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THE SIRC COLUMN

Destructive obedience and the importance of seafarer training



Seafarers need instruction in “teamship” as well as seamanship, says Helen

Sampson, of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre

On August 25, a 15,829 dwt chemical tanker, Bow Eagle collided with a French fishing vessel Le Cistude off the coast of Brittany. As a result, the fishing vessel sank with the loss of four lives. The Bow Eagle did not stop and is now at the centre of an investigation into claims that attempts were made to cover up the collision.

An initial investigation by the French maritime accident investigation bureau has concluded that the consequences of the loss were

“considerably aggravated” by the failure of the Bow Eagle to stop and assist the fishing vessel’s crew. Three of the crew were eventually rescued after nine hours clinging to the wreckage in the water, but four others died.

The Bow Eagle’s second officer, who was on watch at the time, is reported to have said that he had been aware there had been a collision but thought the fishing boat had continued safety. He has been extradited from the Netherlands to Norway, after an inquiry by the Norwegian Maritime Authority. A Filipino rating, on duty on the tanker at the time, alleged subsequently that the second officer had asked him not to say anything about the incident. He is reported to have said that he had been unhappy about this and had urged the second mate to call the master, but had been overruled; this had left

him unable to eat or sleep.

If this is the case, then he is not the first junior ranking crewmember aboard a vessel to find him or herself unable to resist the authority of a senior aboard.

The vessel Green Lily sailed from Lerwick harbour in 1997 in very bad weather on the command of the captain whose judgment was reported to have been *silently* questioned by at least one officer aboard. The vessel subsequently foundered and a winchman involved in the rescue of the crew lost his life.

This incident is but one example of a more pervasive problem. It is a problem that has been acknowledged in the airline industry and is often referred to as “destructive obedience”. This term recognises the capacity for individuals to sit back and say nothing to challenge the problematic behaviour of a

superior officer even when their own, or others’, lives are in jeopardy. The National

Transport Safety Board (NTSB) in analysing 37 serious airline accidents (23



A SURVIVOR from the French trawler Le Cistude is winched to safety after the Channel collision with the Bow Eagle which is under investigation. (Photo: AP)

of which involved fatalities) concluded that in 25 per cent of cases the accident could have been prevented by the non-flying officer challenging the behaviour of the flying officer (who was senior in 81 per cent of cases).

While we may initially find it difficult to believe that people find it so hard to challenge authority that they will even endanger life rather than speak up, examination of our own individual behaviour might prove illuminating. Many of us have sat in the passenger seat of a car, or on the back of a motorbike, driven by a stranger, or someone whom we feel unable to challenge (perhaps a boss?), silently fearful of an accident as a result of poor or reckless driving. Most of us will, if we are honest, be able to recall some incident in our lives where we have not acted as

we thought proper or prudent because of the presence and/or behaviour of another individual. The truth is that, for most of us, challenging the behaviour of others is difficult at the best of times and we find challenging people whose authority we recognise and respect even more problematic. Aboard ships seafarers are no different, and we should not be surprised when, in the absence of intensive training, they act just as we would ourselves in similar situations ashore.

The airline industry has taken active steps to address this problem, and has introduced practice in challenging the behaviour of those in authority into its simulator training programmes. In some of the more imaginative courses in maritime training establishments across the world similar training scenarios are being

practised. However, even these non-mandatory courses can have little impact on such events in the shipping industry. Ordinary seamen do not receive such training in today’s maritime environment. Such training, where it is available at all, is generally only available to officers. Yet, critical members of the bridge team, and the ones who are arguably most in need of training in raising concerns with senior officers (as they have the highest power differentials to cope with), are surely the ordinary and able bodied seamen on watch and on the helm. Until the industry addresses the issue of destructive obedience with serious intent, and devotes considerable resources to training seafarers in “teamship” as well as “seamanship”, there are tragically likely to be more Green Lilies and more bereaved families.