to get out on a ship at just about every interview I’ve conducted since 2000. No one seemed willing to take the bait, and I was beginning to lose hope.

That was until I met Sergey Terekhin, managing director of Cyprus-based Unicom at the time and now head honcho for Novoship, this summer. He proposed a trip on one of Sovcomflot’s tankers, for which Unicom acts as managers, and the wheels were finally set in motion to drag me away from my home comforts and out to the North and Baltic seas for a trip from the UK to Primorsk.

Friends and family questioned my sanity choosing to spend five days at sea on a tanker with a Russian crew. Work colleagues hoped that they wouldn’t be asked to do the trip next. Even our esteemed Michael Grey did question my choice of travel on an ‘unsexy’ tanker, sent out to the outposts of countries, over the indefinitely more accessible and debonair dry bulk carriers.

Undeterred, I boarded the good ship Ligovsky Prospect at Fawley, UK, after dozens of emails and calls between the agent, the shipmanager, the owner and, of course, the ship itself. I suspect that gaining access to MI5 might be marginally easier; one-nil to the ISPS Code.

Settled into the owner’s cabin, I dug in and prepared myself for four days on the, hopefully not too high, seas. The master, Captain Evgeniy Morozov, was to be my chaperone. As he introduced the ship and its crew to me on embarkation, he explained that my arrival on the ship coincided with the tail end of the four month stint for the crew, with the first set of crew due to change in St Petersburg with me. He was to leave with the second batch after the next voyage.

I ask what he plans to do with his four months off. With a sigh he explains that a number of his certificates expire this year, which means he has to spend time on shore renewing them. “A seaman’s life is complicated,” he says, “there are lots of certificates.” Here he gestures a wad of papers about an inch thick with his forefinger and thumb. But he’s looking forward to being back for his five-year-old son’s birthday, which he has missed every year.

I was not there when he was born and have not been there since,” he says matter-of-factly.
“In 1977, our country was under another rule and it was more difficult for seafarers. It was like that until 1992, the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now it is easier to get shore leave. You can go anywhere if you have time. Now it is more difficult as you can earn more money on shore. But the appeal of some sort of adventure remains and you still have more possibilities.”

He explains that when he started out on his seaward path 30 years ago, a ship of this size [aframax] would have had a crew of 50, but on our voyage our full complement stands at 22.

Intrigued by the captain’s description of the lure of the sea, I ask second engineer Vyacheslav Gustunov (Slava), a sea veteran of eight years, what attracted him. “First it was the romance, now it is the routine ... a hard routine,” he says with a smirk.

Aleksey Prokopov, third officer, the baby of the bunch, at 27, has just taken his exams for promotion to second officer. I ask him why he chose a career on the workhorses of the shipping industry. “This is the life I want,” he says. “And Novorossiysk (his home port) is an oil terminal.” I ask if he wants to become captain: “Of course,” he smiles.

A rating on watch tells me he has been at sea for 20 years. Are you looking for a shore-based job, I ask? “No,” he says vehemently, shaking his head.

But while these men clearly love what they do, they do recognise the restrictions of a life offshore. Second officer Viktor Gusev tells me that after 15 years at sea he earns ten times more than his wife, but has to spend four months on to get four months leave.

“I think that this is not a job for a married person,” he confides.

Inside the beast

Off the bridge, and in the hands of chief officer Alexander Khoroshko, I head for the belly of the beast.

As the trip took the Ligovsky Prospect from the murky Solent waters to the cleaner Gulf of Finland, an exchange of ballast water was necessary in the Baltic Sea.

This gave me an opportunity to examine one of the ballast tanks before refilling. Having donned a rather attractive bright yellow two-piece oilskins and gumboots, I headed into the depths of the ballast tanks with Khoroshko. Our miner’s headlamps lit the way as we descended into the darkness of the double side and double bottom of the tanker. The sheer scale of the space was overwhelming; at 21 metres, the height of the tank is equivalent to more than four double-decker buses and half as high as the Statue of Liberty. And this just one of 14 ballast tanks. This peek into the heart of the ship allowed me to fully appreciate first hand its scale and the feat of engineering that those outside the industry so often take for granted.

But the experience came at a price in the form of heavyweight paperwork. The necessary enclosed space entry permit had five sections, the first on pre-entry preparations which asked 19 questions including readings for oxygen, hydrocarbon and toxic gases, of which thankfully there were none. The five-question second section concerned the pre-entry checks, including setting reporting intervals, permissions and a pre-entry briefing. The third concerned authorisation, the fourth the enclosed space entry log and the final section marked the completion of the permit requiring a signature from the responsible officer, covering every angle.
Coded confusion

This permit was just the tip of the paperwork iceberg. All the officers resignedly accept the increasing amount of paperwork as code after code rolls in. And with this increased paper mountain comes the inevitable discrepancies between one code and the next. The second engineer highlights one for me.

He explains that the door of the emergency generator room has to be locked under the International Port and Ship Facility Security Code to reduce the possibilities of stowaways gaining access to unsecured areas. But under the Solas code this room has to be accessible to all. So a padlock secures the door, but immediately to the right there is a red block with a glass front with the key to the padlock inside. And there is also the potential for ‘information overload’ onboard: navigation warnings piped through on the radio for areas that the ship is not planned to pass through, a GMDSS continually spouting messages where, if you are lucky, one in 20 is relevant to the voyage you are doing, and weather reports for areas not pertinent to the current route.

It is also easy to see why the electronic age has been only warily accepted in some quarters. Certainly on night watch I found the allure of the bright electronic chart display strangely hypnotic, and infinitely more interesting to watch than the dark horizon with visibility down to just five miles. Proper manual lookout could easily be neglected, and those small fishing vessels that might not display on the ECS could easily be mowed down without a bump to these giants. Thankfully, my crew were not taken in by the luminous blips and stuck steadfastly to a proper lookout from the bridge, using the electronic displays as the aids they were intended to be.

Homeward bound

As we come to the close of the voyage, there is a palpable sense of excitement as the crew readies itself for four months leave. Third officer Prokopov busily prepares the all-important wages for the crew, while I sign yet more forms in triplicate for the Russian authorities.

As I watch my final sunset from the stern of the ship, I have time to reflect on my voyage, my crew and my industry. Yes, the trip was invaluable in terms of knowledge building and broadening my own horizons, but I can’t help but wonder how a career that offers half a year at sea away from home comforts, family and friends can still compete with other industries. We’ve become blasé about travel, nonchalant about foreign cultures and customs and far too comfortable in our routines to be attracted to the life that once appealed to so many.

Perhaps, without the routine that the officers had, I couldn’t fully empathise with the structure at sea. Unlike the officers, I had the luxury of time to fully appreciate early morning, late afternoon strolls around deck, revelling in the clear blue skies and glorious sunshine, even in the North Sea. But for all my deliberating, this was an experience that allowed me to wonder at the, albeit, small insight into the mysterious lure of the sea for our often unappreciated seafarers. And it was an experience that was worth waiting eight years for.