

THE SIRC COLUMN

Seafarers, scapegoats and word processors



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education will stop
seafarers being made
scapegoats

Imagine the scene: you are the master lying in your bunk getting thrown around as your ship batters its way through heavy weather. You can hear the banging of the anchor as you ship green seas and slam and shake your way to make the ETA at the discharge port. Then you realise that the ship has not come back from that last roll, you are hanging there listed heavily to port and the mate reports seeing cracks on the deck. So you radio for help from the nearest land, seeking shelter and a port of refuge. They refuse to give you shelter and

instruct you to head out to sea. So now faced with the prospect of your ship breaking up beneath your feet, you decide to abandon ship.

This is not a decision taken lightly. You know that you have open lifeboats, that one seafarer must remain on deck to operate the winch and that the seas are mountainous, but you have no other choice. So you go ahead and everyone gets off the ship without injuries, a wonderful example of seamanship. You watch your ship break up and sink to the bottom with all your possessions, but at least you are alive and the helicopter is on its way. You have just survived the most traumatic and dangerous experience of your life and then you are arrested, thrown in jail and treated like a common criminal. This is what happened to Captain Karun Mathur of the *Erika*. Welcome to the world of the seafaring scapegoat.

The idea of a scapegoat goes back a long way in human history. For example, in the Hebrew ritual of



CAPTAIN Karun Mathur (ringed) can be seen on the wing of the bridge of the Erika. He stayed on the ship after other crew members were rescued in order to collect the ship's log. He was later arrested and jailed. (Photo: French Marine Nationale)

Yom Kippur, also contained within *Leviticus* chapter 16 verse 21-2 of the Old Testament, instructions are provided on how to transfer all the sins of society on to a goat and then to cast it off into the wilderness. Also, the ancient Greeks

had a ritual where the ills of society could be transferred to an individual and then this person would be cast out carrying all the problems with them. As Tom Douglas explains, in his excellent book on scapegoats, the scapegoat

ritual was essentially a process of purification for those conducting it and that the ritual of scapegoating was one that would effectively disperse any contamination and reinstate the people as clean in their own eyes.

All this may seem to you to be far removed from the fate of Captains Hazelwood (*Exxon Valdez*), Yannakis (*Express Samina*) and Mathur, however, all of these masters have been used as scapegoats and taken the brunt of public anger for the ills of the maritime industry. These ills revolve around unenforced regulation, the weak voice of the seafarer, and owners who get away with doing everything and anything that they want. I cannot recall any instances of the arrest of an owner or charterer who places seafarers in danger by putting a substandard ship to sea, yet seafarers continue to face criminal proceedings for the foundering of unseaworthy ships or running aground on uncharted rocks.

Furthermore, the industry would argue that the seafarer is actually at fault, after all it is widely reported that 80 per cent of all marine accidents are caused by human error. Then you start to look at this reported human error, and the majority of accident reports always seem to contain a sentence that reads something like, "the seafarer was

negligent because rule xyz/1982b, of the code of operation, sub-paragraph 697c/87 was broken." It must be wonderful to have the memory for detail that seafarers are expected to possess during the time of crisis. For this is the standard that the industry does expect – perfect recall of everything – otherwise seafarers would not always get blamed for causing these accidents.

At this point it is interesting to compare our industry with that of civil aviation and ask whether the same form of scapegoating and blame culture exists in the air? And the simple answer is, no. In civil aviation it would appear that the opinions and professionalism of the aircrew are respected and seldom called into question. Look at the recent Air France Concorde disaster. It seems highly unlikely that the captain's epitaph would have been one of a valiant and brave struggle of a true professional against insurmountable odds if the Concord had been a 30-year-old tanker that sank with 113 souls.

So what is to be done about this situation? Education. People need to understand the very valuable contribution that seafarers make to the smooth running of the world economy (90 per cent of world trade goes by sea) and so understand the link between the oil tanker and the car. Once informed of the importance of seafaring, people might start to look for the real transgressors, those who put seafarers and the marine environment in danger from unseaworthy ships, fatigued crews and tight ETA's, all in the pursuit of maximum profits. Once this occurs, then coastal states would no longer feel the need to arrest the lucky survivors of a shipwreck.

To close, it is, I think, also worth noting that while writing this article I discovered that the word "unseaworthy" is not contained within the dictionary of the word processing software that I use and so I guess that this is the word processing software of choice within our industry.